The Ocean's Story: An Exploration of Environmentalism and Graphic Narrative
Integrative Project 2013-2014
Meggie Ramm

INTRODUCTION

For my Integrative Project, I created a graphic novel that addresses issues

currently facing our oceans. In this paper, I will provide an overview to the various

aspects of my project, the methods of production, and introspection on its success. In

the process of creating this project, I have honed my skills as a cartoonist as well as

create a successful narrative that connects the reader to environmental issues effecting

oceans and causes introspection to live a more sustainable and eco-friendly life. The

process has also provided me with the skills necessary to produce my own comic and

adapt it for an exhibition setting. This comic is specifically targeted towards comic book

readers and comic enthusiasts, as I hope to distribute my final work to comic book

stores.

BACKGROUND

The two themes prevalent in my thesis are ocean environmentalism[1] and

narrative through the medium of comics. Comics are an accessible medium for all ages

and can be entertaining while also touching on major issues. To cite a popular example,

Alan Moore and David Gibbon's *Watchmen* explores themes of identity and political

conflict through the common subject of superheroes. I want to explore environmental

___

[1] *Environmentalism:* philosophy, ideology, and social movement regarding concerns for
environmental protection and improvement of the health of the environment.

issues through comics not only because of my love of creating them, but also because I think the medium itself has the potential to make an impact. I hope to get readers and comic book enthusiasts to reconsider their impact on the environment by creating an accessible story that connects the reader to environmental issues. With my first attempt at addressing issues such as this in a comic book format, I saw the capacity to handle heavy handed issues in the space of a comic as well as how literal I could be with these issues while still retaining an effective narrative. It was creating a seamless merge between oceanic environmental issues and narrative that was a challenge throughout the year.

The ocean covers over 70% of the earth's surface. It contains a plethora of organisms, as well as a majority of the resources used to maintain human existence. It drives climate and weather changes and regulates temperature. It stands to reason that humans should wish to protect it, especially as it is becoming more and more apparent that oceans are not inexhaustible. Sylvia Earle goes into detail about this in her book *The World is Blue*. Through the course of her career as an oceanographer, Earle documents the changes in available ocean resources. She goes into detail about the Newfoundland cod collapse of 1992 due to overfishing by commercial fisherman, which led Canada to turn the Grand Banks into a permanent no-fish-zone. Earle also documents the history of whaling and the decline in overall whale population. Whales were hunted without restrictions well into the 20th century until whale stocks were unable to be replenished. This caused the International Whaling Commission to place a ban on commercial whaling in 1986 so that the whale population could recover. These

examples and more are explored in depth, cataloging the loss in ocean biodiversity[2] over time. While this could be seen as the natural order of things, Earle goes on to describe the multiple benefits the ocean has to offer. Not only do the oceans provide numerous sources of food, they also minerals and oil, as well as being used for travel, shipping and recreation. Though the decline in whales and commercial fish stock might seem trivial, it is their interconnectedness with the rest of the ocean that creates a resourceful ecosystem. I wanted to include these issues in my comic, if not literally then at least figuratively, so that my reader could gain an appreciation for what our oceans have to offer.

Resource loss in oceans has been compounded by pollution, and multiple documentaries on this subject have influenced my thinking on this issue. *Plastic Planet* is a documentary narrated by Werner Boote, son of a plastic tycoon, who delves into how plastic effects lives around the world as well as examining the lives of those who try and live without plastic. His documentary shows an accurate representation of how plastic has infiltrated itself into nearly every facet of human life. Throughout the movie, he asks people in different parts of the world to assemble all the plastic in their homes to then place in front of their house. The result is often a massive plastic pile almost as high as the roof. Boote accurately documents the impact by contrasting the big and small. When visiting an ocean research team taking random samples of ocean water, Boote found that all of their samples contained at least some portion of trash. In constrast, Edward Burtynsky focuses only on the big in the documentary *Manufactured*

---

[2] *Biodiversity:* the variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat or ecosystem

Landscapes. Directed by Jennifer Baichwal, the documentary examines how consumption and industrialization affects the lives of people involved in production. It uses Burtynsky's photography to explore the many effects that making products has had on the planet. The film captures the scale of human change on nature, as well as the underbelly of mass production in China. While both of these films have their merits, both Boote and Burtynsky are more than slightly narcissistic. Boote spends a majority of the film hitting on every woman he encounters, and Burtynsky and his camera crew are emotionally removed from all the depravity they see, seeming to only be interested in the final (sellable) photographic image. In the end, what I took from these films was how Boote wanted to redeem his father's past mistakes and how Burtynsky seemed more pleased with the recognition he received as an artist than the impact his images could have. It would be more beneficial to Burtynsky's work if he were able to concentrate on the impact he felt personally from his work, or the impact he hoped to make.

It is not difficult to find examples of those who turned the struggle of reality into fictional artistic content. Hayao Miyazaki is famous for his exploration of man's relationship with the environment and industrialization in his Studio Ghibli films. In his first film *Princess Mononoke,* the story follows a young man in the midst of the struggle between forest spirits and the town that consumes the forest resources. He investigates this theme again in *My Neighbor Totoro* where supernatural spirits coexist and interact with a family that moves into a rural neighborhood. These excel as examples, because the theme is not immediately apparent and the movies are

enjoyable for all ages. Miyazaki's stories all feature undertones of larger issues without being overbearing. *My Neighbor Totoro* has led to awareness about the satoyama tree, the tree that the lead character Totoro protects. The environmental journal Ambio stated that "[It] has served as a powerful force to focus the positive feelings that Japanese people have for the satoyama and traditional village life" (Hiromi, Primack 2003). It also spurred the creation of the "Totoro Hometown Fund Campaign", which preserves areas of the satoyama within Japan using money raised by auctioning off original artwork from the movie and promotes village sustainability[3].

