



## Artist living a Disney story beyond his dream job

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By JOE NICKELL of the Missoulian

### Preview

An exhibition of work by Richard Scott Morgan is on view at Seeley Swan Medical Center, 3050 U.S. Highway 83 North. The show runs through the end of August. Hours are Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. For more information or to see more of Morgan's work, visit [www.richardscottmorgan.com](http://www.richardscottmorgan.com).

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*"All your dreams can come true if you have the courage to pursue them." - Walt Disney*

*Once upon a time not so long ago, in a sunshine city near a castle with a moat, there lived a happy young artist and his beautiful wife. The artist worked in a shop with dozens of other artists, and together they spent their days drawing pictures of cute animals and fantastical make-believe creatures.*

*They whistled while they worked.*

*When they finished their drawings, the artists would put all their pictures together, and the creatures they drew would suddenly come to life: bears would walk and talk, space aliens would dance, men would swing from vines through colorful jungles.*

*It was a good job, a fun job, and it paid well. In fact, artists from all over the country wanted the young artist's job. His wife even worked in the shop with him, in a different department.*

*What could be more ideal?*

*But trouble loomed on the western horizon. A man who didn't respect the old ways decided to replace all the artists with machines. He showed the world that he could make aliens dance and animals walk and talk with help from big computers. He didn't need all those artists. He began to take all the business away from the shop in the sunshine city.*

*So one day, the artist learned that his shop was closing. All the artists were out of work.*

*What to do? Some of the other artists began frantically looking for other jobs at similar places. But the young artist and his wife had been thinking for awhile about bigger dreams, distant places, quiet lives in the western mountains.*

*They found a log cabin a forest with a river running through it. They bought the cabin and opened an art studio. They had a baby and named her Sunny.*

*They began whistling again.*

*All of this is true, even if some of it sounds like the romanticized plot of a Disney movie. In fact, it's a story about Disney movies. It's also a story about how new technology pushed one man from a dream job to a dream life; and how the loss of one child could make the gift of another all the more precious.*

*It is not a completed picture. The paint is still tacky on the canvas, and some corners remain to be filled in. But, oh, it's a pretty picture right now.*

*Meet our young artist: Richard Scott Morgan, a Florida native who grew up dreaming of making animated films for Disney. After graduating from high school, Morgan attended the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Fla., where he studied illustration.*

*It was a good time to be at Ringling.*

*"Disney was at the time entering what most consider the second Golden Age of traditional animation," recalls Morgan. "Ringling was one of the three colleges where Disney most heavily recruited. I really wanted to work at Disney, so that's why I chose Ringling."*

*During those heady years as a student, Morgan drew obsessively. As soon as classes let out during the day, he and his roommate would pack up their sketchbooks and head out to the mall, or to the zoo, or to figure-drawing classes in the community. He admits he wasn't much of a painter at the time - "I decided to stick to drawing because painting was so hard" - but he knew that there was plenty of work for pen-and-ink specialists in the animation industry.*

*The key to getting work at Disney's animation studio, Walt Disney Feature Animations, was through an internship. Everybody knew this, and it seemed that everybody was interested: Some 10,000 art students from around the country applied for internships in the same year that Morgan applied, for just 18 available internships.*

*Morgan and his roommate both won internships.*

*What followed was an intensive summer immersion in the mystique-laden world of traditional film animation.*

*"It was really intense, with a lot of all-nighters," says Morgan. "They were definitely trying to weed you out."*

*At the end of the internship, Morgan got the call: He'd been selected for a permanent, paying position as a so-called cleanup animator. His roommate was also hired.*

*In traditional animation, each film is actually the combined work of somewhere around 200 artists (not to mention voice talent, directors, and other workers). Morgan's job entailed taking the near-completed work of other artists, and touching it up so that it matched the style and visual flow of the rest of the film.*

*"You're trying to make it look like one artist did the entire thing," explains Morgan. "So you're taking the established style of the film, and applying it to the work that each contributor has done."*

*Morgan worked on several of Disney's great modern classics, including "Pocahontas," "Lilo and Stitch," and "Brother Bear." He spent 15 years working for the company.*

