

# The Arkansas Art Scene Blog

May 27

## Interview with artist Anna Zusman

Anna Zusman is an artist whose work is firmly rooted in traditional drawing. However, after acquiring an iPad Pro in 2018, she now works more frequently in a digital platform. Anna received her BFA in Illustration from Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA in Painting from San Francisco Art Institute. In 2017 she began teaching drawing and illustration at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia, Arkansas. She has participated in numerous regional and national exhibitions, including Small Works on Paper and the Annual Delta Exhibition. More of Anna's work can be found at her website [annazusman.com](http://annazusman.com).



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**AAS:** Anna, I know you are not an Arkansas native. Where did you grow up?

**AZ:** I was born in the former Soviet Union, in what is now a country called Moldova. My family decided to leave because of antisemitism and overall uncertainty shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. We came to the US when I was 12 years old and settled in New York City because we had relatives there. I knew that I wanted to be an artist early on. I am lucky that my family supported me in my decision even though it was an unusual career choice for an immigrant kid. After attending LaGuardia High School of Music & Art, I got accepted to Rhode Island School of Design to study illustration.

While illustration was certainly more practical than fine art, it was still not a career that promised a steady job after graduation. Therefore, I got my master's in art education from Teachers College Columbia University and went on to teach art at a high school for 7 years. I was hoping to develop my illustration career while teaching at the same time. However, I gradually realized that while I was making a lot of art, it was fine art and not illustration that I was interested in. I moved to San Francisco to get my MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and afterwards stayed in California for 10 years.

**AAS:** What brought you to Arkansas and Southern Arkansas University?

**AZ:** After graduating from the SFAI, I continued making art and started working as an adjunct art professor at several different colleges. Being an adjunct is stressful due to the lack of job security and healthcare as well as poor compensation. In my search for a full-time position, I applied to a variety of institutions around the country. When I came for an interview at Southern Arkansas University, I immediately liked the other faculty. I have never encountered such a dedicated and collegial department, and I was thrilled when I got the job. It was also important for me to work for a public university that provides affordable education, particularly for first-generation college students and immigrants.

I teach a variety of art courses at SAU including drawing, illustration, pen and ink, and concept art. One of the exciting things about the academic environment is that I am always learning something new for my classes as well as for my own artistic practice. During my tenure at SAU, I have audited classes on digital photography, 3D modeling, and web design, all of which have enriched my artistic process and my teaching.

**AAS:** I first saw your work in the 2024 Small Works on Paper Exhibition (<https://www.arkansasheritage.com/blog/dah/2023/12/04/the-2024-small-works-on-paper-exhibit-kicks-off>). Your digital illustrations are filled with emotion that I feel is enhanced by your hatching technique. Were your current illustration techniques developed when you were using pen and ink?

**AZ:** I developed my love of pen and ink after taking a Pen and Ink and Scratchboard class at RISD. There is something about the starkness of black and white and expressiveness of the linework that really speaks to me. I remember discovering Albrecht Durer's drawings and prints and being really blown away by how real they felt to me. In *The Four Horsemen*, his use of line not only describes each of the characters but also creates a

sense of motion and urgency. I later discovered illustrators Franklin Booth and Bernie Wrightson and they also had a big influence on me.

These days I primarily work digitally on my iPad Pro, but my technique is an adaptation of traditional pen and ink to digital media. Working digitally is lot more forgiving and it allows me to perfect my linework so that every line contributes to the final impression of the piece.

**AAS:** A few weeks ago, I interviewed your colleague at SAU, [Rhaelene Lowther](#), and she mentioned that *Dead Crawfish*, a painting of hers which I especially liked, that was a part of your collaborative series. She has a more literal interpretation of what the two of you stumbled upon. Your version, *Dead Crawfish*, is quite different and wonderfully humorous. Tell me about it.



*Crawfish*, digital drawing

**AZ:** Well, the first thing that I thought of when I saw the dead crawfish was how strange it was that the head and the body have been separated. It also reminded me of an Egyptian statue that I once saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where only the body without a head was present. The title card next to the statue said that the head was at another museum in Berlin. I wondered what it would feel like to live with the head and the body separated.

This drawing was created during the pandemic. At the time we all had to deal with difficulties and limitations that would have been unthinkable before. In my drawing I am presenting a character who has been eviscerated, whose head has been separated from his body, and yet he somehow manages to continue with his life, enjoying his afternoon tea. You might say that the drawing was aspirational for me, being able to find this kind of equanimity and poise in the face of adversity.

**AAS:** Perhaps my favorite illustration of yours because it takes the viewer into your surreal fantasy world is *Grass 2*. I especially love your use of color and the creatures inhabiting that world are too numerous to count.