Comics and film are similar in that they both involve narrative, but comics are able to give a more intimate experience. A literary narrative allows the reader into the privacy of characters thoughts instead of gaining information through dialogue. My love of comics has led me to observe how changing an aspect of a comic can draw the reader in even further. One of my favorite examples of this trait can be seen in David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp.* Mazzucchelli is genius in his unique take on comic formatting. For instance, to show the divide in perspective between two of his characters, he draws one in strictly polygonal forms while the other is very roughly sketched. When there is confrontation or tension between the two characters, the drawing styles become even more pronounced. A more common form of differentiation in comic format can be seen in the simplistic design of panel[4] structure, as seen in Jim Henson's *Tale of Sand,* illustrated by Ramón Peréz. Instead of using

---

[3] *Sustainability:* Conserving and ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources.
[4] *Panel:* An individual frame, or single drawing, in the multiple-panel sequence of a comic strip or comic book.

panels as distinct and separate scenes within the story, panels often overlap or collide with one another. This serves two purposes. One is to make action within the story stand out. The other is to add to the theme of the overall story, which is that time is compounding upon itself and jumbling up. This can be seen in pages where there is no clear story thread to follow, many different characters and activities are happening without clues as to what comes first or last.

It bears mentioning that my life up until this point has been research on comics. My childhood friends were Calvin and Hobbes, and my first attempts at drawing were emboldened by the fact that my idol, Gary Larson of the comic strip *The Far Side*, drew humans that were more likely to resembled apoplectic balloon animals. It was through Jeff Smith's simplistic characters in *Bone* and Berkeley Breathed's *Opus* that I was able to see how a comic strip could be accessible to all ages. A comic could both hold visual delight for a child as well as providing humor on larger issues faced by adults. Over time my taste in comics has grown, although the classics have stayed dear to my heart. My love for well-written comics has remained, but my taste in comic art has changed. While I'm liable to stick with a comic that has a good story, my favorite pages tend to be ones drawn with a smart color scheme without hues akimbo. Zac Gorman of *Magical Game Time* and Jake Wyatt of *Necropolis* are both skilled in their small palette that leads to a wide range of color, often that assists in the telling of the story. My favorite example of this can be seen in the comic *The Wrong Century* by Tomas Kucerovsky (shown in Figure 1). Kucerovsky uses the repetition of red throughout the panels to connect the narrative to the main character. I tried to use this method in my own comic,

to not only create color connections with characters, but to attach symbolism to these

colors and characters as well.

Figure 1: *The Wrong Century,* Tomas Kucerovsky. Webcomic, (2009).

METHODS

Upon starting, all that I knew about my story was that I wanted it to take place at sea with a tentacled cthulhu as the villain with a hazy idea of the characters I wanted to include. After many rough drafts, my story was put through a 7-point exercise in order to better finalize the narrative, shown in Figure 2. The 7-point exercise allowed me to further flesh out my story into what it is now, and can be summarized as follows: Boats have been disappearing all over the ocean, and journalist Karl is sent to investigate. He is left in the care of two marine researchers, Mel and Sam, who have opposing views as to who is responsible for the disappearances. Further investigations prove everyone wrong when they find that a cthulhu like monster from the deep is to blame, and the gang is drawn into a conflict between nature and humanity that is as old as time.

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│             MYSTERY:                │
│   Boats start to disappear in the   │
│              ocean                  │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│            PLOT TURN:               │
│   The gang suspect environmental    │
│        extremists are to blame      │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│              PINCH:                 │
│   The gang witness a huge cthulu    │
│      like monster destorying a      │
│                boat                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│            MIDPOINT:                │
│   The gang decides to try and kill  │
│            the monster              │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│             PINCH 2:                │
│     Monster attacks the gang's      │
│                boat                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│           PLOT TURN 2:              │
│   The gang attempts to kill the     │
│             monster.                │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
                  ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│           RESOLUTION:               │
│   Mel sacrifices herself so that    │
│   Karl and Sam can live, killing    │
│    the monster in the process.      │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 2: Final version of the 7-point story structure, where "the gang" refers to Karl, Sam and Mel.

I had initially planned on breaking this story into a trilogy and working on the first segment during the course of IP. However, after feedback from my peers it was mentioned that only telling part of the story would be shying away from trying to tell the whole story. That being said, the 7-point story structure went through several further iterations. This is turn led to several versions of thumbnails of the comic. My three main characters: Mel, Sam and Karl, had existed in my head long before undertaking IP. Prior thought was put into character development and they have gone through multiple iterations since. My goal was to make female characters that looked strong as opposed to skinny, as well as look like unusual polar opposites. On the other hand, I wanted to make my male character Karl as stereotypical white male looking as possible. I didn't want my characters to seem like unattainable models like one would see on television. I wanted them to look like unique, yet at the same time look and act like someone the reader could relate to.

