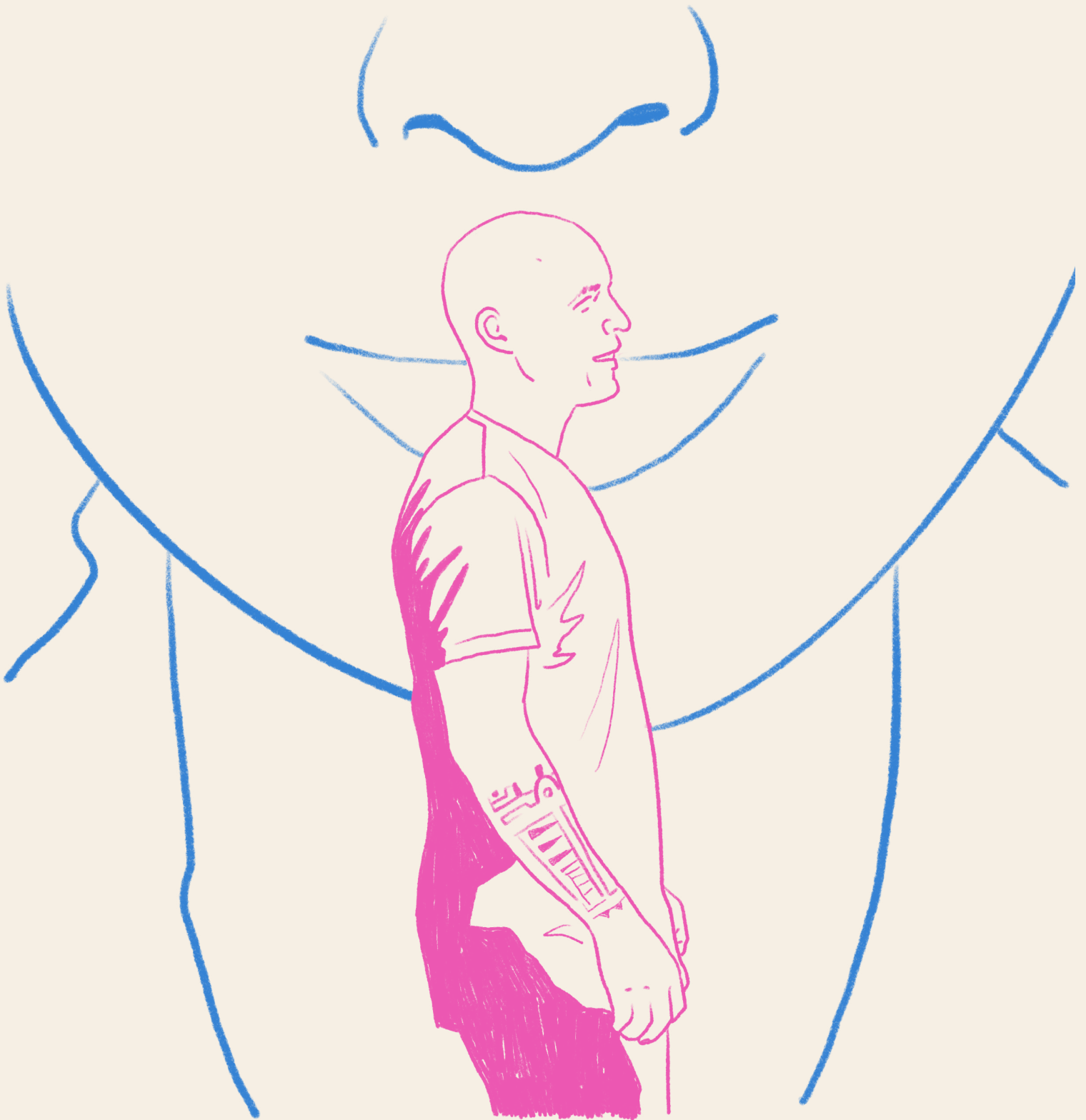


# *Sam Rodriguez* on Local Inspiration and Facing Forwards Towards an Increasingly Digital World

by Liz Godbey



One of my favorite experiences at CCA is speaking to talented alumni and hearing about their time at school and beyond graduation. Sam Rodriguez is one of these alumni, calling San Jose his home. In his talk on September 29th, part of the Design Lecture Series, he expressed how his own mixed identity, as well as the diverse population of the Bay Area, influences his "Cultural Landscape paintings." In these paintings, he focuses on the experiences of Latinx, Asian, Black, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous people in the Bay and beyond.

I found it quite poignant to listen to him speak at length about one of his early murals, done pro bono, on a laundromat in Northside San Jose. He used his daughter and a friend's daughter as references (although not to a great likeness, he added) and included iconography from the area's history of generations of Japanese-American and Mexican-American families.