*Along the way, he married his college sweetheart, Aurora. She, too, had earned a job at Disney after*

*graduating from Ringling, working in graphic design.*

*In 2003, Aurora got pregnant. The couple decided to name their baby girl Aspen Sienna. The pregnancy seemed to go fine, up until the due date. But Aspen Sienna was stillborn.*

*“That gave us a real jolt about how precious life is,” says Aurora, an eternally cheerful Philippines-born Floridian. “So we decided to focus on what we love in life.”*

*For several years, the couple had vacationed in the Rocky Mountains in the summer. Rich by then was, in his words, a “Sunday painter,” spending his weekends painting landscapes when he wasn’t at work. The two began to talk about the possibility of buying a place in the mountains, slowing down, focusing on family and simply painting.*

*Then, Walt Disney Feature Animations shut down in the autumn of 2003. Though some analysts have blamed the animation studio’s failure on lackluster films, the simple fact of the matter was that digital animation is a more efficient enterprise than the type of hand-drawn animation that Richard Morgan had done for Disney. Pixar Animation Studios, a California production company founded by George Lucas, was leading the digital charge. Disney simply couldn’t keep up. The age of traditional animation was over.*

*Thus Aurora and Richard found themselves, in late 2003, jobless and childless - hardly where they’d planned to be.*

*That also meant they were free to follow their dream.*

*“It seemed like, if we were going to do this (move to the Rocky Mountains), that was the time to do it,” says Richard.*

*Friends and family urged caution. Maybe another job would come along. What about a job at Pixar?*

*“I wouldn’t say against it; they just literally thought we were insane,” says Aurora. “A lot of people just feared the idea of us trying to make a living selling oil paintings in Montana.”*

*The couple looked for land in several western states, including Colorado and Wyoming. Then, Richard saw a story in a magazine about a ranch in Condon. He liked the photographs of the place. The couple came to visit the Seeley-Swan valley.*

*“After that, that was pretty much all she wrote,” says Richard.*

*In the summer of 2004, Richard and Aurora Morgan moved into a log cabin just north of Seeley Lake, on the banks of the Clearwater River. Since then, Richard has become a familiar fixture around the small town. One of a handful of local landscape painters, Morgan spends most of his days somewhere out in the woods or down on the main street of Seeley Lake, working at his easel, painting what he sees on smallish canvases.*

*Passers-by stop to watch him paint, or to talk to him about his work. In fact, that’s how he sells quite a number of his paintings, right off the easel. One time, when he was painting a picture of Little Bird’s Cafe, 25 people stopped to talk to him before he finally finished the painting.*

*“Out of that one painting, I’ve gotten three (students for) art lessons and I’m hoping I’ve got a sale of the painting,” says Richard. “For a lot of people, there’s something romantic about seeing a painter out there doing his thing, slowing down and paying attention to things around him.”*

*The paintings certainly reflect a contemplative, slower-paced Richard Morgan. Whereas many artists focus on majestic landscapes and brilliant, eye-catching colors, Morgan's paintings highlight the soft, grayish quietude of the Seeley-Swan area. His style is loose yet highly intentional; and unlike some landscape artists, he's not afraid to include traces of humanity - fenceposts and roads and old barns - as well as careful studies of the inherent cacophony of nature in his compositions.*

*Morgan has begun to build a reputation for his work around the region. He is now represented in Missoula by the Dana Gallery and in Jackson Hole, Wyo., by the Buffalo Trail Gallery. His work is, perhaps predictably, a hot seller at Little Bird's in Seeley Lake.*

*He and Aurora named their studio Aspen Sienna, in memory of the daughter they never had. Then, 10 months ago, Aurora gave birth to Sunny.*

*"It's been a real adventure," laughs Aurora. "She changes every day."*

*Just like the light on the barn, and the leaves on the trees, and the wind on the water - the things that catch Richard Morgan's eye, keep him focused on the beauty that surrounds him, keep him painting and loving life.*

*"Working at Disney was a dream job in a lot of ways," says Richard. "But I really think we've found the right thing for us to be doing, and the right place to be doing it here."*

*Ever after comes next. Since this is a Disney story, it presumably will come happily.*

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