

Shilo
(www.shilo.tv)

New York, NY
Del Mar, CA

Autodesk® Maya® software

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—Andre Stringer
Co-Founder and Creative Director
Shilo

Flower Power.

Shilo Artfully Raises Compassion Over Compulsion in MTV Video Support for Burma.



Image courtesy of Shilo

Summary

To the mournful notes of a lone piano, viewers are confronted with the ominous imagery of sleek fighter jets and wide-winged bombers preparing to make their deadly sorties. Rain, snow, and slate-gray skies complete the scene. So opens "Burma," a grim and foreboding, yet ultimately uplifting, visual story created by Shilo, the Emmy Award-winning production company with studios in New York City, New York and Del Mar, California.

Despite the specter of the multitude of military aircraft converging on the war-torn country, however, things look up just as they are looking darkest. Releasing their plentiful payload, the planes continue their journeys through brightening skies, while their dropped bombs explode, not with flames and shrapnel, but with the beautiful blooms of flower. In an eyeblink, certain disaster is transformed into loving support.

Designed to direct attention to both the ravages of Cyclone Nargis and the political repression afflicting the Burmese people, "Burma" was created for iconic music network MTV, with extensive use of Autodesk® Maya® software. Shilo Co-Founder and Creative Director Andre Stringer and Lead Artist Tamir Sapir spoke about the challenging and inspirational project.

The Challenge

"At Shilo, we are primarily motivated to create powerful and provocative stories through our imagery," says Andre Stringer matter-of-factly. "When we were approached by John Jackson, the head of Social Responsibility at MTV, and reading the script written by Carl Le Blond, Executive Creative Director at Ogilvy & Mather in Amsterdam, we had no doubts at all about being involved in the project. We knew this was a unique chance to use our creative skills to help change the world as it is. The project had everything we look for: a cause we believe in, creative challenges, a powerful script, and more. With Shilo as the Director, we committed ourselves to the message, and were given full creative freedom. We ran with it."

And how. Pretty much the entire creative staff at Shilo pitched in on the project, with three lead animators, matte painters, 3D animators, composers, an editor, even a miniature set designer getting in on the well-wishing. The profoundly affecting soundtrack was composed in collaboration with Good Sounds in Amsterdam. Even with such a sizeable, enthusiastic team, however, the project presented Shilo with many creative challenges:

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“Burma was a big undertaking for us,” says Stringer. “We were determined to remain true to the original vision without compromise. Maya was an obvious choice for us. Not only was it extremely helpful from the earliest stages of the pre-visualization phase, Maya was invaluable in troubleshooting and accomplishing the most difficult shots throughout the project. In all, there were 40 shots required for the film, and Maya was used in every single one.”

Predictably perhaps, Shilo Lead Artist and Composer Tamir Sapir points to the abundance of beautiful flowers in the final scenes as the film’s most challenging elements:

“The flowers were a major challenge,” says Sapir somewhat ruefully. “We wanted a profoundly realistic look, while also choreographing the flower’s gentle descent to the music. There are shots where you see so many flowers floating down through the air, while other shots reveal individual flowers in extreme close-up. To tackle the problem, we decided to model three separate versions of the same flower, ranging from a highly detailed version to a lower resolution version for more distant shots.”

The Solutions

Following the creation of the flower models in Maya, each model was rigged and placed in a spot in the scene appropriate to its resolution, with higher resolution flowers close to the camera.

“The big challenge was maintaining a seamless integration of all three flowers, while also retaining the natural, authentic look and feel,” says Sapir. “Working with Maya helped us develop a creative approach to the problem. We put a lot of time and energy into designing a robust and flexible pipeline around Maya, relying particularly on its native referencing capabilities. We were able to make last-minute animation tweaks, then send scenes to render almost immediately. With roughly two months to create 40 shots, our Maya pipeline enabled separate production teams to work seamlessly and simultaneously.”

The Shilo animation team used Maya to create a custom rig based on a set of individual controllers, and using driven keys and wrap deformers, to control how the flowers bloomed and petals reacted to the wind. The realistic look and movement of the flowers heightens the already emotional tone of the film.

Tamir is also quick to praise the scripting capabilities of Autodesk Maya, along with many other features:

“Maya has exceptionally strong scripting, and its open architecture has been extremely valuable to our work,” he says. “We used Maya Fluids to create realistic, yet artful clouds in CG. We generated a bank of different shapes and types of clouds, all of which enhanced the realism of the scenes involving the airplanes. In addition, the particle engine within Maya helped us create several dynamic simulations, especially for the flower sequences.”

The Results

As moving as it is topical, “Burma” represents a visceral example of the fusion of art and activism that will lead to attention and transformation. The film was originally aired on MTV International, and spectacularly screened on the MTV Jumbotron in New York’s Times Square, and is still featured on the website www.noneofusarefree.org, supported by the Burma Arts Board and MTV. Deservedly, “Burma” was also shortlisted at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival.

Asked for some final words on the projects, Stringer is gracious and circumspect when it comes to the use of software:

“Never forget the emotion at the core of your work,” says Stringer. “It’s not all technical; you have to find a balance. Working with Autodesk Maya enabled us to be creative and find the poetry in this piece throughout the film’s evolution.”

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Lead Artist & Composer
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Image courtesy of Shilo