

Digital & Dynamic

Artist **Jessie Young** uses digital tools and a dedicated drawing habit to feed and fuel her creative life.

By Doreen Manning

Struggling with situational depression during the pandemic, Boston-based illustrator, writer, educator and self-professed "giant vector geek" Jessie Young found herself lacking all motivation to work, create or do much of anything. Then, during a particularly energized evening, Young picked up her tablet (an iPad Pro) and succeeded in creating a simple outline of a single self-portrait before bed. The next morning, she looked at the unfinished drawing and felt inspired by its coloring book-like quality.

Young drew the piece, **Me, Horns**, on her iPad using pixel brushes in Adobe Fresco. These brushes behave much like traditional materials, such as charcoal and colored pencils, but the marks are made in pixels on a screen. To view a video that demonstrates the making of this work, visit bit.ly/463H9KE.

Young spent the next few weeks using the portrait as a template, adding to it each day, never repeating an idea twice—and "The Depression Coloring Book" series was born. (See examples below.) "Sometimes I let whatever happened on a given day inform what I drew," she says. "Other times I'd scribble around with no goal in mind until my energy level or circumstances made me stop. The story behind each drawing may not always be apparent to the viewer, but it's a visual shorthand for whatever was weighing on me most that day."

ART PUSH-UPS

In addition to her own art practice, Young currently teaches digital art and animation at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, in Massachusetts. She has also taught a more traditional drawing class for the summer program at the Putney School, in Vermont. Throughout her career, a type of personal discipline and focus has driven much of her work. Take the self-initiated project of drawing 100 vector portraits, inspired by one of her own teaching assignments.

At one time, Young had given her advanced digital studio students some weekly self-directed homework—exercises intended to turn their weaknesses into strengths. Let's say a student was challenged by drawing eyes; Young had them commit to drawing 10 pairs of eyes for a week. "That's why I started my own series, challenging myself to draw 100 vector portraits," she says. "I wanted to prove to my year-long kids that their assignment was challenging, but doable, and I wanted to show my summer students that I'd take a crack at doing an independent project, too."

Young decided to work through a tendency to obsess over details by committing to a series of quick, daily portraits. "I art-push-upped my way through my days … and kept to my goal of drawing 100 portraits as a way to stay focused and keep myself from slacking," she says.

The process for her daily portraits was simple. Using her iPad Pro and an Apple Pencil for working on the fly, Young would find a willing subject and then draw—with no filters, no tracing. Utilizing Adobe Illustrator Draw (now Adobe









These digital self-portraits, created in the midst of the pandemic, became a type of visual diary that grew into a series that Young titled, "The Depression Coloring Book." The creative activity was an effective way of coping with challenging times.





LEFT TO RIGHT **Caleb**, **Robzilla** and **Brian Yap** are three pieces from Young's self-imposed "100 Portraits" challenge.

Fresco), she starts with lines. Once the structure is in place, she glides from dark values through midtones until she fills in the highlights. She tosses in a bit of color, sends it through Adobe Illustrator CC to clean up and add finishing touches, and she's done. "I discovered that speed has made my marks cleaner, smoother and more forceful in a way that I really love," she says.

Halfway through that series, Young published a few portraits on Twitter and caught the eye of *Adobe Create Magazine* (now *Adobe Discover*), which led to a series of articles and features with other artists. "It was a wonderful experience to share my knowledge beyond the classroom," she says.

Young's empathetic nature is very much evident throughout her portrait series—the expressions are broad and expansive, often sharing deep emotion within her linework alone. The irony of her work is that the bulk is portraiture, even though she's face blind. "Maybe," she says, "it's my weird relationship to faces that just sort of makes me fixate on them."

CREATIVE ROOTS

Becoming an artist wasn't so much a choice that Young consciously made; you could say she was simply born into it. "I grew up with art teachers for parents, so it wasn't like a thing I decided to do or something separate from just living my life," she says. "I simply grew up thinking that in life you make stuff—that's just what you do."

Being raised in an environment that celebrated artistic expression and nurtured a deep appreciation for the arts had a profound impact on Young's creative development as a child. Her father was a painting teacher, her mother taught graphic design, and the budding creative grew up painting and drawing. An only child, Young says she was fortunate that her parents indulged her every interest, which included everything from drawing and photography to jewelry-making, weaving and bookmaking. She took summer art classes and watched her parents prep for their classes. She was exposed to art on a daily basis. "You could pretty much assume that if there was some kind of art I wanted to try, the equipment was available in the house somewhere, and usually at least one of my parents knew how to do it. I was very lucky in the parent department," she says.

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>
> –JESSIE YOUNG

Even though Young gravitated to drawing, when it came time to choose a major at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), she elected painting—mainly because her 18-year-old self thought the painting department had the better studios. Then, during her freshman foundational year, she took a drawing class with Brice Hobbs, who would become a mentor. He helped her navigate a major that she'd become immensely unhappy with. Her fellow painting majors weren't feeding her creatively, and Hobbs encouraged her to find peers elsewhere on campus; to seek out those who inspired her. That led her to illustration majors with whom she hung out constantly, poring over their assignments and learning from them by osmosis.

