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JUNE 1993

### RICHARD CORBEN

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Underground

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# 8TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE





**10 LIVING IN THE UNDERGROUND**

by Neil Johnson

A maverick artist and one of the best known of the fantasy art elite, Richard Corben transcends his craft and style to complex technical heights that make him unique in the field. Corben's work over a 30-year career has extended from the comic underground to National Lampoon's *Heavy Metal*.



**22 7TH ANNUAL AIRBRUSH EXCELLENCE COMPETITION WINNERS**

The envelope, please . . . The Airbrush Excellence Competition has become an exciting *Airbrush Action* tradition and an important barometer of the current and up-and-coming talent in the industry. And the fact that the winners are featured in this, our anniversary issue, makes the May-June edition one of the hottest of the year.

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**82 HOW TO PAINT LIPS AND EYES ON T-SHIRTS**

by Cass Fuller

Improperly done, faces fall flat on T-shirts—and other media, for that matter—the eyes won't look at you and the lips don't invite. Cass Fuller leads you step-by-step in an effective demonstration of one of the most asked-about technical aspects in textile art.



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**91 COAST AIRBRUSH PARTY PREVIEW**

by Justin Weaver

Coast Airbrush in Anaheim, California, the originator of the airbrush party concept—now being widely imitated—proudly celebrates its fourth event on September 11 and 12 in the usual blockbuster fashion. Join in the festivities and fun on page 91 and the real thing this fall.

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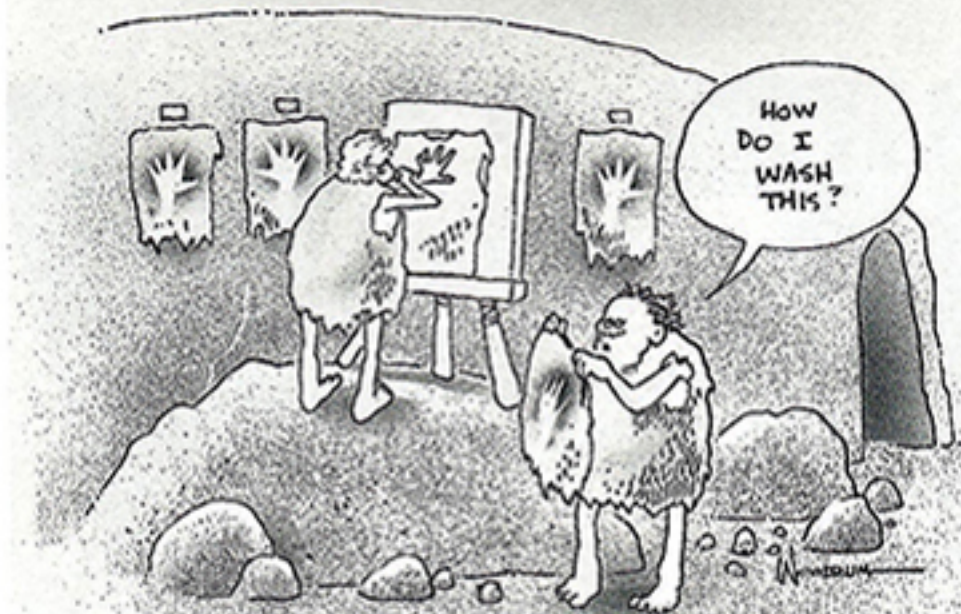
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MAY-JUNE 1993  
VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1

**ABOUT THE COVER**

Richard Corben created this illustration entitled *Air Battle* in 1985 for a cover in a series of role playing game books. The original is 19 by 30 inches, done with oil paints on pressed wood.

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# Living in the

# UNDERGROUND

By Neil Johnson

◀ *Beyond the Supernatural:* 1986, 18 by 24 inches, oil on illustration board.

▼ *Indian Evening:* ©1984, 30 by 20 inches, oil over acrylic on illustration board.

It's a career that started underground and hasn't gone up. Not that Richard Corben is complaining. The same underground comics that gave him a start in the 1970s have kept him going since and now take up his full artistic effort.

Corben has drawn more than 2,000 pages of comic illustrations since he

physiques, or the pea-brained, peering, beady-eyed at the world.

These come from a quiet 52-year-old guy living in the white-bread world of the Midwest who started out working in the art department of a Kansas City film company.

That was around 1962. Uncle Sam had just finished taking some of Corben's

launched his freelance career around 1972. But you won't see muscular guys in tights with an "S" on their chest or women wearing a second skin of Spandex in the pages that spin from his fertile mind.

You will find guys with muscles, but not the clean, All-American hero types you're used to. And there are women, sometimes bald-headed with pointed ears, but when seen from a frontal or profile view they are definitely, protuberantly female.

The other of his trio of creations are the monsters, the slaving, toothy or gnarled with disquietingly humanesque

time, and he landed a job at Calvin Productions, a Kansas City company that made industrial films.

It was in the animation department of Calvin that Corben was introduced to the airbrush. "I saw its possibilities and knew I had to add it to my repertoire," he recalls.

At Calvin, Corben did backgrounds, animation cels, and titles for the films. "It was animation but not Disney. It was more like a cutaway of a diesel engine."

Like so many artists, Corben had a steady job that filled his wallet and kept food in the pantry but left other empty places in his life. "It didn't fulfill my





interest in science fiction and comics. I was looking for freelance work," he says.

