Behind the Psychedelic Scenes of New Netflix Series The Midnight Gospel

Illustrator Liam Cobb on worldbuilding for a show with many, many worlds

Words by Ritupriya Basu
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On April 20, Netflix released The Midnight Gospel, an eight-episode, psycho-cosmic adventure spun by the brilliant minds of Pendleton Ward—of Adventure Time fame—and comedian Duncan Trussell (whose podcast, Duncan Trussell Family Hour, set the tone for the show). The outlandish, brain-melter of a series follows the adventures of its protagonist, Clancy, as he travels to unknown, dying universes to record interviews for his "spacecast" (like a podcast, but trippier). Each episode unfolds against the backdrop of a new fantastical world, created in part by illustrator Liam Cobb and a team of designers entrusted with the show's background design.

Cobb, well-known for his quietly surreal comics like The Inspector and Shampoo, had never worked as a background designer for an animated series before the series' art director, Jesse Moynihan, approached him. Many of the show's viewers may not even realize that designing the backgrounds required a team of its own. But Cobb's illustrations, as well as the creative processes that led to the scenes, are an indispensable part of the worldbuilding process—especially in a series with as many worlds as The Midnight Gospel.

Digging into ideas of metaphysics, love, zombies, and loss, the show poses compelling questions, but sets forth to answer them in comic, irreverent ways. "The Midnight Gospel explores what it means to be human through conversations between characters, rather than asking those questions and looking for their answers in a straightforward narrative," says Cobb.

In each episode, Clancy picks a brand new universe to travel to, pops his head into a yonic, fleshy "multiverse simulator," and the show begins. "There are beautiful, wondrous worlds full of intelligent beings with stories to tell, and I'm going to interview them and put my interviews online and make a bunch of money so suck my d***," he declares.

As Clancy hops across universes meeting weird new characters, much of the intricate worldbuilding that anchors the story occurs through the trippy backgrounds. In addition to outlining the details that define these new worlds, the backgrounds also help set up the multiple narratives going on throughout the show. "Sometimes, they even act as metaphors to help visualize what Clancy and his interviewees are discussing," says Cobb. "So although the background stories might, at times, seem almost incidental, if you pay attention you'll find all sorts of interesting things going on."

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In episode five, which follows Clancy visiting a soul prison on a remote island, Cobb delved into his own ideas of an apocalyptic landscape. "Based on the concept and the initial sketches, I wanted to reflect the pain and the demons that the prisoners could have experienced within the landscape," he says. "I was reminded of artists like Hieronymus Bosch, and created these twisted landscapes that look a bit like skeletons crawling out of the earth, but with a comical touch, of course." These complex backgrounds that add layers of symbolism to each scene lend a very re-watchable quality to the show, with a promise of new discoveries with every rerun.

Along with fleshing out the storyboards and animatics that laid the conceptual foundation of the backgrounds, Moynihan and lead background designer Elle Michalka also defined a "house style" that ensured all creations developed across

multiple teams looked coherent. The set of visual rules not only underscored stylistic details like the need to simplify busy compositions, but also focused on the nitty-gritty. "Every graphic element had a smooth straight line, and all shapes and corners would always have the same diameter," says Cobb.

The challenge, as Cobb explains, was in finding a balance between maintaining the "logic" and consistency in the backgrounds—making sure things made sense from scene to scene—and creating otherworldly environments. "Some backgrounds in cartoons can be really 'wacky,'" says Cobb. "The Midnight Gospel definitely has that effect, but it also always maintains a sense of realism.

"It was very important for the backgrounds to serve the characters, making sure they could navigate through the spaces without it seeming awkward."

Ensuring every stroke, line, and shape is perfect, all while working alongside a team of half a dozen line art background designers introduced a collaborative workscape unlike any designer/client dynamic Cobb had experienced. With annotated storyboards and animatics in place, each team of background designers was assigned a certain number of "environments."

"The concept of the scene would already have been established in the storyboard and animatics, so the designers came in to illustrate the details and build on the concept wherever required. Some backgrounds had tighter rules than others to go by, so it was a real mix of creative freedom and 'getting on with the job,' which I liked," says Cobb.

Before the files were handed over to the colorists and animators, each layer of the drawing needed to be marked and grouped on Photoshop, which in itself presented a challenge for Cobb.

Still of the zombie house in Episode 1.

