

GREG RUTH INTERVIEW

The whatisthematrix.it staff is extremely proud to interview the famous artist Greg Ruth creator of three fantastic Matrix Comics and numerous works such as: M.A.R.S, Sudden Gravity, Freaks of the Heartland, Conan: Born on the Battlefield, The Lunatics!, The Woodland Chronicles, and much, much more ...

Hello Greg, welcome though virtually on Witm.it (among other things, this reminds me The Matrix ☺), we are extremely honoured that we can interview you and especially that we have the opportunity for you to let you know in more detail to all your Italian fans and to all Wachowski and The Matrix fans.

G.R.: Happy to do this- it's been a while since I dove back into the Matrix stuff, so this is really fun for me.

I would say to start talking about your talent:

Everyone knows that you were born in Houston, Texas and after graduating from the High School for Performing and Visual Arts, have studied painting at the Pratt Institute in New York. However, I wanted to ask you when you realize for the first time to have this natural talent? How did you realize that your skills would become practically your job? You have been encouraged to invest in the art of drawing or was an independent decision? It 'been hard to reach your present skills?

G.R.: I think I always drew and made things as a kid. Texas wasn't particularly nurturing of the arts back then- it may be different now, but then it was pretty much all about sports or business, food or hunting. I was a wiry goofy guy who was barely capable at some of those and ridiculously inept at the others, so for me art was my place to go and feel like myself. It was a kind of escape for me. I may not have known I was doing that at the time of course, but looking back now I can see that clearly. Art was my escape pod from Texas. My Mom was a big shepherd for that, and I think spotted my art habits fairly early- she enrolled me in weekend classes and always encouraged it. My father has a natural ability towards art, but never gave it much credit and I think that extended to me as well in that area, so it was really Mom who pushed things along. She even strong armed me into attending HSPVA (the High School for Performing and Visual Arts) which changed everything for me. For the first time I was surrounded by artists and dancers, actors and musicians who all spent their breaks working on their chosen craft. It was such a fulfilling and exciting place to be, it just changed my life entirely. When I started that school I liked art and was fairly good at it, but when I left there was no other career choice in my head. I may not have known what I was going to do, but something within an artistic realm was a certainty at least.

School started teaching me how to see as an artist- both the High School and Pratt. That's the real essential bit of the studio side. Anyone can learn the craft of drafting a clear image- it may take some longer than others, but really it's a skill that can be achieved. The seeing... that's something else. You can be taught to see things in a different way, but how you see them and then translate that image onto paper or canvas or whatever, that's something you have to find within yourself. I think that's the hardest bit frankly, and something that never gets fully resolved if you're doing it right. Art if you're doing it right, isn't goal-oriented or process-oriented. It has to be a search that never finds its goal, and if it does it has to be let go for the ongoing search to continue. I think in

America we're raised in a goal oriented culture, and it's hard to come to terms with that when faced with the requirements of art.



Now I would say to talk more specifically about your work:

What kind of atmosphere is breathed in your work sector? You have full freedom of action or must be subjected to certain rules? Your work is hard and stressful? From a purely artistic point of view you get the proper recognition? And from an economic point of view? The strong global economic crisis has also affected your industry, with what consequences? Do you have any advice to give to those who want to undertake this type of career?

G.R.: Well if I understand the question... that has changed quite a bit over the years. In Texas I made my art in a total bubble, really. There was little outside influence there of any merit and it was mostly about creating a place for me to go that felt safe and understandable to me- I think that's where my passion for stories and creating worlds came from. In Pratt, well let me just say, being an art college student in NYC, even at the decline of the artworld there was like a kid in a candy shop. There's so much to absorb there, museums and galleries, studios and a whole industry to feed of . I look at my time then, and the ten or so years after in Brooklyn as a kind of absorbing process. I just soaked up everything I could. It wasn't until I had my first kid and moved out here to the woods of western Massachusetts that I began to really hone my voice, to take those previous influences and find my path. So it's no coincidence that having to make an actual living in art and starting a family got me hyper focused on figuring all that out.

