

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and bangs, looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a blue and white patterned scarf and a black and white striped shirt. She is holding a white notebook with a black pen, and the notebook is open to a page with a blue and white sketch of a landscape. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

setting the scene



Scenic artist Kathryn Lim has just completed three-and-a-half years on the road, cultivating realistic props and sets for the biggest productions in New Zealand's film history.

Kathryn's working tour began with Peter Jackson's film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* and finished with his remake of the cult classic, *King Kong*. Between times, she worked as a painter on *The Last Samurai*.

On both *The Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong*, Kathryn worked closely with Oscar-winning art director Dan Hennah and production designer Grant Major to transform Peter Jackson's vision into reality.

"The art director and production designer have a look in mind, and it's my job to understand what they're trying to create and to make it look exactly how they want it to look," says Kathryn.

Complicating the job somewhat was the fact she was responsible for as many as 120 painters at any one time.

"I love that pace, though. I love the mad, crazy chaos of film and I love working with lots of different people," she

says. "Working with other painters, you always stand to learn something new. Even if the painter is less experienced or has half your sensibility, chances are they can still teach you a new technique or a different way to view it."

With the advent of blue screens, green screens and CGI technology, Kathryn says her role tends to focus more on sets than on backdrops.

"In the whole *King Kong* movie, there were only two painted backdrops. A lot of what I do is about making the film set and the studio sets match, or taking fake props like trees that have been given one flat colour and painting them to look real."

Film sets aren't Kathryn's only canvas. Off-location, she runs her own painting business, Props and Drops.

"I'm a gun for hire really, which is great because of all the different jobs I get to do and the people I get to work

Resene paints were used extensively in the *Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong* sets and props.

The Embassy Wellington was also redecorated in fresh Resene paint in anticipation of the *Lord of the Rings* premiere.

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with," she says. "One day it's film, another day it's theatre and another day I'm working on a commercial."

In America in the '90s, Kathryn's painting skills saw her walk into a job with a scenic design company. She painted the Rainforest Café chain of restaurants, created a set for an Aerosmith music video, and worked on the Pillsbury Mansion and the singer Prince's home.

"Working on people's homes is a real privilege. It has a degree of permanence that film, theatre and advertisements don't have. Most of that stuff is gone within weeks, but when you work on someone's house, you have a responsibility to create something they'll love and that they'll be able to live with for a long time."

Two years ago, Kathryn bought her own house on Auckland's Te Atatu Peninsula, but has only managed a three week stint at home since then. This means the house is a tribute to unfinished projects, she says. A series of unfinished paintings, the beginnings of some handcrafted wallpaper, and a range of her own screenprinted fabrics destined for clothing and upholstery, are a few of the most recent undertakings.

However, the root cause of the unfinished projects doesn't all come down to a hectic lifestyle.

"I'm one of those people who loves learning and trying new things."

Before becoming a scenic artist, Kathryn studied politics and philosophy at Waikato University, spent six years studying fashion design and art in New York, and later undertook postgraduate study at Belgium's prestigious painting school, the Ecole van der Kelen. She chose to learn her craft there because of the history surrounding the school, and because of its elite reputation for teaching traditional painting methods such as marbling, wood graining, gilding and stencilling.

Now, her love of old things and her garnered knowledge is culminating in a new room in her house. Styled on pre-Victorian Cabinets of Curiosity, where worldly men kept interesting objects from far corners of the globe, Kathryn is having a studio built, which will provide a space for her to create her own art and will also act as a gallery for her collection of stuffed animals.

"I collect dead animals. They're all antiques, so they're well dead by the time I get them, but I think they're just beautiful. I've got lots of birds, roosters, ducks, a polar bear, a brown bear, a wallaby. I may be the only one that thinks they're beautiful, though. They're always really cheap, which suggests no one else is buying them!" **H**