

Modern magic

Resene
Canterbury Clay

In the world of set and props construction, Resene products are at the heart of creative problem solving.



Both New Zealand and Australia have long been popular filming locations for their expansive, breathtaking and often otherworldly scenery.

Aside from its natural beauty, New Zealand is also particularly well known for its award-winning pre- and post-production studios like Stone Street Studios, Park Road Post, Weta Digital and Weta Workshop – all of which are headquartered on Wellington’s Miramar peninsula. These titans are not only sought after for their multimillion-dollar sound stages; they may be even better associated with their concept design, set building and manufacturing abilities, armed with artists at the top of their game creating props, gadgets, robots, weapons and creatures that stretch the bounds of imagination.

When it comes to special effects, it’s a common misconception that computers can do it all. The truth of the matter is, while they can do a lot, there are still many things in movies and television shows that require physical props and sound studio sets – and those items do far more of the heavy lifting than people give them credit for. One can still watch films that relied almost entirely on practical effects, such as John Carpenter’s *The Thing* and feel just as impressed and fearful of the convincing puppetry, oozing fluids and latex monstrosities as when it was released in 1982. It’s also easy to overlook the incredible effort that goes into designing and creating convincing worlds to be used for the stage as well, where computer effects aren’t even on the table.

The level of artistry it takes to accomplish these effects isn’t a widely held skill. It’s a specialisation that takes a lot of practice and mentorship, and far more experimentation. While various types of paints

and timber stains, foam, plasterboard, MDF and adhesives are all supplies you’d expect to be used to build sets and props, less expected items like sawdust, biscuits, cat litter and toilet paper are also typical in their arsenals. And the Set & Props Construction programme at Toi Whakaari/New Zealand Drama School teaches budding set and prop designers how it all comes together.

The school operates like its own collaborative ecosystem, with one programme feeding into the next to assemble all the complex pieces of the puzzle necessary to produce significant film and stage productions. Head of Course Francis Gallop says it’s far from a typical university experience. “We emulate an industry model, so it’s a full on 9-to-5 – and sometimes later.”

Students primarily learn through hands-on applied knowledge, which Francis says is a vital benefit of the programme. “These are craft skills, and being Wellington-based, we are able to draw upon the most amazing resources in terms of seasoned art department veterans who are incredibly generous in sharing their decades of knowledge.”

Within an already tight-knit school of less than 200 students, Alison Clark and Megan Gladding are members of a far tighter family. Administration only selects a maximum of eight students to enrol in the Set & Props Construction programme each year. As far as their year-mates go, Alison and Megan are two of just six – which shows just how much skill and savvy prospective students need to already possess when they apply just to make the cut. Neither woman enrolled in the programme fresh out of high school. Alison and Megan each already hold degrees: in education and sculpture, respectively. But it’s clear that both are driven by their passion for the craft and the desire to grow their skillsets. So far, they have been the only two that opted to undertake internships before they’d even entered their second year of schooling.

As a former educator, Alison has a wise approach to life, one that recognises the strong value in continuous learning. “Every year I do something that ‘scares me’ or is at least outside of my comfort zone,” she says.

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above: Megan used various Resene testpots to paint this miniature villa sculpture she built.

left: Megan (left) and Alison (right) in front of a ‘brick wall’ they created with their classmates out of polystyrene and approximately fifteen layers of different Resene paints.





left: This suit of armour was a collaboration between an entire class of students in Toi Whakaari's Set & Props Construction programme. It's made primarily of foam that's been coated with layer upon layer of various Resene paint colours to give it a weathered metal look.

It's a journey that has led her to pick up skills in welding, pottery, chain-sawing and pencil drawing. She's also taken a cooking class in every country she's travelled to. "If I need something done – like a wall plastered, for example – I'll often employ someone to do it on the understanding they teach me how at the same time. It may cost me a bit more the first time, but I save heaps down the line."

"After teaching, I had a career in property maintenance, which was a sort of gateway in a sense," she says, "I spent two years building sets for a local theatre and took drama last year. Then, I tried a few shorter courses to get a taste for what Set & Props Construction would be like before applying at Toi Whakaari."

Alison says that she was drawn to the programme because of the wide range of options for specialisation and the different skills that she could gain in the course. "There was such a variety under one umbrella, and I still can't believe that people get paid to have this much fun."

While she is drawn to the carpentry side of set building, Alison says that given the challenges of that highly physical work, she's looking forward to exploring more prop and set painting this year. She recently completed an internship at Royal New Zealand Ballet where she helped build the frames for the sets for *The Nutcracker*, which will be shipped to the United States to go on tour there. She hopes to return there to try having a go at the props side of things, but she's also hoping to get down to Christchurch to do some work with The Court Theatre.

"One thing that's really fascinated me is that I've really gotten a lot out of painting something seemingly small, like an eyeball, and layering the colours to create depth. Everything I thought I knew about painting, which was mostly walls during my time in property management, has been thrown out the window. Instead of two or three layers, it's more like 15 and the depth just grows with each layer. It's all about knowing how to get there."

She says the process has shown her just how drawn she is to realism. "I think that's a really captivating skill that I would love to constantly develop. It's not easy to do abstract work, but to nail realism and likeness of humans and animals is very interesting. And rusting – I love rusting. I really enjoy trying to emulate the qualities of something, so taking a piece of wood and turning it into a rusty piece of steel, that really fascinates me," says Alison.

