

## Commissions Are Now Closed

*By Jacob Duarte Spiel*

It's not easy to paint.

Actually, scratch that. It's not easy to get *paid* to paint.

You can only hustle through so many empty gallery showings and openings and closings before you start thinking "fuck, man, I'm spending more on oils than I'm selling these pieces for" and then you start cheaping out on supplies because the walking suits who can afford art don't care enough to notice the difference between oil and acrylic, between linen canvas from Varese, Italy and cotton from the dollar store, between brushstrokes made from traditional goat hair and brushstrokes made by some shitty synthetic. So now your art looks like shit and worse yet *you're the only one who knows*, but either way you gotta try and sell these half-dead pieces of your soul. But *still* nobody's buying and that whole time you're smoking, smoking, smoking, on the fire escape, counting pennies and vaguely praying that the Catholic church takes over the world again because then you could get paid to paint a thousand frescos of St. Francis of Assisi and that's gotta be better than this.

So you give up. You throw away your ambitions. You throw away your dignity.

And you start doing fetish art commissions.

And you discover... holy shit do those deviants have a lot of money.

I mean, I'm not saying I was comfortable right out of the gate. *Financially* comfortable, I mean. I don't mind freaky stuff, except for the few clients who tried to loop me into threesomes or whatever. Probably just angling for a discount.

But still, before I knew it the commissions started flowing. Whether it was a quick digital painting of someone's original character or this life-size acrylic-on-canvas of a guy on a St. Andrew's Cross, I was finally getting paid for my work. And I could *churn* these pieces out. That's the beauty of being hyper-obsessive: I spent three decades behind an easel, mastering every aspect of the craft I could think to master. I put in the reps and now, even if my work wasn't hanging in the Louvre, I could still paint a decent black-and-blue ass in about 10 minutes.

It's not that I didn't care about the quality of the commissions but, well, let's just say mechanics are more careful with their own cars. These weren't my cars. My cars were unsold, collecting dust in a storage unit 12 miles away.

Word-of-mouth was brisk. My clients weren't used to having access to a classically-trained artist and soon I was so busy I had to reject projects. My waiting list was weeks long, even after raising my prices 4 times. I was already planning a vacation, maybe to focus on my own work for a little bit.

But then, I was sitting at home one evening, putting the finishing touches on an impressionist interpretation of nipple clamps, when my laptop dinged.

An anonymous email.

That in and of itself wasn't weird. Most of my clients were anonymous and, after receiving their commissions, I often understood why.

It was a commission request, an easy one. The client simply requested that I, quote, "paint the following reference image to the absolute best of my ability". *Alright, pal*, I said to myself, *I'll get to it if I get to it*.

I was just about to close the window when I happened to glance at the payment.

I did a double-take. Counted the zeroes again.

Holy shit.

An absurd amount of money, absolutely absurd. Yet I hesitated. I'd heard of clients like this from other artists. Clients who made ludicrous offers but demanded perfection and never actually paid up no matter how good you were. Through sheer force of will, I closed the email. No point in trying to come to a clear-headed decision while dollar signs were doing squaredances in my mind.

My laptop dinged again. This time, it was from my bank. The anonymous client had just e-transferred half the proposed payment. The deposit memo read "now you know I'm serious".

Well, well. I suppose I do.

I took a closer look at the email. Nothing strange there. The bank deposit didn't give me any new info either. Again, no surprises. In general, the more money someone was willing to spend, the more anonymous they could afford to be.

All that was left was the reference image. My mouse hovered over the link. The half-payment I'd received suddenly felt enormously heavy, like a boulder dangling above my head or a corpse in my arms. My mind flashed forward to me explaining to the police how the image ended up on my computer.

But in the end, I clicked.

It was a close up shot. Macro. A lot of white adorned by red threads around the edges. In the middle, a forest green donut encircling a vast, black pit. It took me a moment to identify it as an eye. The pupil stared slightly off and to the left, inspecting... what? The photographer? The

studio? It was impossible to tell. It was skillfully done, not a single rogue reflection shimmering within the sclera.