Corben's love of comics and science fiction started with the early pioneer of non-mainstream comics and horror, the old EC Comics back in the 1950s. They were the kind mothers used to snatch away from their kids, warning that they would rot their brains. "It must have made a lasting impression," he says.

So the introverted kid growing up in a small community called Sunflower—actually a company town for Sunflower Ordnance, a bomb company—had a yen for art and an interest in the bizarre fueled by EC. He says he was the kind of kid who drew comic strips at home and brought them to school for friends to read.

There was never any doubt that he'd become an artist, but he didn't anticipate that it would be as a comic book artist. It's not a career parents urge their children to enter.

Corben graduated from high school

in Kansas City and got a degree from the Kansas City Art Institute.

By 1967, still working at Calvin, Corben's quest for freelance work paid off. He mailed a watercolor painting to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It was a painting of two astronauts tethered to their spaceship, which was floating above an asteroid.

Corben created the rocky texture of the asteroid surface by using an airbrush to spray color on a crumpled piece of paper, then flattening it and placing it on the background.

The magazine bought it immediately and used it for a cover illustration. "It was my first sale to a major market, and I was elated for a while. We worked out a deal for more. But on that assignment, the piece was destroyed in the mail and I missed the deadline. That ended the relationship," Corben says, adding that it was not the best idea to mail the original artwork.

He was also doing a black and white

comic strip for *Vampirella*, one of the better known of the underground publications that were springing up.