Although inspired by the Bay, Rodriguez's work is in no way exclusive to the area. His murals and paintings are found all over, Rodriguez showing us images from commissions from Kobe, Japan, to Koreatown, Los Angeles. His digital work circulates the globe through collaborations with *Wired* magazine, *The New Yorker*, Puma, and Xbox. He got the com-






*( left) Kobe mural in progress  
(right) Koreatown mural*

mission for the Koreatown mural for a commercial real estate client, through a CCA connection. Framing it as a lesson to the students in attendance, Rodriguez emphasized the importance of fostering friendly creative relationships, saying that “they’ll give you jobs, they’ll want to collaborate” and that there are “talented folks to your left and right.”

I was interested in him speaking about developing his distinctive style from his roots as a graffiti artist, through his time pursuing a BFA at CCA, to the current moment of working in public murals, commercial and editorial collaborations, and corporate commissions. Rodriguez did not grow up exposed to much ‘fine art.’ He was always attracted to portraiture—a significant component of his current work—but also loved commercial art like album covers or cartoons and, of course, local graffiti and mural practices. He entered CCA without knowing what he wanted to do but soon found his place in illustration through his love of working in the mural form. Reflecting further on his experience at CCA, Rodriguez explained how there are ways in which he would like to return to how he worked then, where he felt free to experiment with his style. At the same time, he also put a lot of pressure on himself during his time in school. He expressed appreciation for his personal and artistic growth in the past years that has allowed him not to put the same pressure on himself, saying “I am serious when it comes to work, but I don’t take my work seriously.” He’s enjoyed being more self-expressive again, which potential clients have received well. He noted, humbly, how many clients prefer the pieces that best expressed his fun, personal style. He stated that lately, he’s “been fortunate in that [he] can do pieces for clients that [he’d] probably do in [his] own studio.”



*Illustration for Xbox, used in a game  
and on special edition consoles*



It was also interesting to hear him speak about his transition from traditional mediums to digital work and his post-graduation experience when he took a “detour” in freelancing and other work before becoming the professional illustrator that he is today. While working primarily in a digital mode now, he retains a fondness for analog making, remarking that “there’s some energy there that shows up on the wall because a physical person was there making that mark.” As for many, myself included, Covid-19 led to a reckoning with one’s art practice in a new way and a reevaluation of what direction one wants to go in. He started his digital practice back in 2018, initially using Procreate software for mockups, but fell in love with the digital process, especially in the past two years. He also appreciates the speed at which the software and this digital way of working allowed him to create work.

As a current student in the Graduate Fine Arts program, this talk definitely gave me a greater understanding of what a career in illustration is like, particularly for those in the CCA community. Reflecting on my own experience here, I always appreciate the times in which I can interact with other departments outside of my own and learn about different ways of making. At one point, Rodriguez made an interesting distinction between the analog/traditional arts and digital illustration, noting the first of which creates an art object whereas the latter produces digital images which circulate in the world differently. This is not necessarily the case, with the rise of digital media usage in the fine arts and the ability to share work via social media or digital viewing rooms. But, I do get this distinction between traditional fine art (paintings, sculpture, etc.) circulating in the art market and gallery or museum scenes as opposed to digital illustration that circulates via advertising or social media. Both have different audiences and different reaches and, of course, one way is not ‘better’ than the other.

Another distinction that stood out to me in comparison to my own practice and experience with the fine arts at CCA was the emphasis on collaboration between artists and corporations. For example, Rodriguez notes collaborations with Puma, a target of the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement, and the local tech-giant LinkedIn. Certainly, this sort of work allows artists to live off of creating work, which is appealing to most artists. I cannot fault an artist for needing to work to survive nor desiring exposure for their art. Yet, while Rodriguez noted he could retain his personal style, I still wonder about the limitations of working with corporations and I would be curious to hear his opinion on that. Does he still have room to create work not meant to be commercially viable? Moreover, while it is frequently said that there is “no ethical consumption under capitalism,” is there also no ethical collaboration either? Artists and designers need to earn income to survive. The nature of the illustration profession is to be paid to visually present an idea or brand; it seems tricky enough to find work with a client who pays adequately within our current system. Similarly, on the fine art side of things, it is difficult to make enough money to live on outside of the traditional and problematic art market. Despite the difference in disciplines, I found a lot of Rodriguez’s talk to be applicable to the experiences of many CCA students. It was a pleasure to hear more about what professional illustration is like and how CCA continues to influence Rodriguez’s illustration practice to this day.



**Rodriguez’s LinkedIn mural**

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