# When Photography? When Illustration? And Why.

By Big Al Gruswitz

It used to be a simple rule: "When you want to show reality, use photography. When you want to show something imaginary, use illustration." But if there's any rule that creative people follow it's "Rules were made to be broken." When you look at a photo today, are you sure it *IS* a photo? Or might you actually be looking at a 3-D illustration?

Take a look at these two images. One is photographic and one is 3-D illustration. Can you tell which is which? The mouse is a purchased 3-D polygon model and the phone is photography. The art director would have been happy to produce them both in 3-D because of the realistic lighting and reflections that can be achieved, but because she needed an "old fashioned" corded phone and there were no 3-D corded phone models available, the phone was photographed against a printout of the grid background and manipulated in Photoshop to make the 2 images visually synchronous.
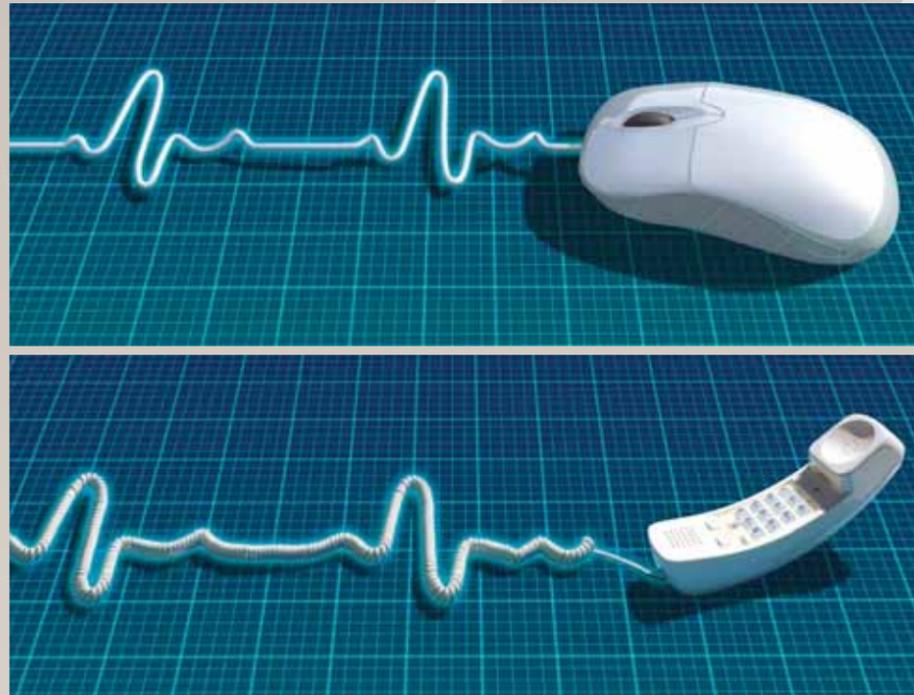
Big Al Gruswitz of Boundless Creativity produced all images in this article. To see more of Al's work go to www.boundless-creativity.com.

Profile: Big Al has worked as an art director and associate creative director at a number of major agencies on both consumer and medical accounts including Saatchi & Saatchi, NY.

Since founding Boundless Creativity in 1994, he has specialized in realistic illustrations in both 3-D and 2-D as well as difficult photo retouching.

Here's another situation: There's nothing like the energy and visual appeal of a high-speed, stop-action photo of a splashing glass of milk. Or is there? This image is a rendering of a 3-D polygon model that was virtually "molded" from a sphere much the same way you would make a clay model, but instead done on a computer. 3-D was less costly than a photo shoot where you would have had to clean up and reset everything every time you clicked the camera. And with the 3-D image there was no crying over spilt milk.

The point is that the line is blurred today between what is real (photography) and what is realistic (3-D). However, there are still times when a concept is best executed in photography (new shoot or stock image), others when 3-D is the way to go, and still others where combining the 2 gets you the desired results. If you're an art director, your job is to know which is the right way to produce your concept in terms of communication of your idea, within your budget, and within your timetable.