**AZ:** *Grass 2* is also a part of my collaborative series with Rhaelene Lowther. This time the inspiration was grass with dew drops on it. The image was so beautiful that initially I created a very literal representation of what I saw - *Grass 1*. However, though I was happy with how it turned out, I did not feel fully satisfied with this straightforward interpretation.

So I took my initial photo and ran it through one of the early AI generator programs where it was distorted almost beyond recognition. I then used the distorted image as an inspiration for the second drawing. The AI image had a wild rainbow palette, but I wanted something a bit more constrained. I decided on using a complimentary color scheme of red and green that allowed to create a psychedelic vibrating effect. I've always loved 1960s psychedelic posters.



**AAS:** When you are creating a work like *Grass 2*, how much of it is preplanned and how much is spontaneous as you work through it?

**AZ:** *Grass 2* is not very representative of my usual artistic process. It was more of an experiment in seeing what I can do by improvising based on an AI-generated image. Some of the creatures that you see in the drawing were AI generated while others were invented by me. This piece was more spontaneous than most of my drawings.

My typical artistic process starts when something captures my interest and keeps me thinking about it for some length of time. I tend to think in visual metaphors which are inspired by things I see, hear, or read. Sometimes the significance of these visual metaphors is obvious, in which case I quickly lose interest. In other cases, a particular visual metaphor I invented strongly resonates with me and I need to find out why. Making an artwork is a way for me to understand what it means to me. Art is a way for me to process information. My artwork has been called surreal, but I generally don't think of it that way. Even the most fanciful inventions in my drawings are usually rooted in reality and my experiences.



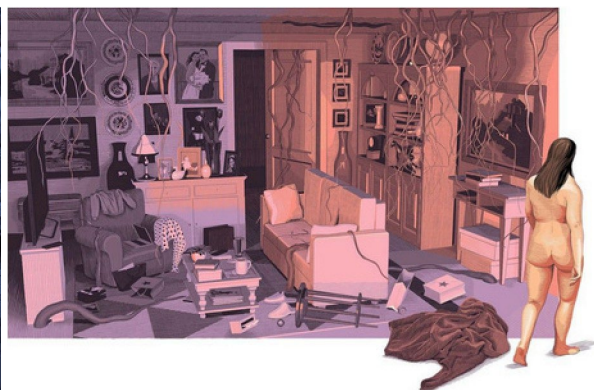
**AAS:** The Covid pandemic affected the work of artists in many different ways. During that time, you began working on a series called *Everything Is Fine Once You Let It All Go*. Two from that series, *Those Who Stay* and *Those Who Go* are very poignant. What is the story behind those illustrations?

**AZ:** At the beginning of the pandemic, I began a series of surrealist drawings that reflected my changing preoccupations as the situation evolved. My early drawings focused on a sense of impending catastrophe and loneliness. Later drawings in the series, such as *Time to Go*, focus more on the idea of escape, getting away from the past. The characters in many of my drawings are depicted in the nude because when one leaves their past, one has to start completely anew with nothing.

The concept for the two drawings above is inspired by the series titled [States of Mind by an Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni](#). That series consists of 3 semi-abstract paintings set at a railway station. The 3 paintings are *The Farewells*, *Those Who Go*, and *Those Who Stay*. In *Those Who Stay*, vertical lines express sadness and immobility of those left behind. *Those Who Go*, on the other hand, is full of chaotic motion and represents transition and hope.

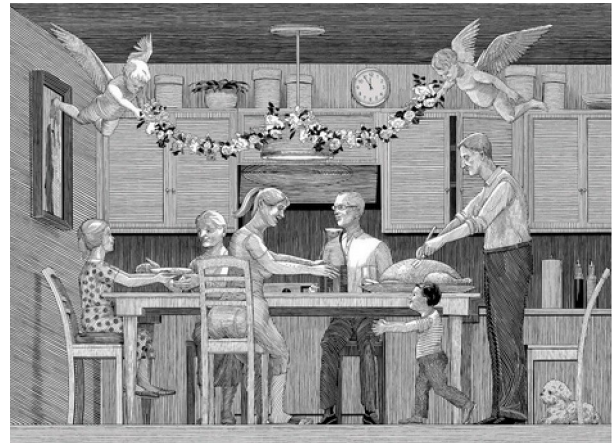
My own drawing *Those Who Stay* represents a woman sitting in her home mindlessly watching television and not noticing that she is being covered by roots. State of inertia is the most natural state, and it takes a lot of energy to get out of it.

The second drawing, *Time to Go*, represents the same woman who has decided to leave. In Boccioni's series, those who go and those who stay are treated as separate groups of people, some who are mired in routine and others who are open to adventure. The way I see it anyone, no matter how rooted, has a potential of changing their life and leaving the circumstances that no longer suit them behind. In some ways, this is one of my more autobiographical piece



**AAS:** Your most recent series, *Us and Them*, is an ambitious and relevant project that challenges the viewer to ask themselves some hard questions. *Room 1 Us* and *Room 2 Them* stand out as wonderful illustrations on their own and become even more powerful together. Tell me about that series and those two 'rooms'.