Figure 3: Early concept art for Sam and Mel, watercolor and Micron pen
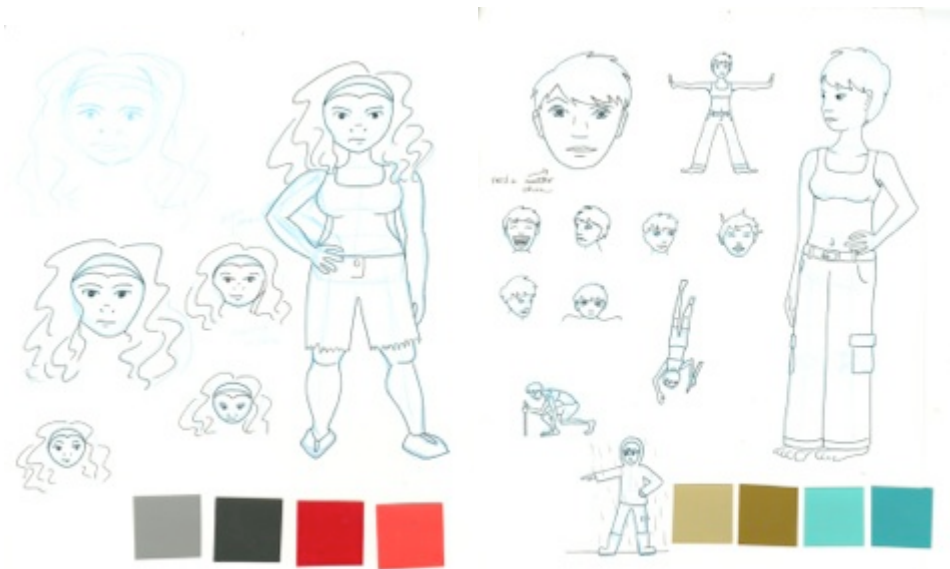
Figure 4: Concept art and color scheme tests, blue pencil and micron pen

These visuals were chosen to reflect the main personality traits within the characters as well as exemplify the symbolism each character was meant to represent. Initially, Sam was meant to be a vessel for the sea, with Mel as a sidekick. However, as time moved on Mel's character became too strong to be a mere sidekick. In the end Sam inherited all of my terrible characteristics, evolving into a selfish rash bleeding heart environmentalist. Mel became the human that I'd like to be, even-keeled and able to dish out tough love.

As time went on, I saw that including literal solutions to ocean issues would make the comic heavy handed, and decided to associate the characters symbolically with the aspects I was dealing with in order to get my message across. Sam, though a bleeding heart environmentalist, represents humanity as a whole. Mel is representative of the oceans and all that they provide, while my cthulhu monster represents the epitome of human greed. My third character, Karl, was designed to be a foil for the most part, and therefore represents a stereotypical human obsessed with technology.

These assigned symbolisms were further demonstrated through color, with each character (and therefore aspect) assigned a specific color. Teal was Sam's color, representative of humanity. Red was Mel's color, representative of the ocean. Yellow was Karl's color, representative of technology. The cthulhu's colors were a mixture of teal and red, as it is representative of a natural thing that was corrupted through human greed. These colors were repeated throughout the comic to further represent the themes of my comic.

The actual style of the comic was found through various tests and trials. I spent the first part of the semester sketching as many sea things and ocean scenes as I could in order to see what style I would like drawing in the most, as seen in Figure 5.
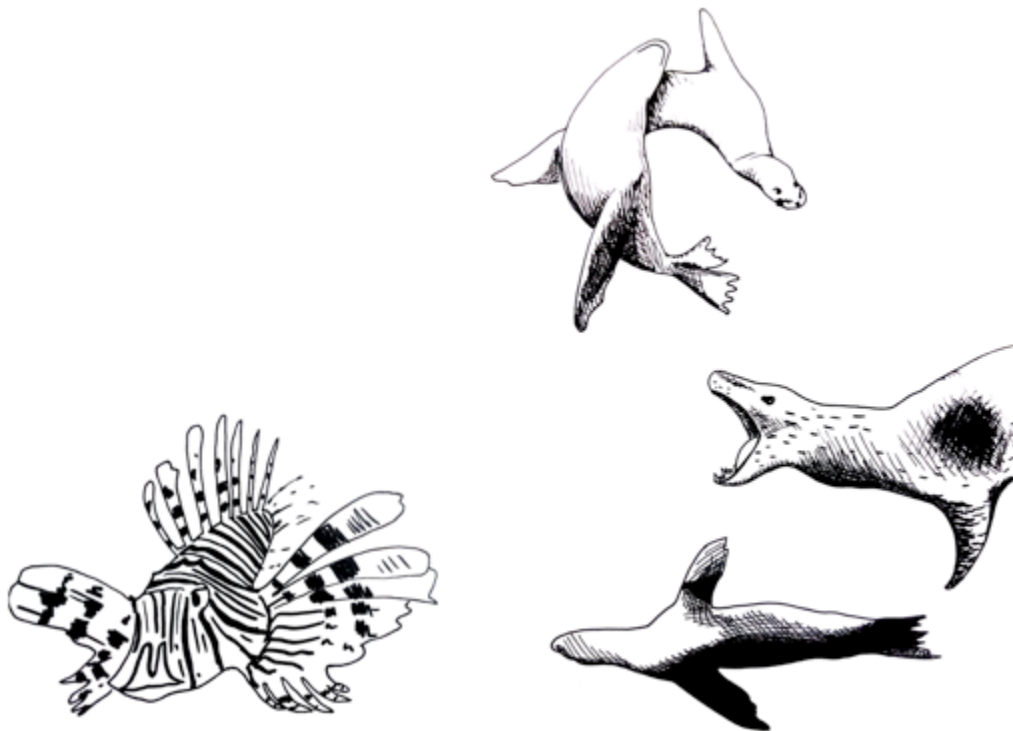
Figure 5: Early sketches done to hammer down inking style.