I would say I'm sort of naturally prone to being a stressed out person in general. I'm always trying to think two or three moves ahead in order to stave off whatever unforeseen crisis may be lurking out there- financial meltdown or otherwise. Artmaking for me tends to be rather difficult and intense. I'm exhausted by myself while working in the studio, and tend to be fairly obsessive about it. I think that's hard on my family, and while my wife also being an artist does provide her with a good deal more understanding of that, I'm still not the easiest cat in the alley. Publishing has been hit very hard by the recession, and I've noticed that it's very difficult now to get new projects going as a result. Luckily I have a pretty sizable backlog of stuff that got into the pipeline before everything melted down, otherwise I'd be in a pickle indeed. There's new stuff that comes across the desk here and there. Maybe a little less than before, and I'm having to take hits on my cover rate in some places... but overall I feel very blessed and fortunate right now having any work at all. It is an

absolute bloodbath out there and I don't relish the next year for myself or many of my colleagues as a result.

I would say the best thing to do if you're looking to get started, is to commit to it whole-hog. Just go for it in a total 110% way or forget it. There's so many other people out there busting themselves to get the same job you're going to go for, you have to really want it if it's going to happen. I think the best way to start that is to really hone your craft, draw everyday and then draw some more. Jeff Jones once said to be wary of taking on a job you don't love, because you'll be miserable doing it and you'll get ten more offers to do more of it. I think that's spot on and I do try to follow that. Otherwise be consistent, be patient and persistent about it. This is a marathon not a sprint, and slow steady pressure and hard work wins the day every time. Whatever else you do also make those deadlines. The book industry, the comics, film.. it's all the same. If you can't deliver on time then forget it. I can name half a dozen artists who are ten times better than I am who can't get a job because they got a rep for blowing deadlines. This is serious. I've never missed one in fifteen years, and I don't plan on starting any time soon. It can make or break you getting a job or not- even if an editor doesn't love your work as much as another, but he knows you can make the deadline, sometimes that's all it takes.

Now let's talk a little more specific of your art:

After many years the art of drawing and comics seems to have finally managed to enter in to the Olympus of the major arts, what do you think? In your opinion what was the cause of this jump quality? Think it's about certain authors? Or thanks to the advent of graphic novels? Do you think that Hollywood has influenced? Movies like V for Vendetta, 300, Watchmen or the various Batman, Superman & company have been crucial in this sense? It was for the common use in the films storyboard and concept art?(Amongst other things The Matrix movie in this sense was a precursor ☺)

G.R.: I think it was always there, it just took time to recognize it. Comics have and really still are, the ugly kid who went to the dance dressed for a costume ball... and it wasn't. I think you can look all the way back to Windsor McKay and see high art being achieved there, whether it was recognized as such or not. Deciding as we grow older that broccoli is delicious even though we spent our lives as children thinking it was not, is more factor of our changing perspective than of any intrinsic quality of broccoli. I'm glad to see it rising up the social totem pole- I wish it was less the Iron Man and Superman aspect and more the Persepolis and History of Violence end of things that were leading the charge, but it's still a good thing ultimately. Much of that seems to be a function of the my generation the one just before mine growing up when comics started taking itself seriously as a medium for telling stories past the usual tropes, now old enough to start bringing that perspective into our adult lives. I think that will get better for a while... but we're not really encouraging kids to read comics any more and I think it'll drop away sharply if we don't start watering that plant at its roots. I think Larry and Andy are examples of this generation wanting to see comics emerge more fully into the world from having loved them in the 1980's or so. I think it's no coincidence that the books that were hitting in the late 1980's are now the movie properties that are showing up in theaters- that's when I started paying attention to comics and when I made the choice to pursue it as a career, and you can see that same inspiration pushing into the orbits of these up and coming film makers.