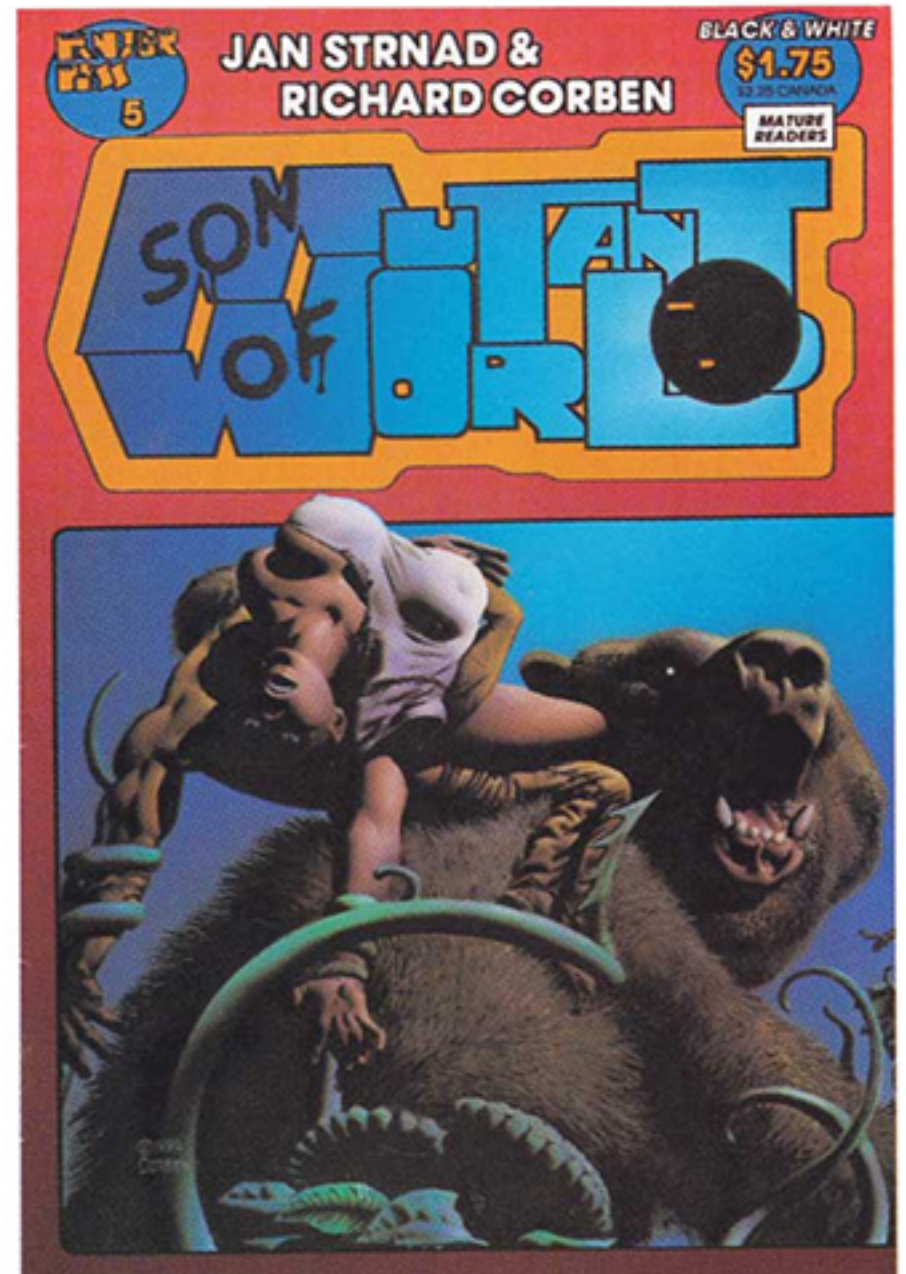
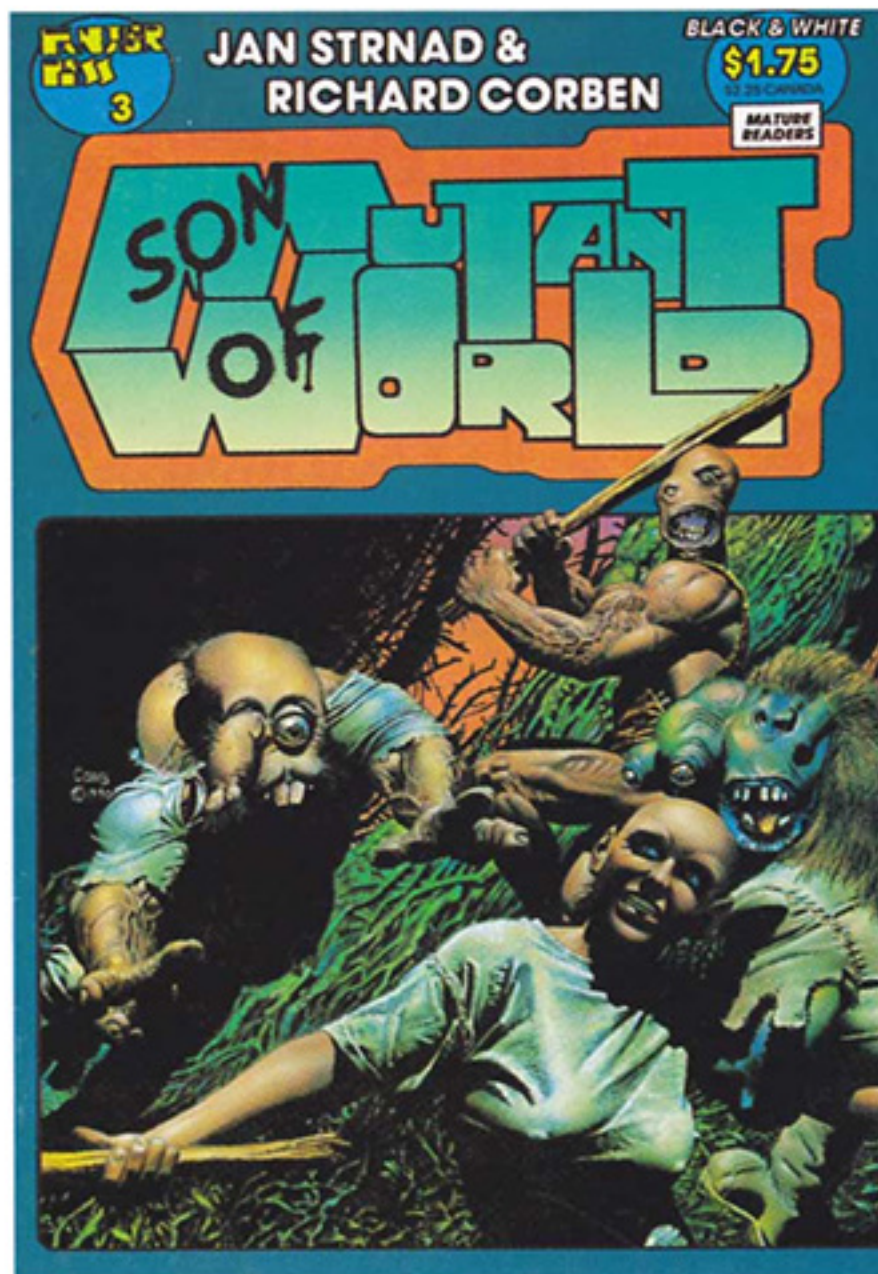
That work grew enough to convince Corben to forgo the regular check. "I reached a point where I could make a go of it. The underground comics were really booming. There was no particular moment I decided. The possibility was always there, and I was getting less tolerant of the work situation," he says.

Now, looking back, "it might have been premature," he admits.

Married and on his own, he had to get through the tough times. The underground comics may have been gratifying to work for, but their very nature made life difficult for a freelance artist. "They were informal arrangements. Sometimes you got paid. Sometimes you didn't." The sometimes you didn't part is hard for anyone trying to live off freelance work.