Okay. Just an eye. That's not so bad. I'd been drawing eyes since I was a middle-schooler zoning out in math class. Piece of cake.

Or was it? All at once I felt self-conscious, as if the eye was some form of artistic judgment. The eye of a critic savouring this delicious moment, the moment right before my utter failure.

Could I really do this, I asked myself. In retrospect it was a redundant question. I knew the moment that money hit my account I was going to take this job.

I didn't let the client in on my internal back-and-forth, I just accepted the offer and asked for clarification on size, style, materials, and what would happen if my work wasn't up to their standard. Handling that from the jump might save dozens of hours down the line.

In seconds, my laptop dinged again. Twice. The first was to tell me that more money had been deposited, this one with the note "signing bonus". The second was another email from the client.

It merely said: "Just work to the best of your ability. You can always try again next month. Same fee."

I stared at my computer, slack-jawed, and the eye stared back.

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I'll admit, my first attempt wasn't my best. Let's call it self-sabotage. Like I didn't believe I deserved this money. This client and job was too perfect. It covered all my monthly expenses and then some. Who was I to get this windfall when other artists – my friends – were out starving in the streets?

I spent the whole month procrastinating, drinking acid-sour gin cocktails in the sweltering August heat. On the final day of the deadline I crammed maybe 4 hours of work into the eye. What came out was a lurid, pouting mess. A rush job. A *hack* job. Bright colours, quote unquote artful splashes of digital paint serving to cover up the sloppy lines, the whole thing done with an extra-fuzzy brush to hide the lack of detail. A caricaturist on the boardwalk would've been ashamed.

The reply from the client came in seconds: "Not quite there. Give it another shot."

Another ding. More money had been deposited.

Instantly, I was red hot with shame and anger. *Fuck* this guy. Fuck this fucking kinky freak for making me feel this way. Fuck him for *forcing* me to take his money, even though I gladly accepted it like the slaving dog I was.

I nearly threw my keyboard across the room.

But I didn't. Instead I made some instant coffee, opened up the reference image, and got to work on a new draft.

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This time I took it seriously. I tore my other half-finished pieces off the wall, canceled a few recently accepted commissions, and started planning. Ordinarily, I would pick a creative direction and do some sketches in that style, but the words “best of your ability” rang in my head. It left me with two questions. The first was what did “best of my ability” mean to the client? “Photorealism” was the ready answer. That’s what most rich people mean when they say “great art” and this guy was certainly rich.

I wrote “photorealism” on the wall. Then I considered the second question: if this is erotic art, what is the subject of the client’s desire? Is it the eyelashes? The iris? The pupil? Tear ducts? Photorealism or not, I could still emphasize the fetishized feature... if I knew what it was.

I couldn’t outright ask the client. Obviously, he’d chosen me with the expectation that I *knew* what was sexy about a macro photo of an eye. Asking would give up the game, kill the golden goose, prove that I had no business working for him. That wouldn’t do. I needed to guess.

I settled on a mixed approach. On a digital canvas, I experimented with each of the qualities in turn, then mixed them together. Elongating the lashes while brightening the iris. Blackening the pupil so the faintly limpid sclera shone more brightly. Lightly touching up the inside corner so the hint of a tear could be inferred in the duct.

I spent weeks playing with the balance of these features before I was satisfied. On the last day of the month, I sent off the file. Within minutes I had a reply. Two replies, in fact.

The first was the client: “Not quite there. Give it another shot.”

The ache from that criticism was eased by the second reply: my monthly retainer had been deposited.

I licked my lips. Back to the drawing board.

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I used the first two months of money to finally move out of my shitty bachelor. My new apartment had space for a studio, which I promised myself I'd set up once I nailed this commission.

My clothes started getting fancier. I went to better restaurants, mostly alone. I struggled to spend time with my friends. Money was always a topic of conversation in those circles and they all wanted to know what I'd done to become so successful. I couldn't be honest with them. You get that, right? So I whitewashed the details. I became nothing more than a highly-qualified freelance artist who happened to luck into a few big commissions from rich clients. That was all technically true, the rancid kind of truth that curdles in your throat as you speak it. There's only so long you can speak that kind of truth.

