

The Extraordinary Artwork of Francis Tsai

After ALS took the use of his limbs, Francis Tsai learned how to draw with his eyes.



Francis Tsai, an author and conceptual artist, used his eyes to communicate and draw through his computer using specialized software. His friends in the art and tech community helped equip him with eye — tracking technology and a tablet that allowed him to continue to do his visual art by moving his eyes.

By Anna Daugherty

Editor's Note: Francis Tsai died on April 23, 2015. This story has been updated.

It is evident in Francis Tsai's work that he loved science fiction, textures, and graphic shapes. What isn't obvious is that he drew using only his eyes.

Tsai, BS '90, MAr '93, died April 23 after struggling with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's Disease, for more than five years. During that time, he never stopped creating art.

Tsai took the long way to his art career. He fell in love with *Star Wars* as a wide-eyed 10-year-old, filling his notebooks with doodles. Luke Skywalker became a personal hero for Tsai, who grew up in Lubbock—not too different from Tatooine. He enrolled as a pre-med at UT, which he soon realized was not his calling. Switching to architecture offered a chance to be creative, although after four years working in that field he dove full time into painting and drawing in 1998.

“Ever since I was a kid, I knew I wanted to draw,” he said in late March, just before his death. “Architecture was the foundation that I ended up using in design work. I had to fill in the gaps.”

After nearly 10 years as a concept artist and designer, Tsai decided to become a freelancer so he could focus on creating art he was passionate about. Soon his work was appearing on Marvel comic covers and in graphic novels, the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the film *Sucker Punch*. By 2009, he had also published two books on designing and painting for fantasy and science fiction. Tsai had never been happier.

“I was finally on the trajectory of where I wanted to be,” he said.

Tsai’s earlier work is characterized by a moody color palette and complex shading and depth. This piece, “Outpost,” was for a space opera project.

In late 2009, Tsai began to feel numbness in his arms. He was diagnosed with ALS, a progressive illness that degenerates nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, eventually leading to complete paralysis. The average ALS patient lives just two to five years after diagnosis.

“When the diagnosis came, it was devastating,” Tsai said. “And ironically, the first things to go were my hands and arms.”

The disease progressed quickly, and the last time Tsai ever held a pencil was early in 2011. But he didn’t stop making

art.

His sister Marice Parchen, BBA, MPA '95, calls him “a determined man.” Tsai continued to be creative when he realized that he could use his feet to communicate with an iPhone. Using his toes, he was also able to continue drawing on the touchscreen.

But by the end of 2011, Tsai lost the ability to use his feet. For a short time, he was unable to communicate or draw, until a computer scientist named Teddy Lindsey began seeking technology to help the friend he'd known for a decade. They collaborated with a company called Tobii to design a tablet setup at his home in Austin that worked with Tsai's medical equipment and limited mobility, and the eye-gaze technology was set up by the following spring. He began using Sketchup, an architectural drawing tool, to create his paintings. His style became "more 2-D, simpler, and graphical" as he painted with his eyes. But his colorful sci-fi style was the same.

“He was so happy,” Tsai’s widow Linda, MAr ’93, says with a smile. “His first drawing with the eye-gaze was geometric shapes. I was so impressed, but I don’t think he even saved it—it was child’s play to him.”

Tsai was humble about his talent, before and after his diagnosis. “He was committed and ambitious, but in a quiet, unassuming way,” Linda says. “He was born to create. It was a natural part of him.”

“MNKE”

The two met while studying architecture, and Tsai first got Linda's attention with his mullet. They both lived on Enfield and occasionally rode the bus together, but Tsai was quiet, and it wasn't until a study abroad trip to Mexico that Linda got to know him.

“I remember falling for his terrible puns,” she says. “His dry humor was the kind that takes you a moment, and then you start laughing.”

They married four years after graduation, in 1997. The sci-fi fans honeymooned at a Comic-Con expo in San Diego, fell in love with the city, and lived there for nearly 15 years. Shortly after Tsai's ALS diagnosis, they moved back to Austin to be closer to family.

Tsai and his wife Linda at home in Austin.

“Francis was still so young when he got ALS,” Linda says, her voice shaking. “We heard about studies and drugs, that gave us a lot of hope—we thought he could make it so much further. Somehow it still felt so sudden when it happened.”

Tsai remained active in both the art and ALS communities until the end of his life. His final sci-fi poster was a reward for crowdfunding donors who contributed to a campaign for the development of eye-tracking glasses for others with muscular disorders and limited communication.

Tsai's sister says that in late March, his eyes were starting to get a little slower. Most ALS patients don't lose function in their eyes, and that was her hope for Tsai, but it was becoming almost impossible for him to draw.

“What amazed me was his lack of self pity,” Linda says.

“Some days I felt sorry for myself, just for the work of being a caretaker. But how could I feel sorry for myself if Francis didn't even feel that way?”

Linda eventually asked Tsai how he found the strength to go on. His simple reply: “I just don't think about it.”

“Adapt :: Survive :: Prevail — Linda”

While he was still able to create paintings with his eyes, Tsai painted his motto onto several designs: “Adapt :: Survive :: Prevail.” He said it reflected what he and Linda had been through.

“We had to adapt emotionally and physically,” Tsai said. “I will prevail.”

The Tsai family held a small celebration of his life in June. Friends and colleagues sent Linda some of Tsai’s sketches

that they had held onto for years. He enjoyed drawing caricatures, particularly of a close group of friends he met while living in the Jester dorms. He thought the cartoons were terrible, but as evidenced by the friends who kept them, they were personal, important parts of his art.

Photos of Tsai and Linda by Ralph Barrera, Austin American-Statesman

