Taking the Wheel

Artist Darlene Ollerenshaw Trusts BOXX as She Revs Up Mercedes-Benz and Breaks into the Boys' Club

"I've always been interested in art since the time I could hold a crayon," says Darlene Ollerenshaw, founder of Pep Creative, a New Jersey CGI product visualization and 3D animation studio focused primarily on photo-realistic automotive visualization. A Garden State native and die-hard fan of the NHL's New Jersey Devils, Ollerenshaw loves sports, and the outdoors, but as a young student, also dreamed of a career in art—but what type of career, she wasn't exactly sure. She would eventually arrive at that decision during her process of selecting a college. Darlene attended an open house at William Paterson University in Wayne, NJ, where an early Pixar short, "Tin Toy" played on a TV monitor in the computer lab. The film won the Oscar for best animated short in 1989, but most importantly for Ollerenshaw, it directed her on a career path. "From the moment I saw that," she recalls, "I knew what I wanted to do with my life."

From a BOXX to a Benz: Ollerenshaw's lifelong appreciation for automobiles shines through her visualizations.

Not So Typical

After plying her trade at various companies for 11 years, Ollerenshaw founded Pep Creative (www.pepcreative.com) in 2005, naming her studio after a nickname she was given as a child. "Growing up," she explains, "my maiden name was Pepper and whenever I would play sports, coaches and teammates used to call me that, or Pep for short."

At its inception, the company provided CGI product visualization, 3D animation, graphic design, and websites for a variety of clients, but over time (with Ollerenshaw as lead CGI artist), Pep Creative has concentrated primarily on photo-realistic automotive visualization, providing high quality imagery for websites, digital signage, and print advertising for clients like Mercedes-Benz. A woman being heavily invested into automotive visualization may have come as a surprise to the men who dominated the industry, but to Ollerenshaw, it seemed perfectly logical. "I remember being a little, not-so-typical, ten year old girl with pictures of both horses and Porsches on my bedroom wall," she says. "I feel that automobiles, in many ways, are beautiful works of art and I have always admired them."

Regardless of her enthusiasm for the subject matter, Ollerenshaw had clearly ventured into a decidedly male-dominated field which, she admits, hasn't been without its challenges. "I feel like I definitely need to go that extra mile to prove that I can do anything the guys can do. A person's work should speak for itself, whether they're male or female. I haven't come across any other women doing auto visualization since I started, but I have heard of a few in the U.S. doing data prep and retouching. For any younger females interested in automotive or product viz, I highly recommend getting into this line of work. If you can find a good company to work with, it can be very rewarding in many aspects."

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The Workflow

Before she reaches the rewarding aspects of any given project, Ollerenshaw must first navigate through her creative workflow. It all begins with the client, which in most cases is Mercedes-Benz. "Once the client decides upon the initial campaign," she says, "the creative director gives me a mockup of a grey car on a back plate image. He tells me what packaging should be on the vehicle as well as what paint color. From there I place the back plate into my digital 3D scene and build out the vehicle that is needed."

By "build out," Ollerenshaw refers to taking the converted CAD data and placing the correct wheels, bumpers, et. al., on the vehicle, making sure that her digital creation accurately depicts the actual vehicle model built for the U.S. market. Once the build out is completed, Ollerenshaw places shaders onto the model and then begins to develop lighting aspects and reflections. In most instances, Ollerenshaw says, she is not provided with a matching HDR dome for the back plate, requiring her to create one from scratch. "This is usually the most time consuming," says Ollerenshaw, "since figuring out where each light and reflection will hit the car is different for each image."

When she is satisfied with the look of the vehicle, Ollerenshaw meets with the creative director for further direction, and then, armed with his comments, fine tunes the image for completion: render layers are rendered, completed, and then the images are handed off to a re-toucher for their final pass. Throughout Ollerenshaw's workflow, many different software applications are required in order to complete a project, including Autodesk 3ds Max, Autodesk Maya, V-Ray, KeyShot, HDR Light Studio Pro, Adobe Photoshop, Autodesk Combustion, and Nuke. "My workflow consists of preparing and cleaning up vehicles from converted CAD data," says Ollerenshaw, "then shading, lighting and rendering the high-resolution images. The main challenge is the time it takes to set up shaders, lighting and reflections. Real time feedback of products such as KeyShot and HDR Light Studio Pro is extremely helpful in this process."

Moving to BOXX

Initially, Ollerenshaw relied on Dell and Alienware systems, but as she moved into the demanding workflow required by automotive rendering, she knew it was time for a better solution. "The files we work with are very large and complex, and we could not even get a computer to render one image without locking up and crashing," she remembers. "This led us to decide on trying out a BOXX system to see how it would deal with our files."

Ollerenshaw was already familiar with the BOXX reputation for building state-of-the-art, record-setting solutions, thanks to the experience of a friend, a fellow designer who had purchased a 3DBOXX workstation to run 3ds Max. His experience and glowing recommendation convinced Ollerenshaw to give BOXX a call and she wasn't disappointed

when a BOXX sales consultant picked up the phone. “The sales people I dealt with were never pushy,” she recalls. “They took the extra time to understand my needs for the specific type of work I was doing and made sure I had what I needed. They were always very patient with me, even though I asked a ton of questions before deciding on final configurations for the systems to be purchased.”

“BOXX workstations are the most stable systems we’ve worked on,” she says. “With the high amount of rendering of complex data that we do every day, we really put them to the test.”

Ollerenshaw opted for a 3DBOXX 8500 Series workstation and renderBOXX dedicated rendering modules. 8500 Series workstations feature dual six core (or quad core) Intel Xeon 5600 series processors and NVIDIA or ATI FirePro GPUs. The top of line model is the performance enhanced 3DBOXX 8550 XTREME which is, at a blazing 4.3 GHz, the fastest workstation in the world. High speed performance is not simply about setting records however; as Ollerenshaw is quick to note that the BOXX workstations have been instrumental in accelerating Pep Creative’s production time. And although she is impressed with the speed of her 3DBOXX solutions, Ollerenshaw is most grateful for their stability. “BOXX workstations are the most stable systems we’ve worked on,” she says. “With the high amount of rendering of complex data that we do every day, we really put them to the test.”

Autodesk 3ds Max, Maya, Combustion, and other apps were used to create this image on a 3DBOXX 8500 Series workstation.

Knowing and Building

Ollerenshaw is also convinced by BOXX claims that their sales consultants, engineers, and legendary tech support speak the language of design pros like her, i.e., they not only know the hardware, but also thoroughly understand professional software applications and creative workflows. For her, it begins with knowing and building the ideal custom configuration. “By using high quality, compatible components, the machines perform great. And with a well-built system, the less crashes, the more work we can get done. We have worked on some other “powerful” systems in the past, but when companies that don’t understand this type of CGI work build them, then they don’t perform as well, and the ideal components aren’t used in their configuration. Who can concentrate on creative work when they constantly have to reboot or take apart their machines and run tests to troubleshoot their own hardware?”

With substantial savings in production time (and money) attributable to the performance of her BOXX systems, Ollerenshaw foresees future opportunity for her business. “I see Pep Creative expanding and taking on more clients as well as artists. I definitely see BOXX as a big part of that growth, since I trust and rely heavily on their products. I feel I have established a very good relationship with their sales staff, as well as their support staff, and feel very comfortable putting my trust in them with the future of my company.”

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