Sketch of the zombie house in Episode 1 before "being asked to make it more weird due to Clancy's simulator malfunctioning." Courtesy Liam Cobb.
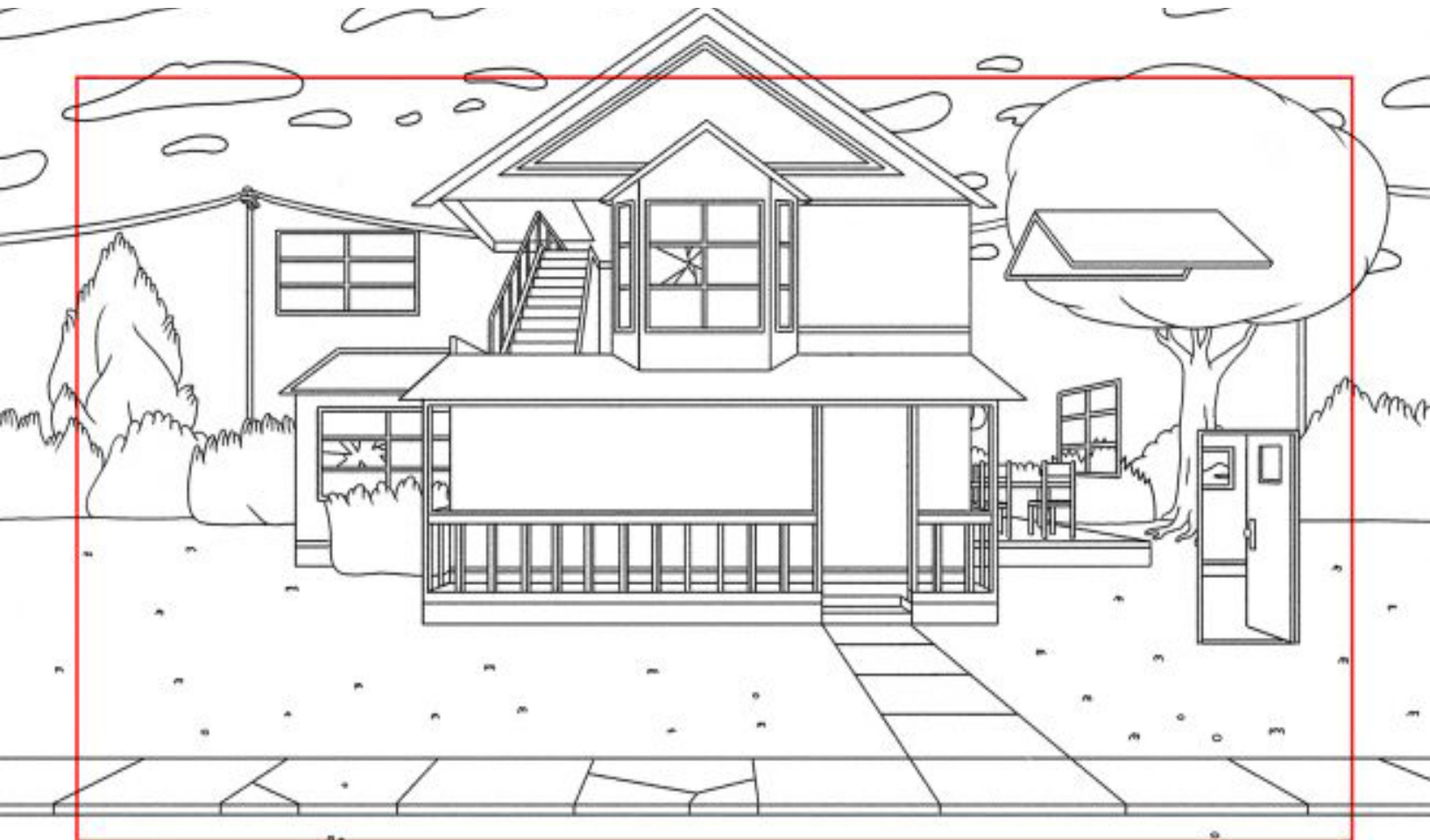
"I was used to exclusively hand-rendering my work, so I hadn't really used a wacom tablet before and the show required a very specific digital brush and size, to be used on PSD layered files," he says. "That was a huge, daunting challenge in the beginning, but I was surprised by how quickly I adjusted to this new process."

So while it was imperative to quickly pick up new skills, comb through the finer details, and work within the parameters that the story, did Cobb ever wonder about lending his own visual style to the backgrounds? "Having drawn a lot of architectural illustrations in my own work helped when it came to designing the backgrounds for certain episodes, which featured urban and suburban environments," he says. "However, I think I was more interested in sharing my ideas than giving the backgrounds a subtle stylistic signature. There'd always be opportunities where we'd have some free reign to come up with our own ideas, as long as we stuck to the composition and made sure that the characters could be animated within that space."

The backgrounds are just a part of the many pieces that fit together to make The Midnight Gospel. "When you focus on the bigger picture, you realize that in eight half-hour episodes, the show makers have masterfully combined conceptualism with psychedelic cartooning," says Cobb. So while the wondrous, layered backgrounds set the stage for what promises to be a zany and third-eye-opening watch, they also introduce and explore the weirdness in which the story really excels.