Comics are not storyboards by any means, and while there may be some migration between the two for professional working people, I don't think they have much to do with each other at all. I would lament any subservience of comics towards film or storyboards. I think as some comics, like mine that are more filmic in their language, make that transition more easily- but I'd not like to confuse

that with the mediums being interchangeable. I think that's the danger of the film industries current passion for comics. The medium has been so abused and self-abused for so long, I think it's a little too vulnerable for my tastes to the siren song of movies. We're still finding our voice and exploring what can be told in comics, through its own language, and I would hate to see that muddled up by it being overly confused as a film pipeline myself.



Few questions about your technique:

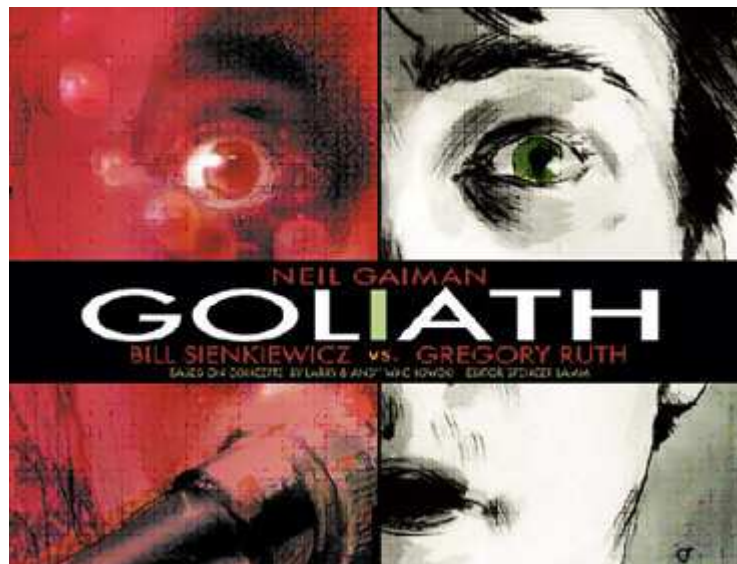
Each artist has his own style, yours is wonderfully realistic, seems to see a movie. Do you have found your style from beginning, or did you get through an artistic journey? But how long does it take to make a comic so detailed? Do all alone or have a team that helps you? Have a sudden open and detailed, explain us a little bit your technique? As is done freehand and how the computer? Nowadays the basic always use pencils or have been replaced by more technological means? We know that uses both techniques, however, prefers the colour or black and white? Why? Prefer to draw or paint?

G.R.: I don't think you should "craft" a style, not if it's to be genuine anyway. I think I came across mine while working, or rather, what my style is came into greater focus in the process. I can't claim to even know what my "style" is so much, it's hard for me to step outside of myself to see it in that way, and I don't know that doing that is my job anyway. I think an artist should focus on his or her work, and that's it- let someone else sort out the implications and style issues. I think seeing that clearly requires being on the outside of your process and I think that's not where you belong if you're making the work.

The length of time to do a comic differs with each project. The Matrix stuff went, by necessity VERY quickly- I think I had less than three weeks to write, draw and letter A Path Among Stones for the Matrix comics, whereas Freaks of the Heartland art would take me a full day for each page. Conan I think ran about three days a page and the Lost Boy, right now seems to be running somewhere in between. It all depends on my familiarity with the story and material, my enthusiasm, and some of the practicalities involved with say doing a story that's set in familiar current times, and one say, like Conan, set in some far off faux-historically setting that nonetheless requires a lot of research and carefulness in making sure the work reflects the canon. Ideally in comics, you want to be able to draw a complete page of art- that's art alone- per day. Anything faster is great, but anything slower gets you into trouble especially if you're pursuing series work that really requires you stay on a seriously devoted pace. Obviously black and white stuff goes faster than fully painted stuff... so there's a lot of variables and factors that help determine the pace of doing a story.