There are examples of each on the following pages:

New Photography

Woman at a bus stop—Obviously photography is the right choice if you're going for reality. Real people still look more real than 3-D models of people, but even with people, the line is getting blurred. The day is not far away when you won't know the difference. The cost factor is still in favor of photography when you want realistic people and complex realistic backgrounds such as this L.A. city street at night. However, what you may not realize is that for cost and timesaving, the woman was actually shot in a studio separate from the background. Both images were brought together in Adobe Photoshop.

Photo by Brian Davis

Stock Photography… Plus Retouching

Man doing a belly flop into an empty pool—This would be a costly photo shoot. You'd need a photographer and his crew, the male model in a bathing suit, a location where the owners would allow you to drain their pool, and you'd need some sort of rigging to suspend the man over the pool… plus retouching to remove the rigging. Instead, the art director purchased a stock photo where the man is jumping into a pool with water and then had the retoucher realistically illustrate the inside of an empty pool.

Photo Getty Images, Inc.

3-D Illustration

Sometimes, the cost factor is in favor of 3-D. Here a "DNA buoy" floats in an endless sea as a passing storm begins to clear. It could take a week of sunset shooting and you still might never have the sun and clouds in the right place. With advances in environmental software, like Vue 6 (e-on software, inc.), realistic 3-D environments are now achievable. Hollywood uses fewer miniture sets because of Vue software.
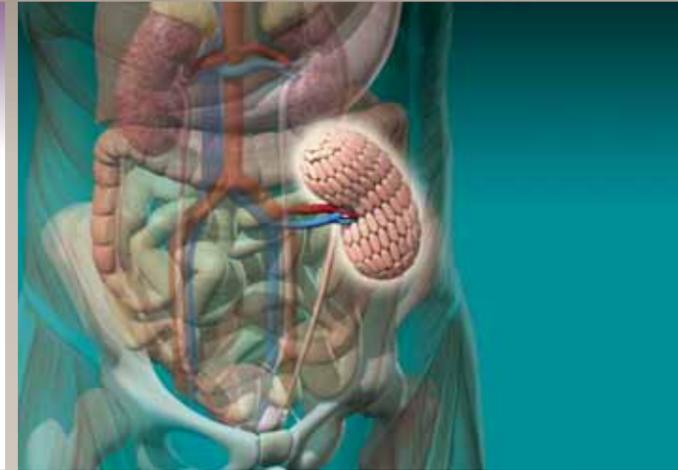
3-D Illustration (Cont.) *In many cases, 3-D is the clear choice.* An expandable fishbowl, or a little character made out of a bottle, or a medication protecting a kidney transplant by literally covering the kidney with pills are all concepts of things that don't exist in reality. You'd have to have an actual model made of them if you wanted to photograph them in the past... or you'd have to pick a style other than realistic.

In many cases, you can turn to 3-D illustration almost interchangeably with photography. Think of 3-D production as a "virtual photography shoot". You have a scene (a location or studio background), a model and/or props), and a camera. There are 2 important elements that make or break the realism of a 3-D image: attention to detail and lighting—just like any photograph. Details matter too for factors like surface texture, atmosphere, and irregularities. You don't want it too perfect because life isn't perfect.

Details are important when it comes to constructing polygon models. However, realistic models of most common things already exist today and can be purchased for very little. A 3-D artist can buy a very realistic Coke®* bottle polygon model for $39. For $680 they can get the entire interior of a deli complete with actual labels on every product on every shelf and in every refrigerator case. There's even an ATM machine and cash register! It still takes a skilled artist to add textures and lighting that will make the model more realistic than as purchased.

Combining Photography and 3-D Illustration… Seamlessly

This image was produced for a headline about "adapting to your environment."

The Production Solution: Separate stock photo of skyline of L.A. and woman and a purchased polygon model of a Ferrari Enzo for $125 are combined.

Produced like a traditional studio photo shoot, the skyline is put on a wall behind the car model and lit; the woman is placed on an alpha plane (so she is silhouetted) and put in the scene on a prop sidewalk; the foreground scene is lit as if under a marquee; additionally, a copy of the skyline backdrop is placed behind the camera to reflect in the car finish. The image is rendered twice: 1st with the woman—for her shadows; and 2nd without her—to distort and add both highlights and shadows that give the appearance of the photo wrapping around her.

Basically, as an art director you have many options. The more you know about what those options are and how they are produced the better an art director you will be.