Corben did hook up with Warren Publishing, which put out two other well-

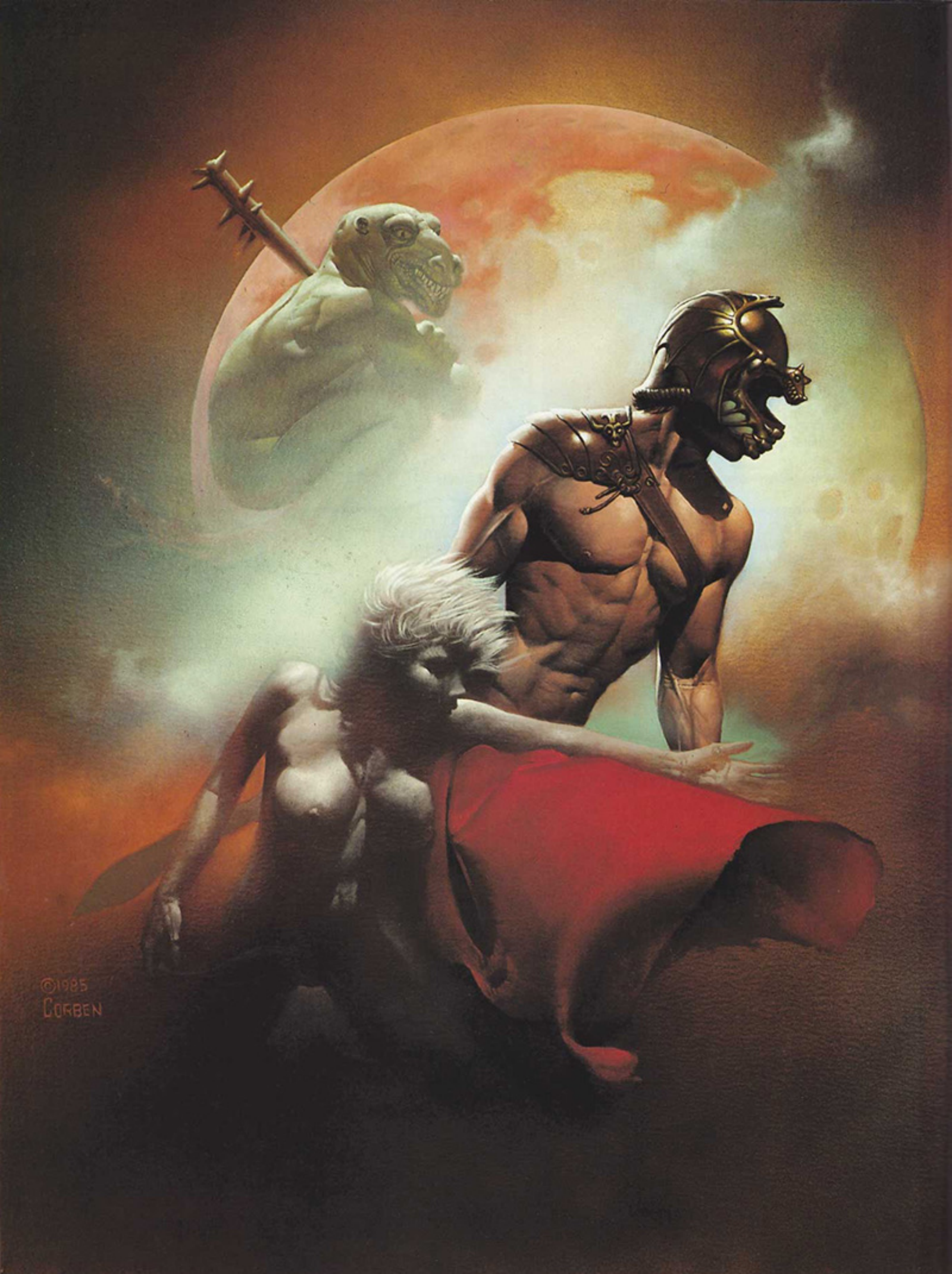
Covers and a page from *Son of Mutant World*, a bi-monthly comic book created by Jan Strnad and Rich Corben.











©1985  
CORBEN



◀ *Dark Mists:*  
1985,  
16 by 20 inches,  
oil on pressed  
wood.



▶ *Electric Canes:*  
1985,  
18 by 29 inches,  
oil over acrylic  
on illustration  
board.