**AZ:** In recent years, the world has become more polarized and our human tendency to divide everyone into "us" and "them" has become more pronounced. My current project, titled [Us and Them](#), shows a cross section of a house depicted twice. In one of them, the rooms with 'good' scenes—an elderly couple dancing, a family at dinner, a girl reading—are illuminated. In the other one, only the 'bad' scenes, such as people fighting and an alienated couple having dinner sitting far apart, are lit up.



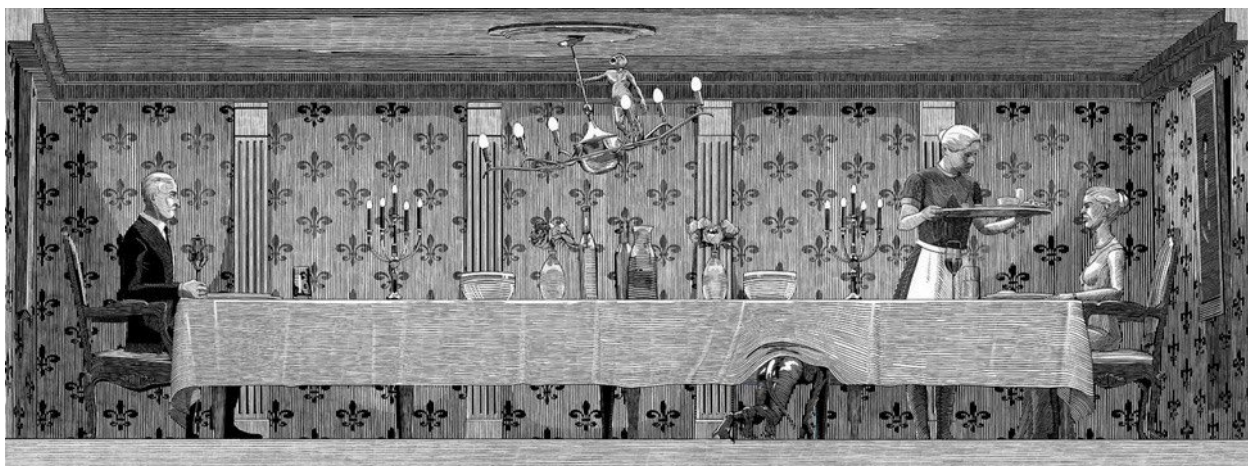
When we think about a group of people who we consider "us," we tend to think of the good things in our "house," while when we think about "them,"

we often focus only on the problems. For example, I really enjoy travelling to Mexico and in particular to Mexico City because of the vibrant artistic life, excellent museums and galleries, and amazing food. Yet when I tell people in the US that I am going to Mexico, I get concerned questions about whether it is dangerous because they are only familiar with the negative information about Mexico. When I tell the same people about my travels around the US nobody raises an eyebrow even though some of the places that I visit have considerably higher crime statistics than Mexico City.

*Us and Them* is a work in progress. I began by creating a 3D model of the house and then lighting it in two different ways to create the "us" and "them" sides. I am using the 3D model as a rough draft for my finished drawings, which I am currently creating one room at a time. After all the drawings are finished, I will combine them into two large pieces: one house where only the good scenes are lit up and another where only the bad scenes are visible - *Us and Them*. These completed homes will be projected onto one wall of a gallery. The individual drawings of lit up rooms will also be printed, framed, and hung individually around the gallery.

This will be a participatory art installation. To facilitate this, I will invite viewers to think of a community that they belong to, which could be their family, workplace, city, state, country, or another group they identify with. Then they will write down one thing that makes them proud of their community and one thing that is a problem in it. Their answers will be projected on a wall next to the drawings.

My goal for this project is to make people more aware of how we divide the world into "us" and "them" and begin to see the good things about the houses of others as well as problems in our own.



**AAS:** Your work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and featured in many publications. That must inspire your students at SAU. What do your students think of digital drawing and illustration as a fine art?

**AZ:** Many of my students these days choose to work digitally, and this mirrors a trend around the world. I would say that the main reason that students enjoy working digitally is how forgiving digital media is.

However, I find that a lot of the digital artwork done by students feels flat and lifeless. I also discovered that the best digital art that I have seen, both from students and from professionals, is done by artists who have started using traditional media and later moved on to digital.

Next year I will be teaching a new Special Topics class on digital drawing and painting. I am currently researching how notable digital artists utilize traditional techniques in their work. I am looking forward to sharing my discoveries with my students in the fall.