I don't have anyone else here to help- working in studio is just to private an experience for me to be able to handle having an assistant in house or anything like that. It's drive me nuts having to worry about someone else in the room to be honest. Which is a bummer because I could really use the help. I'd been an artist's assistant for many years previously, and I know the value of a good assistant towards keeping the artist working in the studio... but I just can't seem to reconcile that with my own privacy manias...

I do all my panel work as separate individual drawings on paper using sumi ink and sometimes watercolour and handmade brushes. I don't draw on the computer and don't think I ever will. I love my computer and could not do my work without it, but I'd no more draw on it than I would use a vacuum cleaner to brush my teeth. It's just not the right tool given how I like to work. For me drawing and painting are tactile synchronous experiences. I want to get dirty, get ink on my pants and fingers, feel the paper underneath, the ay the brush bounces around the page and enjoy and regret those accidents that always occur. I'd never have the experience on a computer. I have one of those Wacom tablets- but like so many others who also have them, it's gathering dust on a bookshelf someplace. I'm sure it's somebody's thing to draw on he computer, it just isn't my thing.



Let's talk about your career:

How did you start? It was difficult, you had to make a mess? It was difficult to achieve fame? Being famous changed your habits? Positively or negatively? We know you as an eclectic and versatile author, you've achieved both comics graphic novels, not to mention the beautiful stories in prose, even murals and illustrations for the New York Transit Museum, and several music videos! What were the most memorable moments in your career? You have made a beautiful music video for Prince, did you meet him in person? How does he like? He left you free way or you had some guidelines? Have you known, other famous people thanks to your work? Do you have any other major project in the program, you advance to the mica reveal?

G.R.: I started drawing stories with my hometown buddy, Stiles White, who's now a big screenwriter with his wife, Juliet Snowden in LA, they both wrote Knowing among others...) Stiles and I used to draw some comics together- he'd write and I'd do the drawing... Mr. Softee was our first effort. Just a little ten page thing. But it wasn't until I started doing Sudden Gravity for Caliber Comics that I felt like I was really getting into the business. And it wasn't until years later, after I did some work for Paradox Press' Factoid Books, that my two-page contribution to Dark Horse's

9/11 benefit book caught Alan Moore's attention, that things started swinging for real. That's what prompted Scott Allie to put me on Freaks of the Heartland.. and things just grew from there. I had in the middle of all that begun to do the Matrix stuff, and that was wonderful... but no one was really looking at comics on the computer yet, so a lot of that stayed below the radar.

Most memorable moments... Hmm.... I would say working late at night in Grand Central Terminal on those murals when the whole place was closed down and dark was pretty spectacular. Working with Prince on the Cinnamon Girl Video was amazing given my junior high school religious devotion to Purple Rain... that was awesome. Getting to chat with Ray Harryhausen in San Diego and having dinner with Barron Storey several times. Working with Spencer Lamm on the Matrix comics was the most fun I've ever had, but so was working with Kurt and Scott on Conan... I don't know it's hard to single out any one thing, there's been so much, and I've loved every moment of it.

I didn't get to meet Prince in person, I was invited to go see him play a show in Boston, but irony of ironies, we had so much to do on the music video, I couldn't make it out . Same for the Obama book- the whole reason I had to stay was to draw the book on the inauguration, and so I missed the actual event. Tragic. I did get to talk to Prince briefly.. that was amazing. I've gotten to start working with Ethan Hawke on a book we want to do together as a result of Conan. I got to have a drink with Will Eisner because of something.. I can't remember now. I got a great note from Caroline Kennedy as a result of the Obama book, and have come to know many of my old early-day heroes in comics as a result of working in the medium, Jon Muth, and Kent Williams, and Dave McKean, Gene Colan, and Bernie Wrightson and so many others. It's been wonderful in that way.

The big thing I'm literally working on today is The Lost Boy with Scholastic's Graphix! imprint. that's my passion project right now. I'm also doing a cover and chapter illos for a wonderful series of novels of the fictionalized adventures of young Jack London for Harper Collins and a new children's book for Hyperion with Ji li-Jiang, called Red Kite, Blue Kite. My second children's picture book from Fiewel& Friends with James Preller comes out next September and it's called A Pirate's Guide to First Grade... and there's a raft of other things coming as well. It's busy time indeed, but so much fun.