When it came time for her thesis, it was a penchant for procrastination that saved her. Not wanting to leave her Providence apartment, she instead opened up Photoshop and taught herself the ins and outs of digital drawing. That became the basis for her painting thesis. "Because the painting department was so permissive, it was thankfully accepted," she says.



THE EDUCATOR

Returning home to Boston after graduation, Young was 21 and unsure what her career goals could or should be. She discovered through her parents that there was a teacher shortage and thus some leniency on teaching requirements. Her father learned of a position within the Cambridge Public Schools for a digital arts teacher, ideally with photography or jewelry-making experience. "I thought, 'I can do all of those things,' so I applied," Young says, "and have been teaching there ever since."

Throughout her years of working to inspire other budding creatives, Young has kept her own art practice alive through her digital work, but not without some criticism. She says that a lot of people assume that because her work is done with digital tools rather than a paintbrush or pencil, there's some sort of trick to what she's creating. Young explains that her vector work starts off as a loose black-and-white drawing in Adobe Fresco on her Apple iPad. Then, she moves to Adobe Illustrator on a Wacom Cintiq to add pops of color, gradients and other finishing touches. "I use no filters, no live-tracing and no live-painting," she says. "Everything you see is the product of my hand and my stylus making marks on a surface—like a painter on a canvas."

Young says she's still a student herself, constantly trying to learn something new or teach herself techniques that she hasn't used before. Although the infinitely scalable vector is her jam, Young says lately she's been working with live oils and blending elements available in Fresco, to challenge herself.

As an artist, Young has learned to ride her hyperfixation when it comes to creative ideas. She also recognizes that her ADHD often leads the way, and has learned to recognize that feeling when the muse hits. "When I find myself almost missing a bus because I have to do just five more minutes of whatever I'm working on, then I'm like, 'Oh, it's happening,' and I start to rearrange things so I can make the most of my inspiration," she says.

As a teacher, Young has many students who want to work in the arts the entirety of their lives, and she's encouraging. She also has students who want to keep art a thing just for themselves. "I say, go for that, too, if it makes you happy," she says. "Just know that what makes you happy will continue to change throughout your life, over and over and over again, so don't be afraid to change your mind."

Turn the page for a demo.

DEMONSTRATION: ADOBE MAX FOR NEWBIES

This is an overview of Young's process for her vector drawing, **Adobe Max for Newbies**, an homage to her first experience attending Adobe's annual Creativity Conference. "I wanted to capture the vibe of being swept from event to event by the crowd," Young says.



WHAT IS VECTOR ART?

Vector artwork is rendered using mathematical formulas rather than by filling in pixels on a grid like in raster images. The artist draws the individual points on the page using tools such as a pen, pencil or brush, among other options, and the program measures their spatial relationships to create the connecting lines. This allows the resulting artwork to be infinitely scalable; therefore, a vector drawing the size of a postage stamp can easily be enlarged to the size of a skyscraper with no loss in image quality.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST ON INSTAGRAM @JESSIEYOUNGART OR AT JESSIEYOUNG.COM.



STEP 1

To create source imagery for the crowd, I solicited volunteers at school, took photos and opened them in Adobe Photoshop CC. I masked each person out of the background, then moved them into Adobe Draw on an iPad and sketched with an Apple Pencil. I sketched the basic forms in light red and refined them in dark red.



STEP 2

I switched to black for the final line drawing. Then I shaded the figures, using separate layers for each value. I worked from dark to light, merging layers whenever I reached the limit allowed by the program.



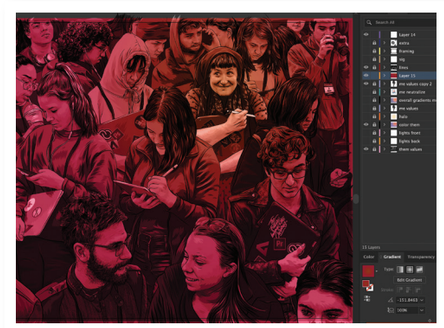
STEP 3

I flattened the crowd into one layer, then shaded myself.



STEP 4

I used more complex textures and stronger contrast in my clothes to help me stand out from the crowd.



STEP 5

After playing around with the overall gradient to give it more depth, I added more realistic colors to my face and clothes. Then I finished up by drawing the light from everyone's gadgets.



STEP 6

As I continued to add new details and make adjustments, I began to re-envision the drawing with an even bigger crowd. I took new references from more dramatic angles to fill in the foreground and background areas and used Draw to sketch the new figures in a draft of the original drawing. I used blue this time so I could stay organized.

FINISHING



After filling in the values, the drawing was so complex that I had to send it to Illustrator layer by layer to keep Draw from crashing. After re-assembling the pieces in Illustrator, I resized the gradient and added purple around the edges to give the crowd some depth. I finished the drawing by illuminating the gadgets. I drew ellipses and applied radial gradients that faded from cyan at 10 percent opacity in the center to 0 percent opacity at the edges and placed them over the devices and the people using them. Then I grouped the gradients according to which face they affected and used clipping masks to shape them to fit each figure. I made the blending mode Hard light at 74 percent opacity. Finally, I punched up the colors of the overall gradient on the crowd by increasing the saturation. (See the finished piece, **Adobe Max for Newbies**, opposite).