I also undertook different exercises in color (see Figure 6). A previously taken a color theory course allowed me time to explore different color schemes that I hoped to associate with my comic. Through these tests, I was able to finalize the color scheme that I wanted to use for the rest of the comic.
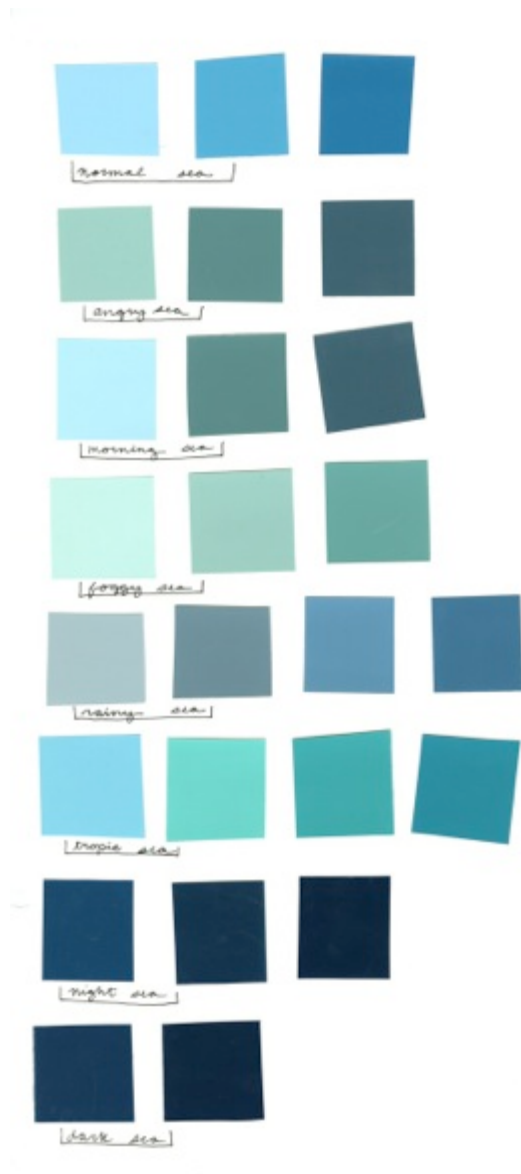
Figure 6: Reference sheet made for different sea and sky colors dependent on weather conditions.
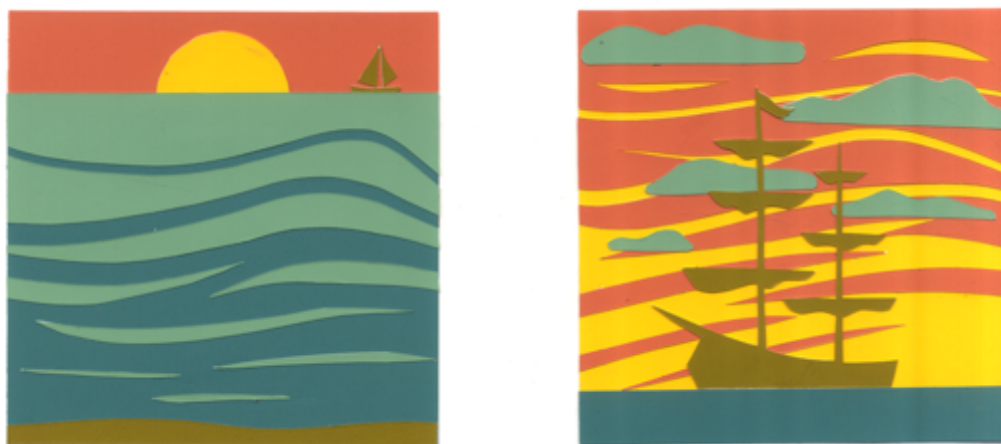
Figure 7: Setting, color theory test where two different scenes had to be created with the same five colors.

I had decided on watercolors to color the comic after I realized that the

cleanliness of the line work that I chose to draw in could be benefitted by the somewhat

messier look associated with watercolor.
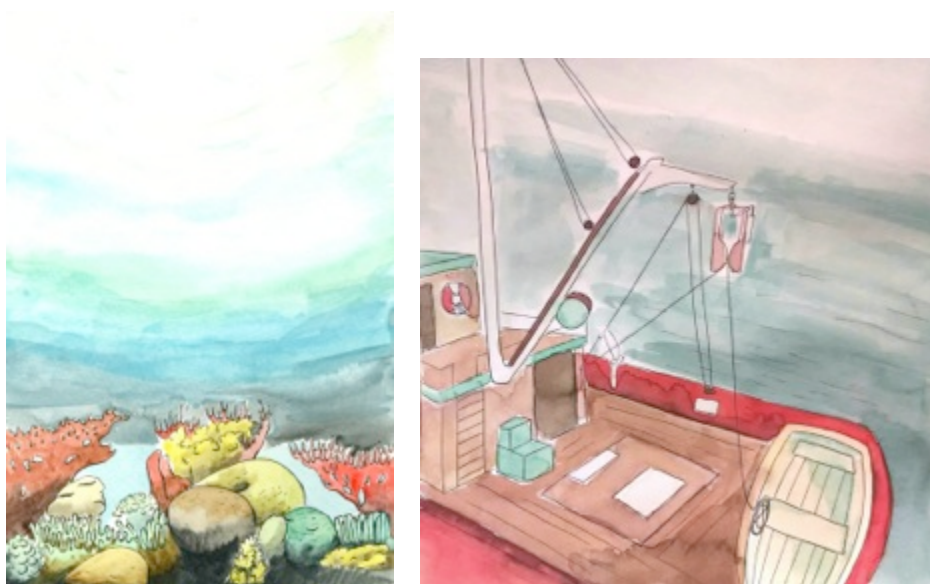
Figure 8: Examples of watercolor tests