What she loves most about using Resene to achieve her impressive end results is how easy the products are to experiment with, and how well different products work together. "Some things can have 10-15 layers, so the fact that you can mix them up across a number of formulas is key. We like pushing the boundaries of the products and seeing what else can be achieved with them."

"I've always been a fan of Resene," says Alison. "I like the way the products mix, and of course the colours. I'm working on building my own collection of testpots and there are so many great colours that I sometimes don't even know where to start. I also like all the cheerful, helpful advice you get when you go to

Resene ColorShop. I rang someone up there recently to make a query and he even did some testing himself to find me the answer – and he was just as excited as I was in that discovery."

Though Megan took a different path to get to Toi Whakaari, it's clear that she and Alison share some traits in common. Megan graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2017 from the Dunedin School of Art with a major in sculpture. From there, she headed to Florida and worked at Walt Disney World as a costumer/entertainer – which was a dream come true for her.

"I came back to New Zealand after that but then turned around and went to China to continue to work for Disney English, teaching kids how to speak English through Disney. But I missed being creative, so I came back again and thought I'd go back to studying. That's when I found the Set & Props Construction programme at Toi Whakaari."

Given her background, it's easy to see what drew her to it. "My sister is a director and I've always helped her with doing the art components of her films. That's how I progressed from loving to sculpt as an art form to wanting to sculpt for film, media and stage shows as well. I remember seeing a stage production of *Billy Elliot* and seeing his house rotate made me think, 'I want to make that'. Then going to Disney and seeing how their world works, that really made me want to get deeper into it."

It was also the variety of skills that Toi Whakaari's programme offered that attracted Megan. "I consider myself a female Swiss

below: One of Alison's creations that she's most proud of so far is this sculpted foam puppet. She used Resene products to paint it to resemble a 'skekis', a fictional character from the 1982 film, *The Dark Crystal*. Achieving a high level of realism in the puppet's eyeball has been her favourite accomplishment to date.





left: A close up of the visual texture created on an MDF panel using Resene paints and timber stains. It was a collaboration by the previous cohort of seven second year students that graduated in 2020 and was used for one of the school's major stage productions.

Resene
Anakiwa

army knife – I can do anything I set my mind to, but I also have a hard time just honing in on one thing. I need lots of variety in my creative outlets.”

A highlight for Megan in the programme so far was when she and two other students created the marble floor for the school's major theatre production at the end of 2020. “Before last year, I wouldn't have called myself a painter per se, but after all that production, I realised that I am a painter. I added that to my book of ‘you can do that, you have done it.’”

She says that the sheer volume of the project was a major challenge. To achieve enough of the floor to cover the stage area, Megan and her collaborators had to consistently apply their paint effects to 32 full-size sheets of MDF. “To marble it, we started with a painted black base and applied resist techniques, such as rolling over it with water, and then on top we used white and gold Resene paints to add the hand-painted veins.”

Since then, Megan has been able to expand her painting experience during an internship at Scale Studios. “I was able to paint some considerable props for films there, including a large, life-sized reptile. Having the opportunity to do that felt like a

huge extension of trust for an intern. I was stoked – and even a bit overwhelmed – with how it came out. It was a wee proud moment of realising I really can paint; I'm not just pretending. I've just never put myself in that category before.”

Colour wise, Megan's love runs deep for Resene's collection of pinks, but it's a particular blue that she considers her all-time favourite hue. “Resene Anakiwa is gorgeous and has a very special place in my heart. You can use it on anything and everything. It's very clean and it makes me really happy. The pigment is delish! I just love it.”

“I always go to Resene to get my paint, but the one thing that really struck me was when I had just come back from China and went to the Resene ColorShop during the Hunger for Colour campaign. I never knew that Resene did that, so the next day I rocked right in there with a bunch of cans of food and looked at that wall of testpots and couldn't even choose. It's such a kind gesture, and that really solidified them as being the top choice for me.”

Looking ahead, a dream project for Megan would be to work on a major motion picture. “I'd love to be an art director on

a big feature film or even make props for one. I'm very passionate about Disney, though I don't see it the way that I did before. After working there, I see it as a much bigger, global company than I did previously. I've already dabbled with short films, and I already have six laurels for short films that I've art directed. But to work on a major Disney picture, that would be really exciting.”

Despite Set & Props Construction being a young course, those that have gone through the programme have seen some spectacular success. “We have only graduated two cohorts – but they have done amazingly well,” says Francis. “Last year, one student graduated on a Thursday and started at Weta Workshop on the following Monday. We have grads working on big movies in Auckland, painting huge sets destined for the States at RNZB. I'm constantly impressed by the drive and talent of our grads.”

“Resene has been a huge support to our fledgling course. Our production budgets are modest – as you'd expect in a teaching institution. But the value added by Resene's contribution, not only in terms of the production quality of our finished work but also in the scale at which we can afford to dream and the scope of what we can teach, has been enhanced greatly.

“I like the pigment density of Resene paints. The coverage is great. We are often working on unconventional substrates which makes flexible adhesion an important factor. Resene products work well, and the specific film paints are great. They have good adhesion and durability – especially for a theatre set, which gets quite an intensive load. If you're trying to make something look like a high-finished polished marble and you've got heaps of people walking over it, you need robust products like the ones they offer.

“Personally, I love the Resene Colorwood stains and really appreciate the breadth of the range. Having some strong primary colours in there gives us the ability to use them as a mixing palette from which to create endless possibilities.” **BW**

To learn more about the Set & Props Construction programme, visit Toi Whakaari's website at www.toiwhakaari.ac.nz.