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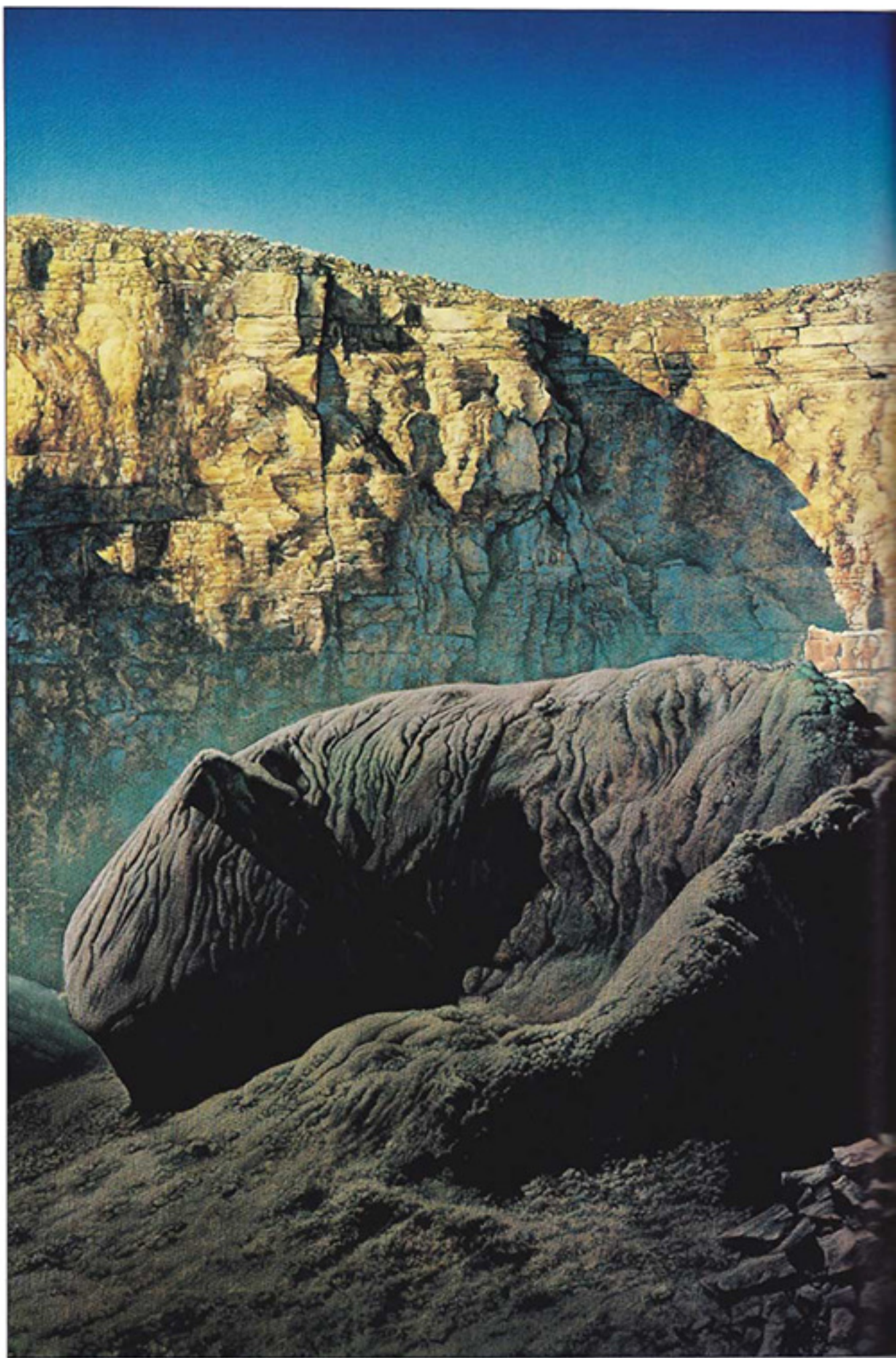
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known magazines, *Creepy* and *Eerie*.

While Corben was struggling, his artwork made a transatlantic journey and, in one of those twists of fate, scored a hit in Europe. It drew a letter from the publisher of a slick French magazine, *Metal Hurlant*. They wanted Corben to do some comic strips for syndication in Europe.

Maybe a year later, *National Lampoon* wanted him to do work for *Heavy Metal*, one of the best-known non-mainstream comic magazines.

"Probably more people saw my work in *Heavy Metal* than anywhere else. And they paid much better rates."

But Corben was smart about it. He kept the rights to his work and sold them for syndication in Italy, France, and Spain.

Not all of Corben's work was for underground comics. He's done science fiction book covers and magazine cover work. Some of his paintings have sold as art prints.

He even did the album cover for *Bat Out Of Hell* by Meat Loaf, a job he turned around in two days, the fastest he's ever produced a commercial piece. The cover was described over the phone, and he shipped it off two days later. "Luckily, they liked it," he says.





But his main love has been working independently, and that means publishing his own line of comics and other artwork.

"Ninety percent of the comic artists are like factory workers. Some become stars, and they make good money. After this taste of drawing comics for the underground, being my own boss made me realize that I'm not happy with other jobs."

While he still does a little work for *Heavy Metal*, almost every minute is now consumed by publishing his own comics here through Fantagor Press.

*Son of Mutant World* is the current

▲ *Labyrinth*: 1986, 40 by 50 inches, oil over acrylic on canvas.

comic Corben is working on. It's published bimonthly. Corben is also working on a quarterly slick comic.

Once a series is finished, the complete story is compiled and printed in color.

Corben does many of his early sketches in marker with a medium point, moving to finer tips as the drawing becomes more refined.