Finally, I tried different versions of font for dialogue. I crafted my own

handwritten font using the website www.myscriptfont.com. My first attempts involved

me trying to make my handwritten font as bland as possible, which led to the results

looking far to similar to the font comic sans. After a few more tests I was able to come

up with a cleaner version that I font suitable, shown below.

JACKDAWS LOVE MY BIG SPHINX OF
QUARTZ

Jackdaws love my big sphinx of quartz

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm
Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy
Zz

JACKDAWS LOVE MY BIG SPHINX OF
QUARTZ

Jackdaws love my big sphinx of
quartz

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww
Xx Yy Zz

Figure 9: First two example of font tests

JACKDAWS LOVE MY BIG SPHINX OF QUARTZ
123456789
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Figure 10: Finalized font

Multiple attempts at exhibit designs were explored as well. This was a challenge

unto itself, as a comic book, or any book for that matter, faces difficulties when placed

in an exhibition setting. A marriage must be found between creating a reading

environment conducive to reading comics and a public space. However, since the final

destination of this comic was a fine arts exhibit, it would also be beneficial to include

some parts of the process. Figure 11 shows one such design setup, while Figure 12

shows the final setup.

Meggie Ramm Exhibit Set-Up

SPACE
3'8" x 5'4" x 7'6"

POSTER
5'4" x 3'

PLINTHES
8" x 8" x 3'6"-3'10"
1'8" btw lengthwise
2" btw widthwise
Adhered to ground using glue/carpet tape
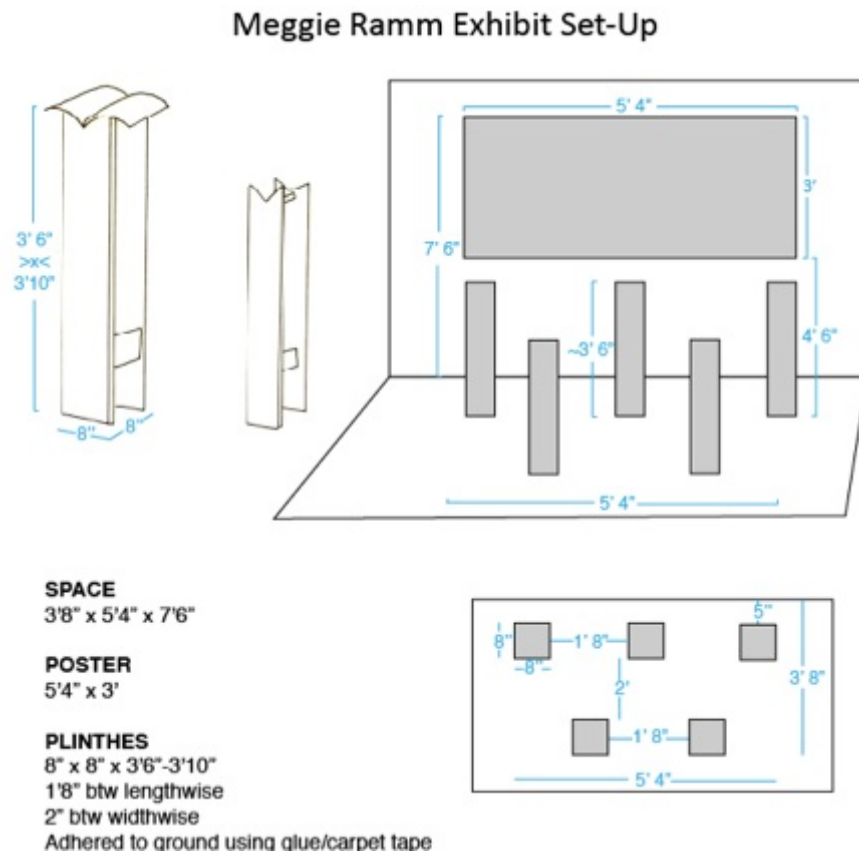
Figure 11: Rough draft of exhibit setup

