Top horror-fantasy artist illuminates the human condition

While Brad Pitt fans eagerly await the release of the zombie movie “World War Z,” this summer, fans of fantasy art await the release of a limited edition of the Max Brookes book on which the movie is based, with cover art and illustrations by Jeremy Caniglia.

Though Caniglia (BFA 1993 Drawing, Painting and Printmaking) may not claim the same following as Pitt, he is a celebrity in his own right, having created original artwork to accompany the stories, poetry and novels of such acclaimed authors as Stephen King, F. Paul Wilson, William Peter Blatty and Douglas Clegg.

Brooks approached Caniglia last year.

“When World War Z 2 was first published in 2006, the cover was just a ‘Z,’” Caniglia explained.

For the new cover, Brooks sought something other than the “typical zombie,” so Caniglia painted a screaming, skeletal corpse with a narrow hint of light above it—a soul caught between heaven and hell, he said—effectively capturing the character he was after.

“My work for the book is a combination of traditional and contemporary, with viscerally brushing strokes, modernist pulling and dripping, and gold leaf. I really believe that without my background at Iowa State, I wouldn’t have been able to make this piece.”

An artist through and through

Caniglia was nominated in 2003 for the International Horror Guild Award for best artist and won the prestigious award in 2004. In 2009 he was nominated for a World Fantasy Award for best artist. So it may surprise some to know he started out thinking he’d be a graphic designer.

“I was taking graphic design foundations classes when one of my professors saw that my work was totally different from the other students. She looked at my paintings and said ‘you’re an artist through and through.’”

That professor shared Caniglia’s portfolio with Brenda Jones, who teaches in what is now the integrated studio arts department. Jones encouraged Caniglia to study fine art instead.

“Brenda gave me a stack of books to read to learn about art history and how it related to my work. I’d finish one set and hand her another. She introduced me to the Old Masters and to modern artists and technicians,” Caniglia said.

“She showed me that art was a gift in life and with discipline, perseverance and reverence, I could make it my own.”

When he completed his BFA degree, Caniglia received a full scholarship to study with abstract expressionist Grace Hartigan at Maryland Institute College of Art, and returned to his hometown of Omaha, Neb., after completing his MFA in 1995.

Word of mouth

At a young artist, Caniglia exhibited his work at galleries “willing to show fantasy, surrealism and art that dealt with the human condition,” he said. At the same time, he took HTML classes and created his own website, which allowed him to reach a wide range of potential clients.

“By 2000 I had the equivalent of a blog,” he said. “Douglas Clegg (bestselling author of fantasy and horror novels) found it, contacted me and said he wanted to buy the rights to put my work on his book cover.”

Clegg has since called upon Caniglia for a half dozen covers for his novels, such as Rodoker, The Wicked and the Magnet.

Clegg’s publisher, Cemetery Dance Publications—a specialty press that focuses on horror and suspense—offered Caniglia additional projects, including The Devil’s Wine, a collection of poetry by Stephen King, Ray Bradbury, Peter Straub and other established authors.

From there, the power of Caniglia’s art spread by word of mouth, leading to more book projects, magazine art and CD covers. In 2004, he was approached by a representative of IDT Entertainment, the owner of Anchor Bay, Showtime and other smaller companies.

“IDT asked for a skeleton painted in my style and said, ‘if we like it, we’ll tell you what the project is about.”’

IDT did like it, and hired Caniglia as the conceptual artist for its Masters of Horror series on Showtime. The program brought together some of the greatest writers and directors of modern horror films—John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper among them—to compose one-hour movies.

The movies later were released on DVD with collector cards with artwork by Caniglia. He also did the packaging art for the DVD release in Japan, which spawned a graphic novel.

Disturbing but beautiful

Much as the World War Z 2 project unfurled, William Peter Blatty sought Caniglia out for his 40th anniversary edition of The Exorcist, published in 2012.

“I was only required to do five illustrations, but I was so engrossed in the project. I wound up doing 13,” Caniglia said. “Blatty was blown away.”

The hardcover limited edition, featuring Caniglia’s “disturbing but beautiful” cover painting of the demon-possessed Regan MacNeil, sold out in 30 hours. Later this year, Warner Brothers will release a 40th anniversary Blu-ray version of the 1973 movie with a new documentary featuring 20 images by Caniglia.

And Blatty was so pleased, he asked Caniglia to produce artwork for a new edition of Legion, the followup to The Exorcist.

Hope and enlightenment

Although Caniglia has made a name for himself in the horror genre, he also does a great deal of fantasy art and portraiture.

Caniglia’s latest project—a 170th anniversary edition of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol to be published by Eason Press in December—brings him back to the traditional classic painting and illustration he studied at Iowa State.

“Eason wanted a realistic vision of what Dickens was trying to say about the plight of the poor,” Caniglia said.

“I re-read the story and found it so intense that I did 29 initial sketches, many of which portrayed scenes no other artist has chosen to illustrate.”

“When Tiny Tim passes away, his body is kept upstairs in his bedroom. I did a picture of Bob Cratchit beside the bed holding his son’s lifeless body. It is a very powerful and emotional piece,” Caniglia said.

Regardless of the project or genre, “I always see it as being about the human condition,” Caniglia said.

“If there’s no redemptive quality in it, I won’t take the project. I look for points of hope and enlightenment in the things I illustrate.”