By the fourth month I'd stopped going to gallery shows, ashamed by my mealy-mouthed answer to the question "so, what are you working on?" By the sixth month I'd stopped seeing friends entirely, the envy on their faces was too much. By the ninth month, I was dodging my parents, thanking God they didn't live in the same province.

Before I knew it, it was just me and The Eye.

I entered a kind of fugue. With no direction from the client it was up to me to seek new avenues, new approaches. My walls were covered with failed sketches and drafts, a hundred-eyed beast staring down at my futile, amateurish efforts.

Towards the end of the year, I ran out of steam entirely. Oh sure, I kept painting, I kept trying new styles and techniques, but in my heart I knew none of these were "to the best of my ability".

For all my existential anguish, the client seemed completely unconcerned. Their emails remained professional and pleasant, replying to each iteration of The Eye with a simple "not quite there. Give it another shot".

And so I did, but eventually you've gotta run out of shots, right? The client would have to get fed up eventually and the fear of that slowly began to paralyze my process.

The fear. The anxiety. It became overwhelming. I'd wake up in a full panic and collapse into bed at the end of the day, completely exhausted from the flood of adrenaline.

I'd shut down my website almost 8 months earlier, sneering as my old clients left, burning the bridge as they crossed. At the time I couldn't dream of a world where I took 100 dollar commissions anymore.

And now? I was stuck. Too terrified to move forward, too proud to move backward.

Inspiration... it strikes at funny times doesn't it?

All I'd wanted was a haircut. My shaggy bangs kept falling into my eyes as I tried to paint.

The barber, Syrian I think, motioned me into his chair. My weight barely depressed the pneumatic cushion. Despite being richer than I'd ever been, my fridge was empty. The barber mimed putting food in his mouth.

"You must eat, my friend," he said.

"Yeah," I croaked back, wondering exactly how long it had been since I'd spoken to another person.

He spun me to face the mirror and began his work.

And who was the creature looking back at me from that mirror? The dehydrated remains of a man lost in the desert? The final, exhausted specimen of an endangered species?

Aimless desperation and anger oozed from that face. A man capable of anything and everything.

Which is when it all clicked.

I leapt up from the chair and ran out, discarding the barber's sheet as I ran for the subway. I didn't even notice as his scissors sliced my cheek, not until the blood was running freely down my chest, staining my shirt.

But by then I was already at my easel.

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"The best of my abilities." It was so obvious. I grabbed my goat hair brushes from storage, I washed one of the Varese linen canvases collecting dust in the basement. I pulled my oils, my *real* oils, from under my bed. I was rusty at first, not used to the physical heft of my tools after all my digital commissions. But each brushstroke was cleaner than the last, and each cut of my palette knife tighter, and within minutes it was as if I'd never walked away from my dream of being a *real* artist.

The afternoon turned to evening, the evening to night, the night to dawn, dawn to afternoon, afternoon to evening. I didn't care. How could I? This was the greatest I had ever been. If I could, I would've kept painting forever, sustained by genius alone.

But every canvas has edges and there's only so much perfection you can cram between them. I don't know how I knew I was done. All I knew was that I *was* done, that this was the one, that it absolutely had to be. I stepped back from the easel, only now looking down at my clothes,

seeing all the paint and charcoal stains. I'd been so desperate to start that I hadn't even put on a smock.

With shaky hands, I poured myself a glass of water, the first thing I'd had to drink since the day before. Halfway through the glass, I paused. My muscles tensed. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

Someone was watching me.

I peered through the windows. Nothing. To be certain, I drew the curtains. I closed my laptop. I even covered the peephole on my front door. Still, the feeling persisted.

The only place I hadn't checked was...

I looked towards the canvas. My opus, my masterpiece. The Eye hadn't moved, it merely stared out at the world in the same position I'd painted it. And yet...

While before it had been merely a painting, now it was... well not alive per se, but something approaching it. And, as if to prove it, the eye blinked.