Figure 12: Final exhibit set up

PRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS
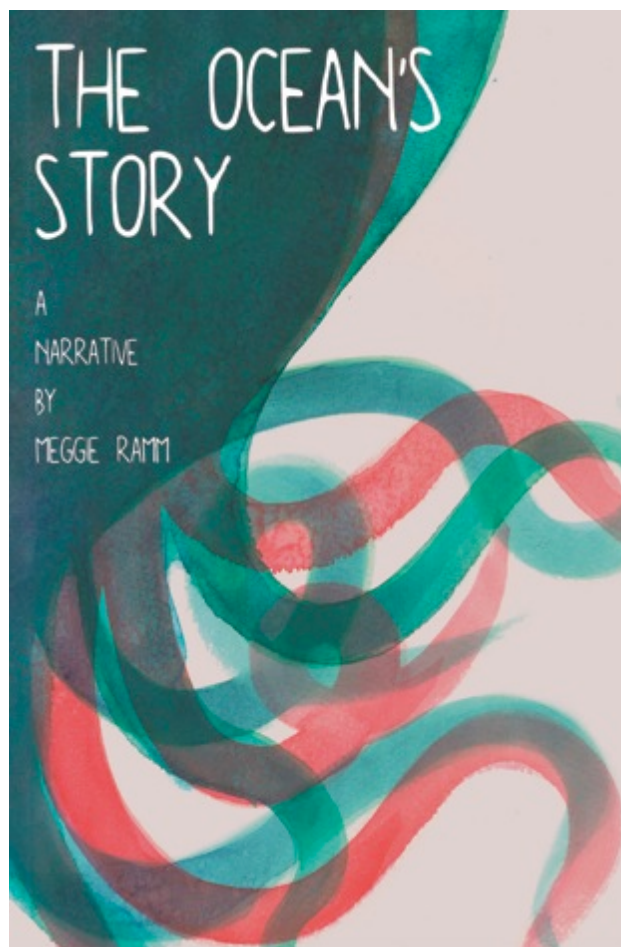
Figure 13: Finalized cover

In the end I created a 64 page perfectly bound professionally printed book that measured out at 6.75" x 10.5", being full color both inside and out.

After developing my story using the 7-point story structure, I began my usual process of coloring comics, which runs as follows.

1. Write a script that includes dialogue, action within panels and layout of pages.

2. Thumbnail[5] out page layouts.

3. Sketch out finalized pages.

4. Ink pages.

5. Color pages.

6. Do final edits to pages on photoshop and add dialogue.

For the most part this process was followed, although steps one and two were done simultaneously due to time constraints. The thumbnails were displayed in storyboard fashion in order to see how the story held up, as well as to receive feedback from outside sources. I was told to reexamine certain plot points as well as make sure to my symbolism was more apparent.

After the thumbnails were done, I moved on to sketching pages. I drew on fluid cold press finish watercolor paper that was 9 x 12 inches with a Staedtler Mars Lumograph 2H pencil. My page dimensions were drawn at 7.5 x 11.5 inches. I followed up by inking with Micron pens of various types, and then added watercolor to these pages using the Koi WaterColor pocket field sketch box. Watercoloring was done in

_____

[5] *Thumbnail:* a small picture or an image or page layout

stages, drawing characters, then adding in background information. Pages were

revisited at the end in order to add texture and shading and were reedited and added in

during various stages, after which script and word balloons digitally.

Figure 14: Finished pages from *The Ocean's Story*

In terms of actual production, more time would have assisted the eventual product. I would have benefited having more time to work on the script. The same could be said for sketching, inking, and water-coloring the pages. While I am happy with the final result, I know that if I had more time to critique and edit my pages the outcome would be highly improved. However, I knew the time constraints within IP and believe that I did the best of my abilities within them.

The production of pages was arduous. Drawing a page could take anywhere from one to five hours, with the same amount of time spent inking a page. Water-coloring pages took anywhere from three to six hours depending on complications, and Due to this process taking up so much time, with additional time needed to redraw pages, it was difficult to start over if the final product was unsatisfactory.

A risk that I took was leaving space for dialogue without penciling in the dialogue itself. In other words, I left room for word balloons in my panels whilst drawing without seeing if the dialogue would fit. This meant that during post-production on the computer I had to work with what space I had. For the most part the dialogue worked out. I was aware of what pages would need room for speeches or hefty conversation, and only a two pages turned out to me more crowded than my liking.
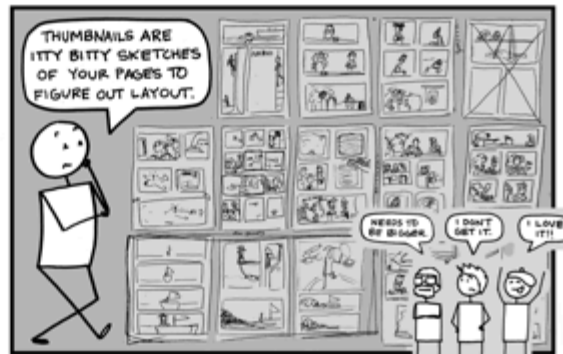
Attempts were made to print through an environmentally friendly printer (Greener Printer), but I was unable to afford the final price. Instead, I used the printing services of a local comic printing press, Greko Printing. While not as environmentally friendly as my initial choice, Greko recycles all of their excess paper materials and uses half recycled content in most of their products. I was very happy with the final result.

Not only was it affordable, but I was provided with a high quality end result at a high rate of turnaround.

The final exhibit included three posters that explained the behind the scenes production of the comic, shown in Figures 15-17. The posters were chosen to not only advertise for the comic, but to draw people into the exhibit and create interest in the reading of it. Next to the posters was a wooden post that had string from which my comics hanged. When my comics weren't being read, they created a dynamic art piece that hung from the wall, but exhibit goers could still remove my comics from the string and read them at their leisure.