The airbrush is often used for glazing or to put a coat of gesso over an area

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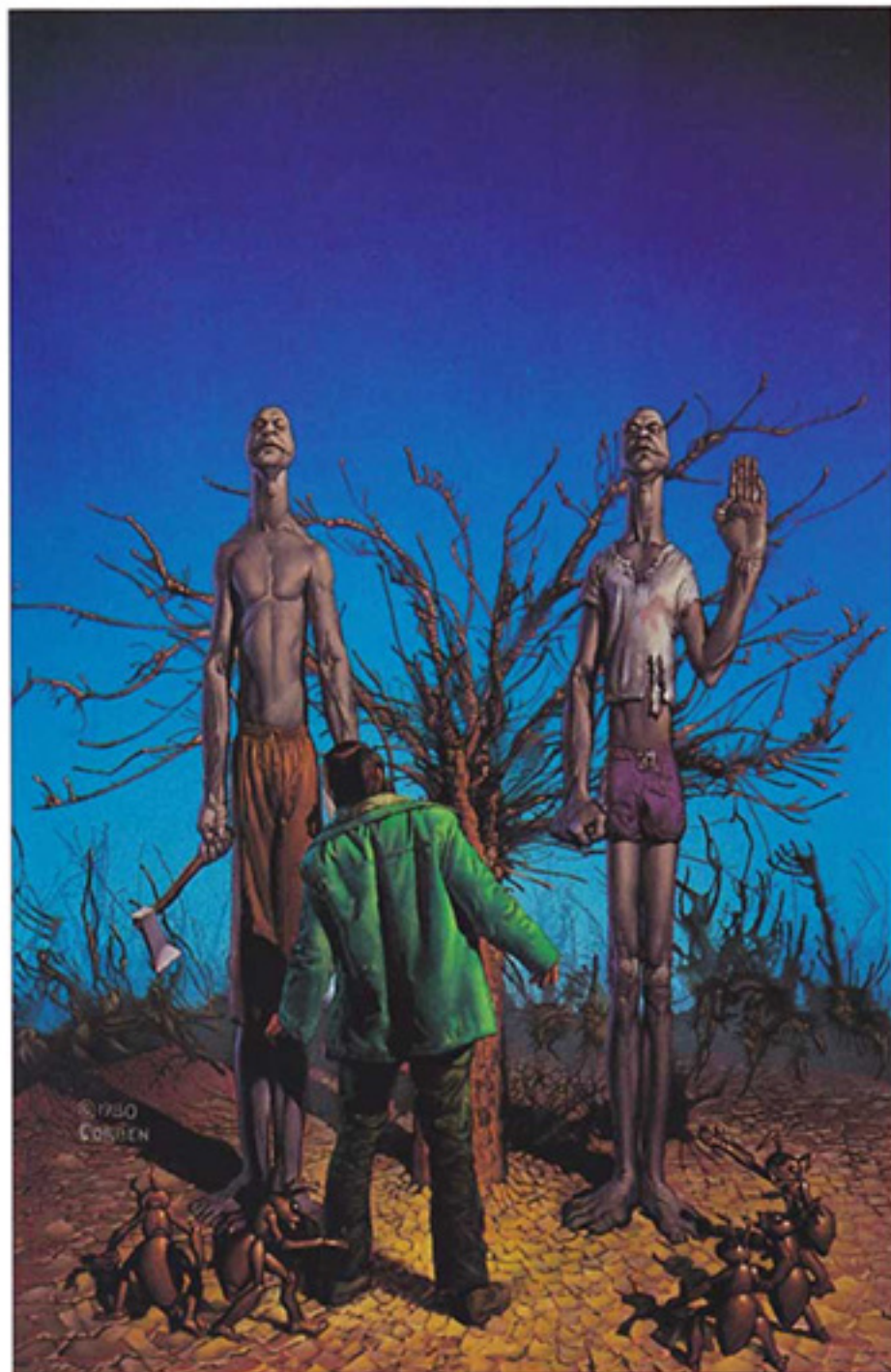


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► *Blue Dragon*: 1984, 19 by 25 inches, oil over acrylic on illustration board.



of the work as well as specific parts of the page panels.

Corben uses a Paasche H, for most applications of the heavier paints, though he'll switch to an airbrush with a finer tip for closer work. He also tried to run oil paint through a Paasche V but it wasn't a great success. "It puts up quite a cloud. I don't do it often."

Then there was his brief relationship with the Paasche AB. "I was getting real close doing tight passes and all the time this minute drop was forming under the tip getting ready to go splat." It did, just about the time he finished the painting.

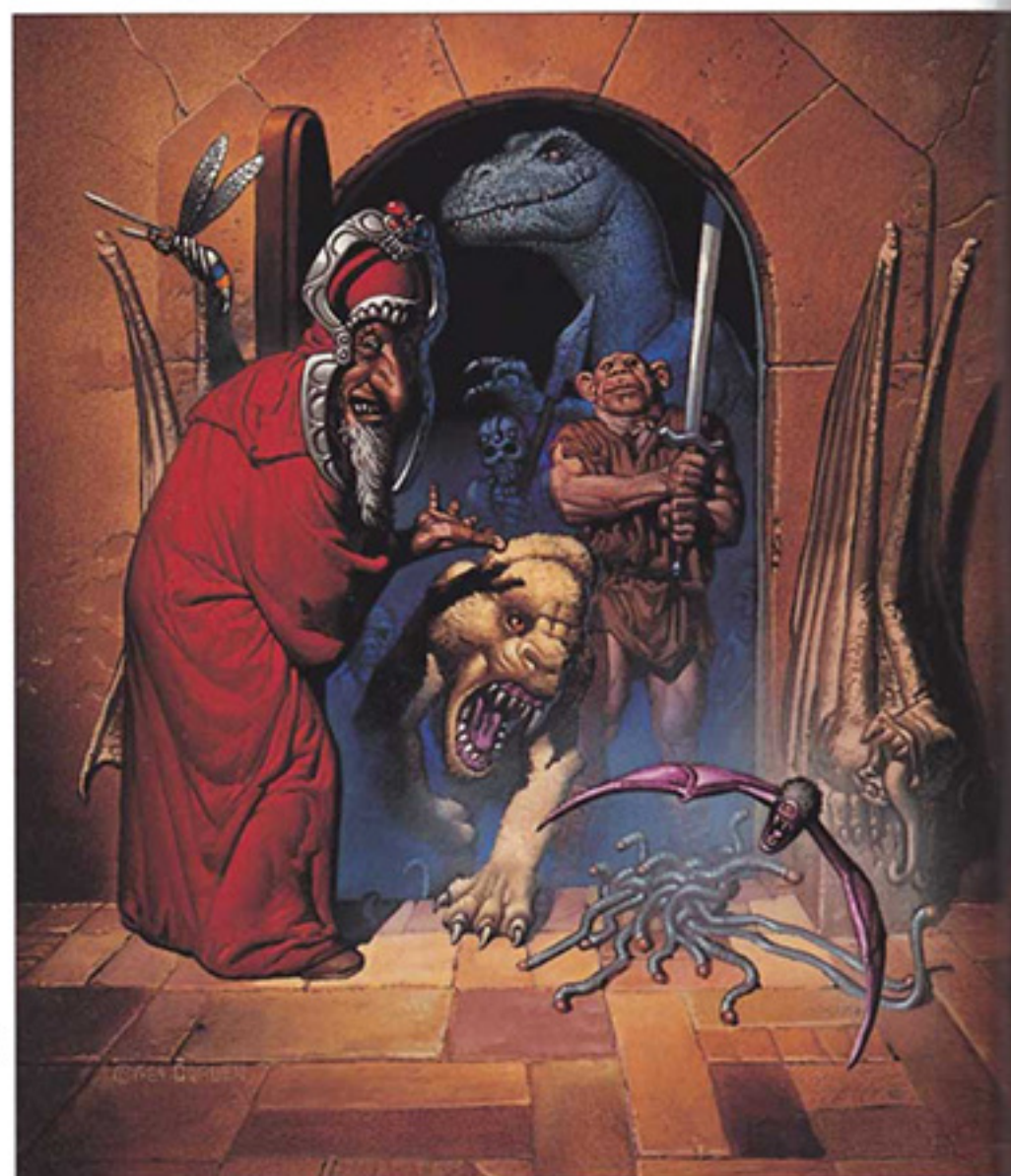
But these troubles aside, Corben uses the airbrush as part of his art production. He works on the comic books in a production line, finishing the drawings and then moving on to the color overlays.

