A conte/pastel
painting of Keanu

When he was growing up, Aaron Sacco thought he would become a basketball player or artist. When he stopped growing at 5'6", he knew he'd be an artist. After he graduated from Baylor University in 2004 with a degree in graphic design, he thought he would have to pay his dues at a day job.

Sacco said most artists believe it takes a long time to make it big, so in the meantime, many illustrators support themselves financially by doing design work. Facing pressure from his family to get a "real job," Sacco was interviewing for full-time graphic design positions in Dallas. He said he may have been subconsciously sabotaging his interviews because he did not really want the jobs and could not convincingly pretend that he did. He pursued freelance design work to make some money while looking for a permanent job, and when he came upon a newspaper advertisement that said Richard Linklater's film, A Scanner Darkly, was hiring illustrators, he applied for it immediately. During the three-hour interview, Sacco digitally drew the actors from the movie, including Keanu Reeves, Wynona Ryder and Robert Downy Jr., using a Wacom pen tablet.

"I hadn't done it before, I had a bunch of coffee and I hadn't eaten, so I was shaky. It looked like I was having a seizure," Sacco said. He did not land the job. While he knew he did not interview as well as he could have, he said he was surprised he was not offered the job.

After the interview, Karl Umlauf, whom Sacco had studied under at Baylor, asked him to assist him with an exhibit in Arizona. Sacco said the trip was a great learning experience since he was able to ask questions and study and connect with Umlauf while helping to move the show and set it up.

"I learned so much talking to him on the road about how to look at art," Sacco said.

When Sacco returned from the trip, he was called back to A Scanner Darkly. Since the filmmakers used such new technology to create the film, they had not accurately estimated how many illustrators it would take to finish the movie by their deadline, and they called back those who came close to making the cut during the first round of interviews. This time around, Sacco was hired as one of the film's animators.

"It was a close call. I could have taken a job in Dallas, but I stuck it out and waited for a job I felt strongly about. I didn't settle and I wasn't scared into a job. I am fortunate; most people don't have that opportunity," Sacco said.

Based on a 1977 Philip K. Dick semi-autobiographical science fiction novel, A Scanner Darkly is the story of an undercover cop, played by Reeves, who is working on a drug bust. Reeves' character is addicted to the street drug he works closely with, Substance D, which produces split personalities in its users. Identity, the perception of reality and the question of whether people really are who we think we are, is a central theme in the movie, which appealed to Sacco. Raised mostly in Lebanon and Cyprus by Baptist missionaries, he said he has always been interested in philosophy.

Dick was involved with drugs in the 1960s and 1970s, and several of his friends died as the result of taking them, so the novel is sometimes read as a cautionary tale. Dick's family required that the movie be a faithful adaptation, and Sacco said some of the movie's biggest fans are also fans of the book.

To create the graphic novel look the filmmakers wanted, the movie's 70 illustrators used an updated, digitized version of an old process called "interpolated rotoscoping," which combines filmed live action with illustrations. This process was also used in the 2001 Linklater movie, Waking Life, and the Ah-Ha's video for their song "Take on Me" in the 1980s. A Scanner Darkly was filmed in less than three weeks in Austin, and illustrators worked for

Graphite drawing,
15" x 10", untitled.

artist / illustrator

AARON
SACCO

[By: Tonya Cone / Art provided by: Aaron Sacco]

Oil, featured in
"Beyond Scanner" art
show

about a year and a half, using Wacom pen tablets and software called ColorEngine, created by Austinite Bob Sabiston, to trace over the live images frame by frame. The end result, which looks like a moving painting, is very fluid, much like the characters' identities.

"It was exciting to see my drawing come to life, moving and twitching," Sacco said.

ColorEngine is not yet available for purchase, and the filmmakers hired illustrators instead of animators because they wanted artists who were not set in their ways and used to the existing software used in the industry, according to Sacco. He explained that the software was very intuitive because it was created for artists by artists, unlike other available software, which was created by software engineers. Another advantage of the movie's process was that since the final product was made up of illustrations, the filmmakers were able to use simple props and imperfect backgrounds when they taped the live action, which enabled them to speed up that step.

"They used crude dials and had a box with a window on it. They could get away with more," he said. When the illustrators traced over those frames, they left the imperfections out.

Having so many illustrators working on the film also presented some challenges, however. The illustrators were assigned to teams, depending on each artist's strengths, which worked on different aspects of the movie. Each character needed to look consistent throughout the movie, and minor details had to be tweaked by a smaller team of illustrators toward the end of the project. For example, a small group of animators worked to make Reeves' beard consistent, Sacco said.

Sacco learned a lot from working on the film, both artistically and from a business perspective, he says. He learned to network and organize an exhibit by putting together "Beyond Scanner: Animators Showcase," an exhibit at the Austin Visual Arts Association, and he published an article in Adobe's "Illustrator Techniques" newsletter. Those opportunities and working on the movie

validated the value of his work and helped build his self-confidence.

Sacco said working as an animator of A Scanner Darkly also gave him the financial freedom to pursue other art. While he enjoyed working on the movie, he learned he wants to pursue art beyond animation. Sacco said those hired to animate A Scanner Darkly were required to create a minimum of 100 frames, or three seconds of film a week. The emphasis was on quantity instead of quality, he explained.

"Quality for me is far more important. I would rather create an image that is perfect and timeless," he said, describing animators as "people who could draw well the fastest, and have their image be the most detailed with the smallest amount of shapes in the least time."

While working on A Scanner Darkly, Sacco also learned how to use blocks of color, rather than blending, to create shadow and depth. He said this technique translates really well to a new project he is working on, a photorealistic mural on a 30-foot brick wall for South Austin Music, featuring 29 local musicians, including Monte Montgomery, Jimmy LaFave and Charlie Sexton. Sacco said using flat fields of color to define form, which he learned to do while animating the film, works much better for murals because the house paint he will use does not blend easily.

Sacco is looking forward to the doors working on A Scanner Darkly opened for him, but he said he cannot predict what he will work on in the future.

"Even the things you guess, what actually happens is more wonderful or bizarre. You just have to trust something will come," he said, although does think he may want to teach eventually. "I want to make it first so I have quality advice and know what I'm talking about. I want to get to the point where I can tell kids things I wish I'd been told that would have made my life easier. If you don't make it at first, don't give up; if you live with passion, even if you're poor you'll be happy." ∎

Digital illustration similar to the "scanner" style. Logon to www.aaronsacco.com to contact him.