Figure 15: First poster for IP exhibit
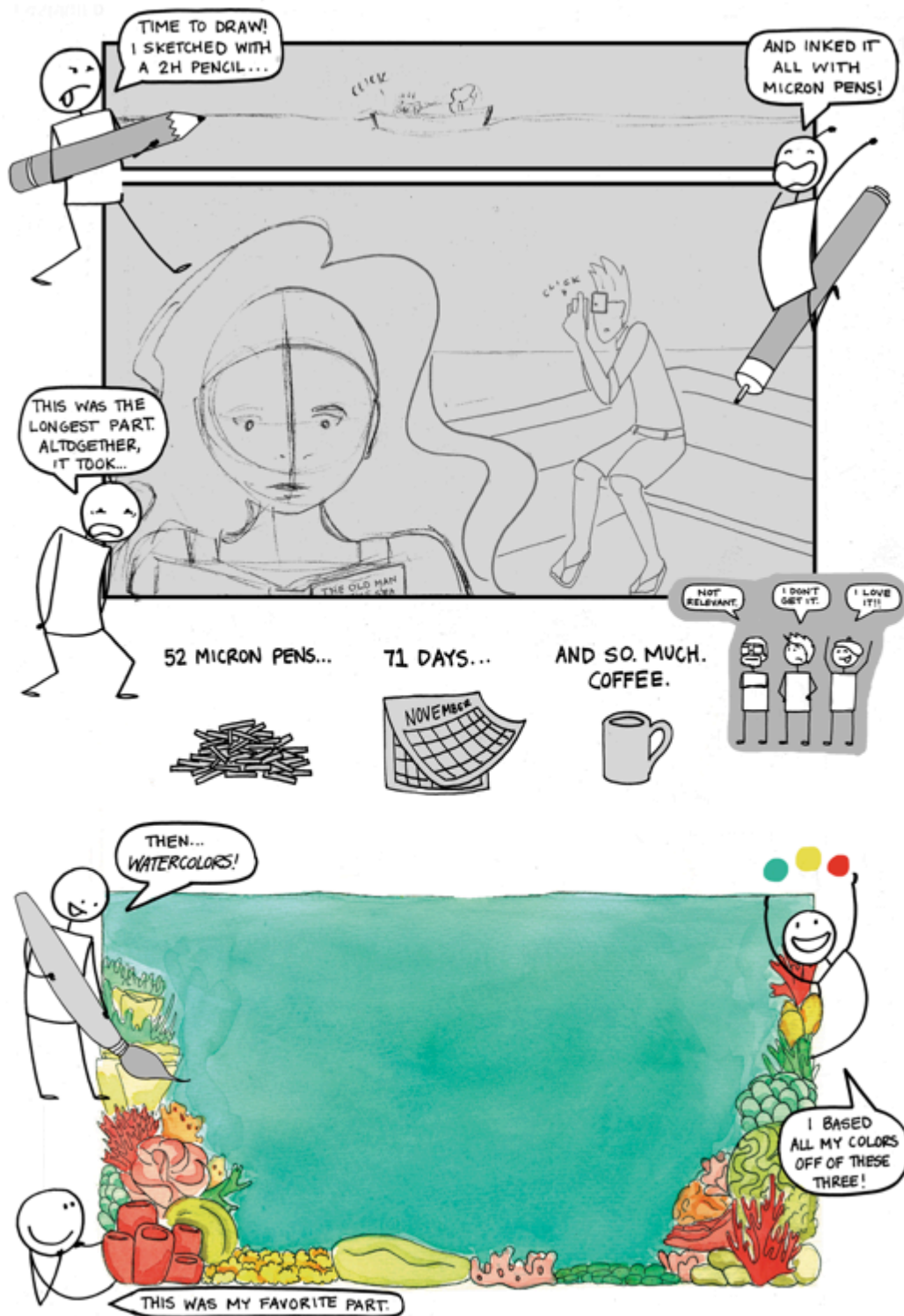
Figure 16: Second poster for IP exhibit
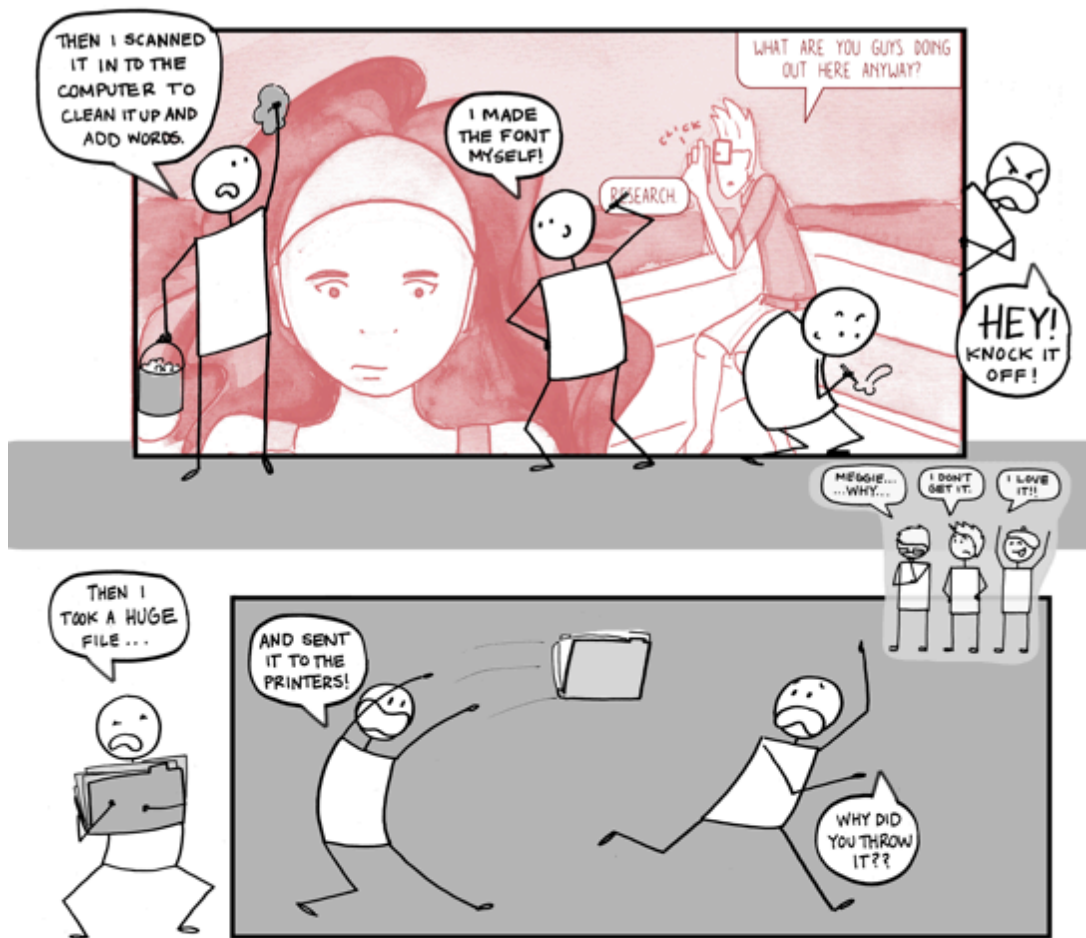
Figure 17: Third poster for IP exhibit