I blinked back.

We stared at each other, paralyzed, the seconds ticking away into minutes as an unreal feeling crept slowly up my spine, as my mind slowly processed a single, terrible thought.

"You created this."

Revulsion, denial, and *horror* burned through my head. There was a sudden awful lightness in my guts. I ran to the bathroom, puking up bile and water, half of it landing in the sink. Laying there, on the bathroom tile, I tried desperately to tether myself back to reality.

It was simple. It hadn't happened. The eye was frozen in place like paintings have always been for 100,000 years. The movement, it was the expression of a fevered, sleepless mind. I wasn't exactly in the best of places emotionally, that I could admit to myself. Too much stress. It was time to take a break, a real break, maybe an institutional break.

But if I did... would the client be there when I came back? Would he move on? I couldn't just walk away from that kind of money, not like just like that anyway. No, there must be another way.

I paced the tiny bathroom, vomit sloshing against my feet like a neglected animal in a cage. I was too deep in thought to notice.

Let's say it *wasn't* a hallucination. Let's say that when I went back outside the eye was still moving. Well... I'd certainly accomplished something nobody else had ever done. An abomination, to be sure, but a harmless one. And, truly, what client wouldn't be pleased?

Slowly, horror gave way to satisfaction.

I crept out of the bathroom and cautiously approached the easel.

It was still moving.

The eye wheeled around, scanning the room. I appraised my craft from the shadows, slightly outside its range of vision. The clean, perfect blood vessels. The stained-glass iris. The charcoal-black pupil. There was no doubt. This was it. This was the best of my ability. It was perfect.

I stepped forward and the pupil instantly found my face. Delicate lace eyelashes beat the air. I leaned forward to get a better look at my meal ticket, my prize. The eye seemed to shrink back, or try to, but I'd fixed it in paint, pinned it to the canvas like a butterfly. All it could do was widen in terror, the pupil shrinking and expanding like a hyperventilating lung.

I was grinning now, chuckling, watching the eye as it ping-ponged, looking for an escape route, any way out at all, but there wasn't. There *isn't*. Maybe you think I'm cruel for laughing, if you even believe me, but I promise my reaction was justified. It *was* funny, you just don't get the joke yet.

There's something I haven't told you, but I'll tell you now: you see, it was *my* eye on that canvas.

Behind my easel, I'd set up a mirror. For 28 hours straight I'd stared into it, capturing every ounce of desperation, every molecule of pathetic cowardice. My vanity, my refusal to walk away, my gleeful abandonment of everything I loved about art. It was all there. An intimate portrayal of every dark, miserable part of my soul, done to the best of my ability.

I took one last, long look. The eye ceased its panicked rolling and held my stare. Slowly the pupil dilated, like an animal's when it sees a predator. Wider and wider, taking me in, *all* of me in, until it seemed like the iris would be swallowed whole.

When I'd seen enough, I wrapped the canvas in brown butcher paper.

My email to the client received an immediate reply. Ten minutes later, a car arrived outside my building. A sleek, dark luxury vehicle with windows so tinted I couldn't even see the driver. I laid the wrapped commission flat in the trunk and the car sped off.

Ten minutes after that my inbox dinged.



“This is perfect,” it said. “Great job.”

My inbox dinged again. He’d sent me a bonus.

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He had another one for me next month. I couldn’t make out what it was at first. Pink and fleshy surface dotted with downy hairs. I only figured it out the next morning as my razor glided down my cheek.

It was a throat.

My throat.

That one I nailed after only a couple of months. You should’ve seen that great, bobbing Adam’s apple, bouncing up and down in silent anxiety. I must say, I particularly enjoyed the slashes of colour I made across the trachea. Such a lifelike texture. That’s something only oils can really capture.

Then it was my ear. My thigh. My buttock. My foot. As soon as I finish one commission, he’s got another. I don’t even have to raise my rates, he does it without asking.

I suppose soon he’ll have all of me, the entire collection.

After that, I’ll have to find something else to sell.