

CASE STUDY: CREATING WILLY WONKA'S CHOCOLATE RIVER ON THE HUDSON

Case Study by Kathleen Corgan

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| CLIENT | Digital Imaging ART 125 / Professor Deborah Krikun |
| PROJECT TITLE | HYPERREALISM: Willy Wonka's Chocolate River-on-Hudson |
| DURATION | September – December 2013 |
| TEAM | Kathleen Corgan |

DESCRIPTION The objective of the Hyperrealism project was to create an image that merged two visually disparate ideas and unite them in a single believable image despite the surreal nature of their coexistence. Of the five concepts we were asked to present, one was chosen by majority vote of the rest of the class. The concept that received the most votes of my five was to transform an idyllic landscape of the Hudson River into a candy covered vista with a river of chocolate, inspired by the imagery and story of the children's classic, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

RESEARCH I initially set out by searching for production stills of both the original 1971 *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and the 2005 remake, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, to get a sense of the landscapes and types of candy used in both chocolate river sets. While both films provided decent stills for getting a sense of layout and scale of the oversized candy, I realized that using images from the more recent film could be problematic from an intellectual property standpoint. It also helped that I preferred the simplicity of the original film's Wonka Bars as well as the design of the original Golden Tickets, both of which became bridge elements. After finding those I moved on to search for other easily recognizable candies whose forms lent themselves to the elements in my Hudson River landscape. Early on I decided to use candy corns to fill the mountainsides and licorice sticks to stand in for the suspension cables of the bridge. Other elements were the green frosted cupcakes, the chocolate covered pears, the cake lollipops, the Gummy Bears and the rainbow swirl lollipops, edited down from a grouping of about 15 or so different candies found through Google image search and Wikipedia Commons.

STRATEGY How to approach filling the landscape with the proper placement and scale of candy elements was a daunting task. I knew that I would need to “plant” the candy elements into the mountainside slopes in a realistic way, and I also had to determine the scale of the candy in relation to the size of the elements in the natural landscape. Another criteria for searching candy was that it’s perspective had to be in the ballpark in relation to where it would ultimately be placed. The need for this became especially apparent later on when building the candy corn fields, and while I was able to find most of the elements sitting at an appropriate angle, I did have to go in and shoot my own photos for the candy corns to get just the right perspective. It was also pretty obvious early on that all the candy should be “supersized”, just as the candy in both Wonka films was larger than life. The easiest place to start and get familiar with the Photoshop tools we were learning each week would be the background bridge. Starting there, using the Wonka Bars for bridge towers and licorice for suspension cables, I could get a feel for the various tools, while continuing to search for acceptable elements for the wooded mountains. Each piece of candy was separated from its original image using either paths or channels, separating color, levels and contrast to take the most advantage of the Magic Wand and Quick Selection tools. Once placed, I made use of inner shadows, drop shadows and the dodge tools to create the shadows needed to “plant” the elements in their space. Where elements needed to overlap each other or hide behind the trees, I employed masks to brush away the parts I didn’t want to see.

CHALLENGES It was in placing the bridge elements and candy corns and creating their drop shadows and inner shadows where I felt I could have the most control of manipulating elements into looking like they belonged, but it still wasn’t enough. I was feeling very unsure of placing elements individually into the fall foliage and getting them all to sit correctly. In an attempt to solve this problem, just before mid-term I changed my background to a winter landscape, with bare trees and snow cover, just so that I could see where I was placing elements to make sure they were sitting believably on the ground. While this worked well for that purpose, other problems arose. The snowy landscape provided scant cover to hide the bases of candy elements, revealing harsh transitions between hard candy and soft ground. In addition, placing the candy in the midst of bare trees was going to mean a painstaking and time-consuming road of masking the candy to show surrounding trees. It became clear that once I was comfortable with situating elements in the winter landscape I could return to the fall foliage, which would provide much better cover for transitions from candy to ground. I changed my background back to fall and set to work replanting all the elements with the slightly different perspective of the fall landscape photo.

A second challenge was the soft focus of the background photo, the dealing with the fall foliage landscape. While most think of hyperrealism as being ultra-focused, ultra sharp focus is merely a device used to suspend disbelief. It can also work in the other direction. I realized that without being able to acceptably sharpen the background photo, I would need to soften the added candy elements to resolve candy and landscape into a unified look. I set about lightly softening the candy corns, cupcakes, lollipops and pears with Gaussian Blur and the Blur Tool so that these ultra-sharp product shots would better integrate with the soft foliage and atmospheric deep background areas. I also finally had to give up on trying to select and mask the subtle soft gradations of leaf cover that obscured the chocolate river; no matter how I pushed the levels, it was impossible not to have artifacts remaining of the foreground trees in front of the river beneath it, as well as the foreground footbridge, where I had originally laid

my Golden Ticket walkway. I had to mask these entirely to avoid having too many flaws in that area of the image.

The third challenge was the river, left as the last candy element as it was the greatest technical challenge. After finding an acceptable liquid chocolate image, it was necessary to duplicate it and manipulate with the brush tool to create streams of water. It took a more experienced set of eyes to coax the flow of the chocolate into a longitudinal direction rather than mimicking the flatness of the water in the background image. This was by far the hardest challenge; after building a liquid chocolate blanket by selectively cutting and duplicating, I needed to draw perspective water flow lines along the background layer to use as a template to warp the parallel lines of my chocolate blanket into the correct directional flow, and then create another mesh blanket with the liquefy tool to introduce ripples into that flow. Still, it was very exciting to meet the challenge of working with those more advanced tools and would enjoy learning to master them further.

The final challenge was to bring a cohesive atmosphere to the landscape. The candy was sitting in its space fairly well, but it still looked like everything had been photographed in a unique lighting setup. I chose a warm filter to give a chocolate-y atmosphere to the whole image, a device I was beginning to notice is frequently implemented by many hyperrealist photographer/Photoshop professionals. This was the final touch to my Willy Wonka landscape.

RESULTS This project was a certainly a challenge. The overall result was pretty good, though I still look at it and feel I could keep tweaking forever! Considering the difficulties of reconciling not just the surreal nature of the objects in the same space, but the very different photographic qualities of each, there are still some very successful parts of the image. There was also a lot to be learned from each of the hurdles presented, from reconciling sharp, macro images with more atmospheric wide shots (avoid it) and rather choosing subjects that have more technically in common to begin with. Nevertheless, there are areas of the image which came off quite successfully and I learned a lot about the nuances of many Photoshop tools in the process. In practice, I found that less is more, and very often, just the hint of an effect can have a much greater impact than using it to excess.