Figure 18: Exhibit at opening night

CONCLUSION

Initially I had hoped to create a graphic novel that focused on environmentalism and advocated for greener practices, providing the reader with incentive to incorporate more sustainable practices within their own life. As time went on, I found that the story was more important to me than other aspects of the comic. I discovered that it was

difficult for me to include specific environmental issues without sounding like I was preaching them. The time constraints involved in making a full fledged printed comic made it difficult to delve into intricate ocean issues. I wanted to make the comic accessible for all readers, and the time it would take to extrapolate a specific oceanic issue would take too many pages. It was difficult for me to include significant data within my comic without it feeling disjointed from the narrative as a whole. Therefore I decided to focus more on the narrative aspect of the comic and include the environmental side of the comic in a more symbolic way and subtle way, through setting and characters. A similar method can be seen in Miyazaki films like *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Ponyo,* where an environmental theme is central to the plot but alluded to rather than literally stated.

In relation to the narrative itself, as mentioned before I think that this aspect would have been improved with more time. The symbolism of the characters and their color associations could have been made more apparent if I had spent more time contemplating that subject. I believe that some page layouts could still be pushed farther, but that that I still was able to capture the essence of what is a comic. I also think that more experimentation with watercolors and the various processes associated with that medium could have assisted in this.

Most importantly, this year has shown me where my strength lies in comic creation. As much as I enjoyed creating a watercolor full-length comic, I found that I got more positive reviews from comics I made featuring my stick figures and snarky commentary. In the future I intend on developing this type of drawing and narrative

further, to make comics that are more in alignment with Berkely Breathed's *Opus.* That isn't to say that I'm not happy that I spent this year making *The Ocean's Story.* Without this year, I would still be trying to make the all-mighty and powerful epic graphic novel without the knowledge of the difficulties that arise when one goes into a project with that mindset.

REFERENCES

Baichwal, J., Burtynsky, E., De Pencier, N., *Edward Burtynsky Manufactured Landscapes*. Iron, D., Mercury Films Inc., Foundry Films., Zeitgeist Films. (Directors). (2007).[Video/DVD] [United States]: Zeitgeist Films.

Blanchett, C., Tomlin, L., Damon, M., Fey, T., Neeson, L., & Walt Disney Productions. (2010). *Ponyo*. [United States]: Disney.

Boote, W. *Plastic Planet.* and First-Run Features (Firm) (Directors). (2011).[Video/DVD] New York, NY: First Run Features.

Earle, S. A. (2009). *The world is blue: How our fate and the ocean's are one*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic.

Henson, J., Pérez, R., Juhl, J., Herring, I., Bennett, D., Christy, S., . . . Jim Henson Company. (2011). *Jim henson's tale of sand*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Archaia Entertainment.

Kobori, Hiromi; Richard B. Primack (June 2003). "Participatory Conservation Approaches for Satoyama, the Traditional Forest and Agricultural Landscape of Japan".*Ambio* **32** (4): 307–311

Mazzucchelli, D. (2009). *Asterios Polyp*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Miyazaki, H., Hara, T., Macek, C., Sutajio Jiburi, K. K., 50th Street Films., Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment,Inc. (2002). *My Neighbor Totoro*. Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

Miyazaki, H., Hara, T., Macek, C., Sutajio Jiburi, K. K., 50th Street Films., Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment,Inc. (1997). *Princess Mononoke*. Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

Smith, J. (2004). *Bone*. Columbus, Ohio: Cartoon Books.