Now some confidential questions to know better:

G.R.: Are they confidential if they're in a published interview?

Are you married, have children, you have many friends? Relatives and friends how to judge your work? You're a sports or lazy? Do you Like cinema, you go there often? Read much? Books, poems, comics or avoid to bring work home? Do you have any special hobbies? Have you ever been to Italy? What do you like Italy? I hope not the Mafia! You know I'm from Carrara, the city of marble, have you ever thought of also dedicated to sculpture?

G.R.: I am married, to a wonderful, patient, gorgeous and immensely talented artist in her own right and have two young boys. I don't go for sports to be honest, but I don't think that's being lazy, I like to play them when the opportunity arises, but watching sports wholly uninteresting to me. I love the movies and am an avid film geek. With the young kids I don't get to the theatre nearly as much as I'd like... If I had time I guess I'd have a hobby, but with the studio the wife and kids and friends and books and movies.. there's really not much time left. I've never been to Italy or anywhere in Europe, but I'd love to go someday soon. I'm, not particularly interested in pursuing sculpture myself- I just don't think in those terms so often. There are certain pieces I want to make, but in the end, I'd rather draw something instead.



As a big fan of Matrix and the Wachowski brothers immediately began asking:

You're so fond of the saga of the Matrix? And the Wachowskis do you think? Did you like their later works, V for Vendetta and Speed Racer? You already know the brothers, or did you meet them thanks to Matrix-Comics? What types are live? When you have proposed to implement the Matrix comics did you think? Did you like working with them?

G.R.: I really loved the first two Matrix films- the third one was a bit of a mess I think, but I still enjoyed it. I liked Speed Racer very much, V not so much... perhaps because the book is so close to my heart. The Matrix stuff was really something amazing from Larry and Andy.... I just think you could tell a hundred stories in that universe they built and never exhaust it. There were so many more stories I wanted to do with that realm that never got made. They were all tremendously fun to work with and very accommodating. They're all big time comics nerds and that just made it so much fun. When I was doing Hunters and Collectors, I had all these ideas of expanding whole new territory in the human world and we just ran out of time really... I could keep doing those things forever I think- especially if it meant working with Spencer Lamm, he's a brilliant editor and friend.

I'd say it's time to talk about your Matrix-Comics:

The brothers have left you full freedom to implement them, or they give you very specific track to follow? Or you have to study the world of the Matrix before it began? I ask because I've always considered the Matrix-Comics integral part of the world of the Matrix, in that it outlines some important aspects of the saga that are not discussed in movies, videogames and anime. I also noticed that the comics often contain details, symbols and wordplay in style Wachos. For example, in A path among stones have used two types of background colours (blue and green), have a special meaning akin to "film? (In the film the scenes in the Matrix in the real world are green and blue). In any case, A path among stones tell a story really intriguing that plays a lot with what people believe is real, or did you get when you had in mind for some time? About Goliath instead sees the collaboration between three great artists you, Neil Gaiman and Bill Seinkiewicz, what was your contribution to the project? Also tells us about the wonderful Return of the Prodigal son?

G.R.: I came into to fill in for another writer/artist in a kind of a rush so they could get their 12th or 13th story in for the second series of online comics- so my initiation was rather rushed. I had seen

the first film of course, but I didn't have much more to work with at the time, so there was a lot of coaching about the canon in that first tale (A Path Among Stones) Once Prodigal Son came around and Hunters and Collectors, the second film was well in the works and I had access to a whole lot more material. That's when it really started getting good and fun. I remember I did this poster of Trinity I really loved and when I showed it to Spencer and the Brothers, they sort of gasped at how precise a depiction it was of the opening sequence of the second film- which was great until I found out that meant it had to be scrapped and hidden away as everything was very secretive back then.

