

Three visions, one world

A Japanese artist and two Pixar colleagues exhibit side by side

by Alex Chun

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SINCE 2001, Pixar Animation artists Ronnie Del Carmen and Enrico Casarosa have channeled their creative talents into feature films such as the Academy Award-winning "Finding Nemo" and the upcoming "Cars."

Their artistic drive, however, doesn't stop when they head for home. With what little time and energy they have left over, Del Carmen and Casarosa have made names for themselves as artists in their own right. This Saturday, Alhambra's Gallery Nucleus will begin exhibiting their drawings and paintings in a show titled "3 Trees Make a Forest."

The title of the show has a dual meaning, notes Casarosa, a 34-year-old from Italy who also worked as a storyboard artist on Blue Sky Studio's "Ice Age." Heavily influenced by Japanese culture, Casarosa discovered that the Japanese kanji character for forest is composed of three repeating symbols, each the kanji for tree. More important, the title reflects the fact that Del Carmen and Casarosa's friend Tadahiro Uesugi is coming to the U.S. from Japan for the first time to take part in the show.

In Japan, Uesugi is known for working as an assistant to manga artist Jiro Taniguchi and for his fashion illustrations in women's magazines; in the U.S., Uesugi, 39, has attained almost cult-like status within the tightknit animation community. As an artist, "Tadahiro is in a class by himself," says Del Carmen, 45, who was born and raised in the Philippines and won an Annie Award as a storyboard artist for DreamWorks' "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron."

"When I first looked at his work, I was immediately fascinated because it seemed to be of a certain time and place, 1960s France, with all these striking images of girls with long necks, long limbs and short skirts walking in profile," Del Carmen adds.

Uesugi says he feels very comfortable showing his work next to Del Carmen's and Casarosa's. "Three of us, we've all grown up in different countries, but you would think that the show is done by three artists who have learned together at the same place," he notes via an e-mail translated from Japanese.

The fact that three artists from three countries are converging for a single show is a testament to the power of the Internet. Del Carmen and Casarosa became acquainted with each other through an artists' message board in 2000, and shortly thereafter, Casarosa joined Del Carmen at Pixar.

Around the same time, Casarosa made initial contact with Uesugi via e-mail using translation software, and that led to a meeting at a Tokyo cafe in 2001. Then late last year, Del Carmen and Casarosa made the pilgrimage to Uesugi's Tokyo home, where they spent the evening talking about art and their mutual admiration for one another's work.

"Since I don't speak English, I was worried about how we were going to communicate with each other, but after I met them, I discovered that language was not a problem," Uesugi writes. "In fact, I can even relate to them better than some Japanese artists."

By the end of the visit, Del Carmen and Casarosa had left an open invitation for Uesugi to visit them in the U.S. So when the opportunity to be part of a show with his two American friends presented itself in June, he accepted without hesitation.

The show, which will feature more than 60 original drawings and paintings along with oversize digital prints, follows Del Carmen's and Casarosa's successful foray into self-publishing. Their books, which include Casarosa's manga-influenced "The Adventures of Mia" and Del Carmen's "Paper Biscuit," featuring his dreamy and waif-like protagonist Nina, have proven popular with their fans and fellow animators.

Casarosa notes that all their outside projects are done with their employer's blessing, and in fact, Pixar executive vice president John Lasseter bought a copy of each of their self-published books at a lunch sale held last summer on the studio's grounds.

"We're very fortunate to have our jobs at Pixar," Del Carmen says. "But at the same time, we definitely needed an outlet so that our own kind of projects can get their day in the sun. Otherwise, they'd just wither on the vine."

Taking a cue from Del Carmen and Casarosa, another cadre of Pixar artists has formed its own publishing enterprise, E-Ville Press. The E is taken from Emeryville, Pixar's home turf, says Pixar storyboard artist Ted Mathot, who debuted his graphic novel "Rose and Isabel" under the E-Ville umbrella at summer's Comic-Con gathering in San Diego.

"We were totally inspired by Ronnie and Enrico," adds Mathot, who plans to make the trek down south for the "3 Trees" opening. "They had been self-publishing their own books for a number of years, and we decided to form E-Ville as a way to keep up and keep motivated."