He'll select the figures he wants to

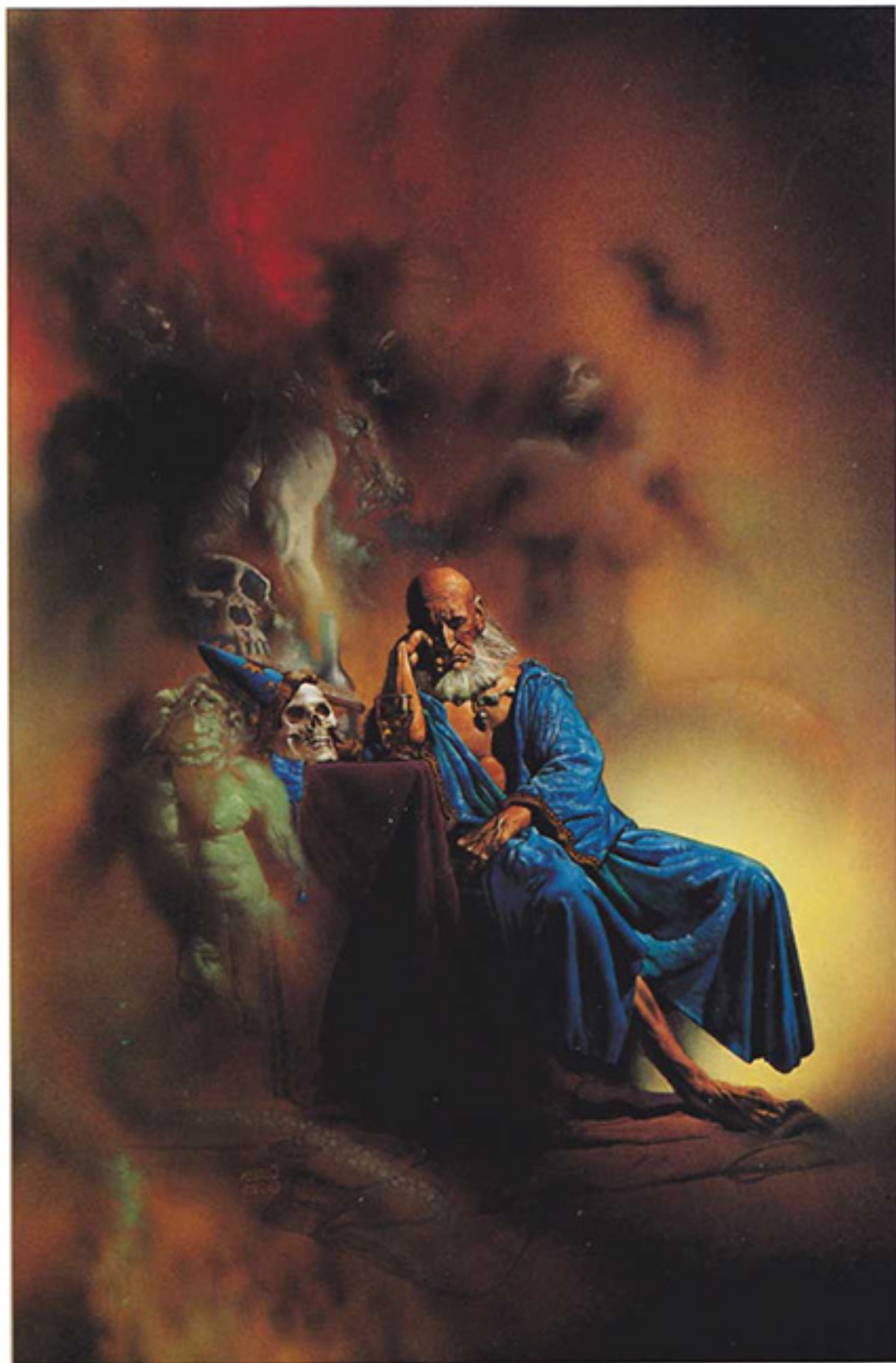
▲ *Deus Iare*: 1980, 13 by 20 inches, oil over acrylic on illustration board.