A Path Among Stones was so fast I never had the chance to dig into the characters as I usually like to... I guess there's a lot of Sudden Gravity influence in that particular story, and I'm sure it rested on that series to a large degree, but the schedule simply did not allow time for me to get to know the characters or that world as I would have liked. Prodigal was different, and quite a bit longer. I think it's like 22 pages or so... so I was able to really get a handle on the characters and the place more. The colours in Path were keyed to reflect the film's colour language- absolutely. When you're in the Matrix, everything has a stark greenish hue, when you're not everything is more organic, browner. So I definitely tried to use that as a visual cue there... Goliath was great fun too- that's one of my favourite stories in the series and getting to draw pictures for Neil's story with Bill was an honour to be sure. Prodigal was especially great fun in that I got to do a black and white noir comic for the first time in a while... and really loved that process. The world of the Matrix inverts everything in an interesting way- especially religion, so I wanted to talk about that. In the Matrix, the "Angels" would be the Agents because they defend the people, stop terrorists from blowing things up and generally maintain or try to maintain, order. God *is* the machine in this case. On the other hand, The Rebels act as demons, who attack the world, and try to tear it down. They'll shot your granny or your sister if they happen to be in their way and wouldn't bat an eye about it. So looking at the world of the Matrix in religious terms turned everything upside down in a way I really liked.



Talked a little bit of Matrix:

The international success of The Matrix is surely due to the fact that the brothers have created a real world, with specific rules, heroes, people and cities, a little 'as has happened with Star Wars and Lord of the Rings. Do not think too that the Matrix franchise still has a lot of things to tell? Not necessarily through new movies, but just through the comics or the cartoon? In this regard you can tell us whether there is a third volume of Matrix-Comics? If not you can convince Wachowski?

With the great success of Avatar chasing rumours according to which we may revise the cinema in 3D version of old blockbusters like Star Wars or The Lord of the Rings. Do you know anything about any version of The Matrix in 3D? This technology is becoming more and more: movies, TV, video games, perhaps in a future not far away motion could also be applied to comic books and pictures, what do you think? About technology applied to comic books, have you ever made a digital-comic? What do you think of this type of art?

G.R.: I agree- I think Larry and Andy have crafted a total and believable place people can go and travel in so beautifully. I think that's the main pillar of their success with that series. I think there's

a good deal more that could be told in terms of the stories and themes initiated by the movies... I just don't know if the market's there for it as much as it was before. This is a different time now, and I think a world where one is trying to awaken from a false escapist place like the Matrix, runs counter to the gestalt of a world where Avatar preaches love for the escapist false world. They're both films that are on totally opposite ends of the spectrum in that way, and I think the kind of Orwellian fear that Matrix stems from is not there as much as it used to be. I think this is what made V so out of place- the idea of a well-intended terrorist in the age of Al Qaeda doesn't gel. I'm not a big fan of 3-D technology myself. I don't really care for it, and I think all the hype will fade as quickly as the rush to make CGI animal films did after Pixar started knocking their balls out of the park. It's just another tool in the box, and because it's new and shiny we're all talking about it. In the end it's the content that matters and wins in the end. Personally, 3-D seems reductive to scope in a movie. It destroys your peripheral vision and replaces the potential for a myriad of special variations by substituting just three or four realms of space. I think it's all a bit overblown if you ask me... we've been here before with 3-d and there was similar talk about it then. I think a good deal of the hype is coming from the studios now because they see it as a way to get people back into the theatres exclusively. So I'm pretty ambivalent about all this energy. We'll see...

I would never glom a film technology to a comic, nor would I assume any film technique works in comics form. They're wholly different mediums. I will do some more comics for the web I'm sure but I really prefer reading them in a book. I like to hold a book in my hands, and feel that paper. I like to be in control of the pace and how I read a story without it being controlled by a mouse or a flash animated page turn. So I'm not chasing digital comics really... But that's just my subjective perspective. I'm a book-guy and books is where I live.



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