

Visual Storyteller

Scandinavian illustrator Simon Stålenhag's digital art combines reality with science fiction. BY RACHEL GUYAH

Growing up in the Nordic countryside, concept artist Simon Stålenhag did what many young boys do: use the power of imagination to enliven his surroundings with robots, dinosaurs and other fantastical beings. As an adult, he uses his imagination to design digital artwork for sci-fi films, computer games, books and even the Swedish Museum of Natural History. Stålenhag's work is created with a digital tablet and pen — though the vivid colors, texture and detail echo his background in watercolor and free-hand drawing.

In 2014 the Stockholm-based artist published his first book, "Tales from the Loop," which depicts a reimagined version of Scandinavia in the '80s and '90s. The book's hyper-realistic drawings portray rural, everyday life alongside robots, machinery and other sci-fi phenomena. A fictional short story accompanies each drawing. Viking recently caught up with the acclaimed artist and writer whose third book is scheduled to launch this fall.

Q Tell us a little about your childhood. Did you always enjoy drawing or painting?

A I grew up in Färingsö, outside of Stockholm. It's a rural island in Lake Mälaren made up farmland and patches of forests. I was into birds and animals, and spent a lot of time outside or with my nose in a field guide for Swedish birds or wildlife. The illustrations in these books got me interested in painting and drawing in a more serious way than before. I really wanted to capture the environment around me.

Q What inspired you to pursue art as a career?

A It started around a decade ago when I was helping a friend with a game project he had been doing in his spare time. He asked me if I wanted to do music and art for it. Writing music and painting were my big passions, but I had no idea how I could

turn them into a job. When my friend started to ask for specific art assets for his game, I discovered I had somewhat of a talent in understanding game art.

Q Which Scandinavian artists have inspired you and your work?

A Swedish wildlife painters like Lars Jonsson and Gunnar Brusewitz. Their phenomenal work showed me the possibilities of expression that painting and drawing are capable of.

Q How did the dystopian world you created in your books come to life?

A I started doing slightly surreal landscape paintings in gouache [opaque watercolors] in my late teens, but the world in my books started to seriously take shape around six or seven years ago when I started to add more science fiction elements into



up close

Name: Simon Stålenhag

Occupation:
Illustrator and writer

Books:
"Tales from the Loop" (2014)
"Things from the Flood" (2016)
"The Electric State" (forthcoming)

the Swedish landscapes. I also started to write down ideas and memories, and slowly I realized I was building a consistent world with my digital paintings and my writing. It was a way to tell the stories from my childhood, but also an outlet for my fascination with Swedish landscape, science fiction and dinosaurs — all happening in the same universe.

Q What are some of the advantages and challenges of using a digital tablet and pen to create your illustrations?

A The most obvious advantage is the ability to undo, and not having to wait for paint to dry. Finding colors and mixing colors is also much easier. The biggest challenge is avoiding a dead, digital look. I work really hard in doing as much as possible the same way I would have done it with a real paintbrush and real paint. 🍷