► *Wizard's Closet*: 1984, 13 by 17 inches, acrylic on illustration board.







airbrush and cut an acetate mask for every page. Then he sprays, using colored inks. He says he picked up the loose masking technique by watching an *Airbrush Action Getaway* video of Mark Fredrickson.

The characters he creates come from what he calls "sort of a reaction to the mundane."

"I deal in archetypes: Amazon, hero, mutant. They're archetypes, but they have character, too. Only they have the character intensity knob turned way up."

If Corben is dealing with a continuing character in a strip, he'll sometimes make a clay model of that character. "If I have to draw someone from more than one angle, I can put it under the light and turn it around," he explains.

When designing monsters, Corben sometimes uses a familiar creature as a

▲ *Wizard's Dreams*: 1985, 17 by 30 inches, oil over acrylic on illustration board.

kernel to build on. If it's a flying monster, the basis might be a bird or a pterodactyl; then he lets his imagination create the finished product. "I want it to seem plausible yet unreal. If it flies, I want it to look like it *could* fly.

Though Corben's work could easily be considered transitory and certainly not meant to last through the ages, he doesn't mind.

"I used to worry about my work lasting or if it had any real value. I did a few pieces to put in art shows." That work shows a real talent for painting and art. But the question seems to have been resolved.

"I'm a comic book artist," he says.

**AIR**

## RICHARD CORBEN TECH FILE



**AIRBRUSH:** Paasche H for acrylics and Paasche V for the Rotring inks.

**COMPRESSOR:** Sears 3/4 hp set at 30 psi.

**PAINT:** I use Rotring transparent inks for coloring comic books. They require less preparation, are nice and bright, and they dry almost instantly. I use Liquitex acrylics for underpainting on the larger illustrations because they have good color and are thin enough to run through the airbrush.

**LIGHTING:** My desk lamp has both fluorescent and incandescent bulbs for a warm and cold neutral mix.

**VENTILATION:** I use a fan and wear a mask with all the windows and doors open, especially when I use oil.

**SURFACE MEDIA:** Crescent hot-press illustration board.

**STENCILS AND MASKS:** Just about everything you can think of—I use acetate, frisket, freehand shapes, and sometimes I'll use a wad of cotton or torn up tissue for creating clouds and other effects.

**ADVICE TO BEGINNERS:** When it comes to asking about technique, I'm not a good person to ask because I make up things as I go along. What the work has to say, the artistic message, that's what is on my mind rather than the tools and techniques.

For advice on the illustration business, although passion and talent isn't a guaranteed formula for success, it's essential if you're going to make it. You have to have a very strong interest in it and the rest should follow. My own direction has been emphasizing figures and faces, while another illustrator might take another direction.



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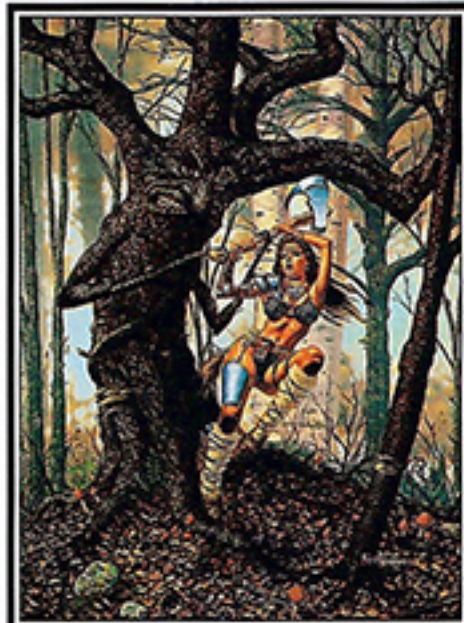
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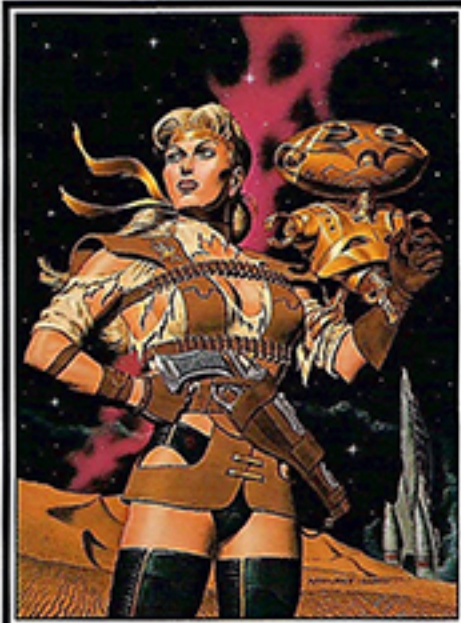
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