

Artistic Drive

CALEB MOODY



Every artist creates pieces of work that portray who they are and show some of what they aim to become. Jay Crilley is one such artist. In their childhood, Jay always knew that they wanted to pursue a career in art and admired both comics and the fine arts. Despite having enjoyed painting and other fine arts, they leaned more towards narrative fields.

While Jay doesn't recall any specific moment that lit their fiery passion for art, they always felt that flame. During Jay's teenage years, they understood illustration as an avenue worth pursuing. While they don't feel they have a fully-realized artistic style yet, their webpage (jcrilleyart.square.site) makes clear that their current approach is realism with a cartoon or animation aesthetic.

As the youngest of four siblings in eastern Pennsylvania, twenty minutes away from Allentown, Jay grew up in an area that had started shifting from rural to suburban, and they had enough time to view and admire the farmers' fields and rolling hills, while also being close enough to everything that they needed to attend art classes. This fondness for nature and artistic education helped them become the artist they are. The now-22-year-old illustrator says, "I feel very grateful for the opportunity to experience that as a child and teen." Despite living in and loving Richmond, Virginia, along with all of the relationships they have built there, Jay does still miss their home and family. "Having two homes can be a bittersweet thing," Jay says.

As high school ended, Jay applied to multiple art schools and chose Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) for its well-established program and because they wanted their education to be more than just art history, more than the fine arts specialization found in private schools. VCU's illustration program is quite varied, and Jay found themselves in classes for animation, 3-D modelling, painting, and more. The admiration Jay has for VCU and VCU Arts is evident. At VCU, they met people, both professors and students, who made their experience equally exciting and fulfilling, and Jay graduated from VCU Arts in 2022 with a BFA in Communication Art. Attending VCU would also lead to one of Jay's biggest commissions from *The Tusculum Review* for an

ARTISTIC DRIVE

illustration of a fictional story by Andrew Snover, “The Pianist.”

Each year when getting ready to select illustrations, the editor of *The Tusculum Review*, Prof. Kelsey Trom, reaches out to universities with strong art departments, mostly within 300 miles of Greeneville, Tennessee—excluding Tusculum —by emailing the executive assistant and chair of the arts department. This is to solicit portfolios from young and emerging artists, as she likes for the journal to help jumpstart their careers. Jay sent their portfolio in as the staff was ready to begin preparing the 18th volume of the journal for publication. Looking at Jay’s portfolio, “it really felt like someone exploring the world through art in a way that you rarely see with undergraduates,” Prof. Trom said. Kelsey saw Jay’s previous work and thought that “The Pianist,” with its complex emotional themes, would be a perfect fit for the illustrator. Jay’s maturity is something Kelsey noted, as Jay sent in their completed work before the deadline and the staff was impressed, had no recommendations for even slight adjustments: “I would not have been able to imagine anything even remotely that evocative.”

Having only done commissions for students at VCU, this commission had Jay feeling that they were truly “a grown-up illustrator.” In fact, their illustration of “The Pianist” is still their favorite work they have ever done. With the way the protagonist of the story had not been given many traits, it allows the reader’s mind to imagine whatever they would

like the person of “The Pianist” to look like, with Jay having captured that ideal brilliantly. Being able to capture the ambiguity and specificity of the story, as well as its mood of immersion in and obsession with the piano and it being played, makes the illustration masterful. When people think of the Norman Rockwell age of illustration, the one commonly thought of as the “golden age” of illustration, Jay would have fit in quite well, as, like Rockwell, they are able to convey so much within a singular image. This commission would not be Jay’s last from *The Tusculum Review*, as they had been commissioned to do the cover for the—as of this writing—upcoming edition of the international literary journal.

After receiving a briefing on the piece for the commission, Jay does research into what the illustration they’re working on will be about. With the second commission from the journal, Jay required a good idea for the historical setting, and after researching and the gathering images, set out to create thumbnails, small sketches that capture the idea and composition of a piece. Jay begins with black and white and adds color values later. “Once I thumbnail a decent variety of compositions, I add notes and send them to the art director or editor, who gives me feedback and approves of one of the sketches. After that I gather more specific reference for poses, backgrounds, etc. by taking photos of myself or others posing or creating rough backgrounds in 3-D modelling apps like Blender, sometimes a combination of the two.”

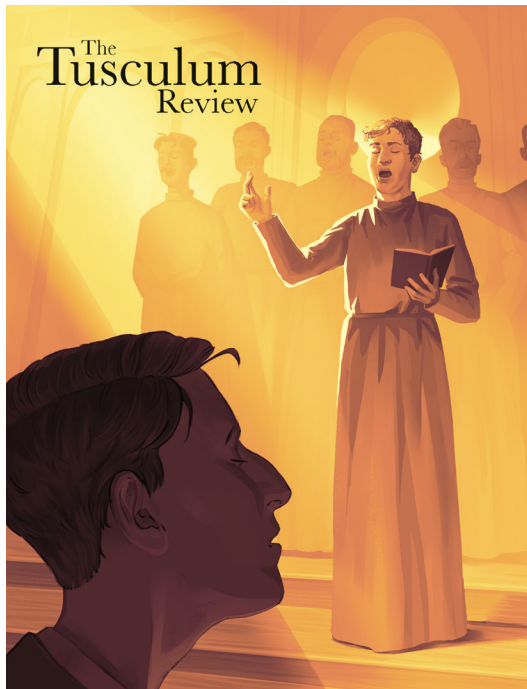
With all of that being done, they then



Jay Crilley illustration of Andrew Snover's *Normal Piano* 2022

CALEB MOODY

begin to draw the piece. Each artwork has a slightly different workflow from that point, but Jay usually first ensures the correctness of the perspectives and linework and then adds blocks of color on differing layers. After this process, they spend time on the rendering, adding layers and fiddling with colors before getting the piece right. Once done, they export the final product files and send them to their client.



As a student Jay created art for the VCU Student Media Center, including a cover for the 2021/22 issue of *The Compass*, an annual student welcome magazine. That issue won 1st Place Standalone Special Selection at the Virginia Press Awards in 2022 and was named a runner-up in the 2022 Jurgen Comic

Contest. Their current work consists mostly of redesigning some of their older illustrations and building up their portfolio. Their current aim is to get a job in entertainment, preferably animation. Prof. Trom shared her thoughts on Jay's professional aims, "My only concern is that in going into animation, they give up on illustration, which would be a great loss." Prof. Trom, who spent a formative year in VCU's illustration program before getting her MFA in Creative Writing there, also shared a bit of her own personal experience, recalling just how demanding and grueling art school had been, despite not having done nearly as much digital art as Jay: "I imagine that is a pretty big challenge." To any beginning artists and illustrators, Jay's advice is this: keep drawing and experimenting--only making art for an assignment or job can feel like a drag, "so at the core keep it interesting for yourself."

Caleb Moody is an aspiring science-fiction and fantasy writer currently pursuing an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing. As an assistant editor for *The Tusculum Review*, his work consisted of choreographing the mailing of more than 400 issues, updating the database, and completing other behind-the-curtain projects. He is working on a collection of poems and ironing out the details for a novel he is writing, codenamed *Basophobia*. When not driving himself up the wall, he enjoys unwinding with some nice music or researching and learning things about whichever mythology system currently holds his attention.