

INSPIRATION

Illustrator Marc Keeley: 'The longer it takes someone to realise it's drawing, the better you have done'

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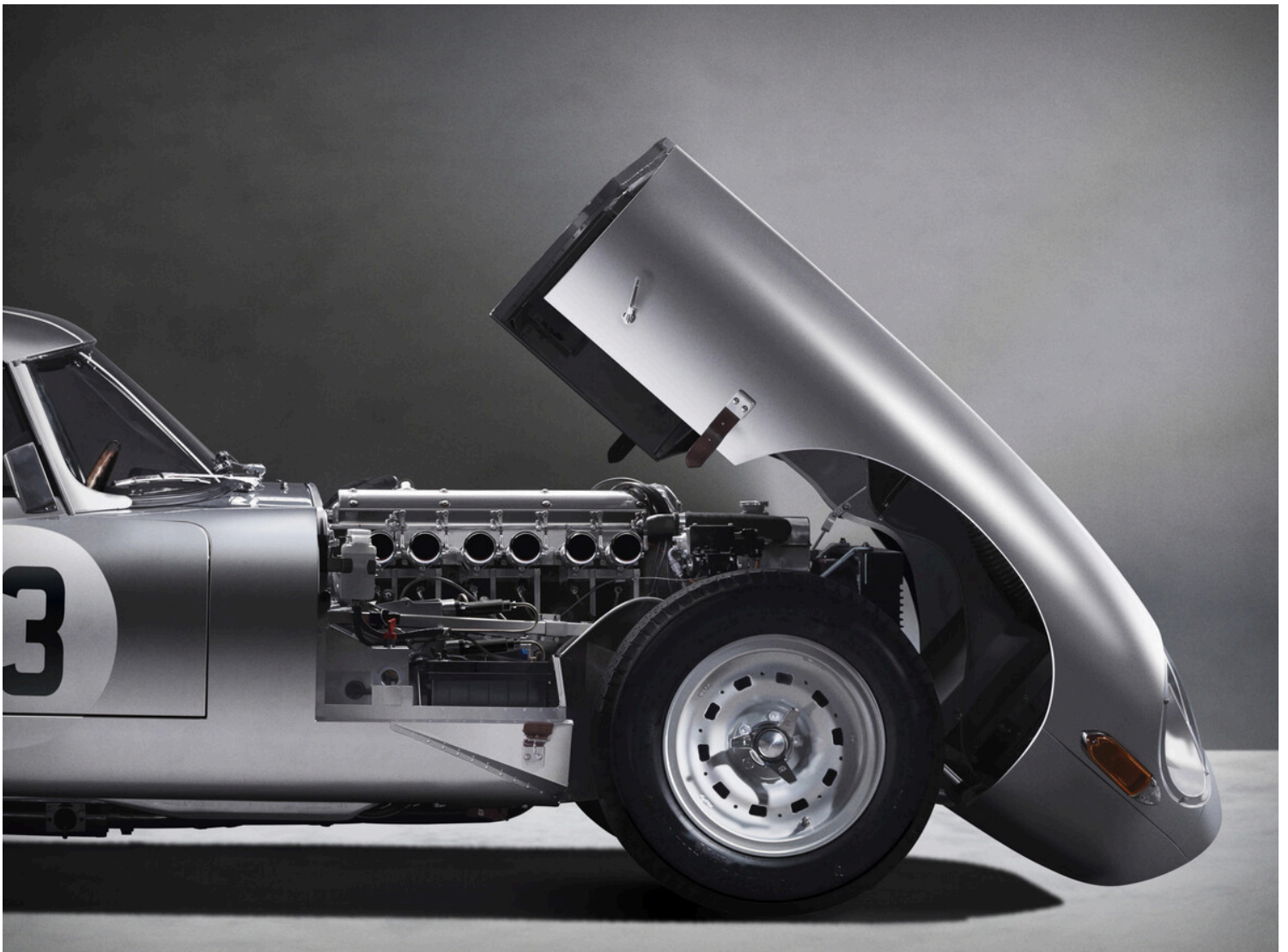
by *Melanie Khareghat*

Self-taught illustrator Marc Keeley creates phenomenal photorealistic artworks in Affinity Designer. He chats with us about his process, the rules he follows when creating and why he prefers to work only in vector.

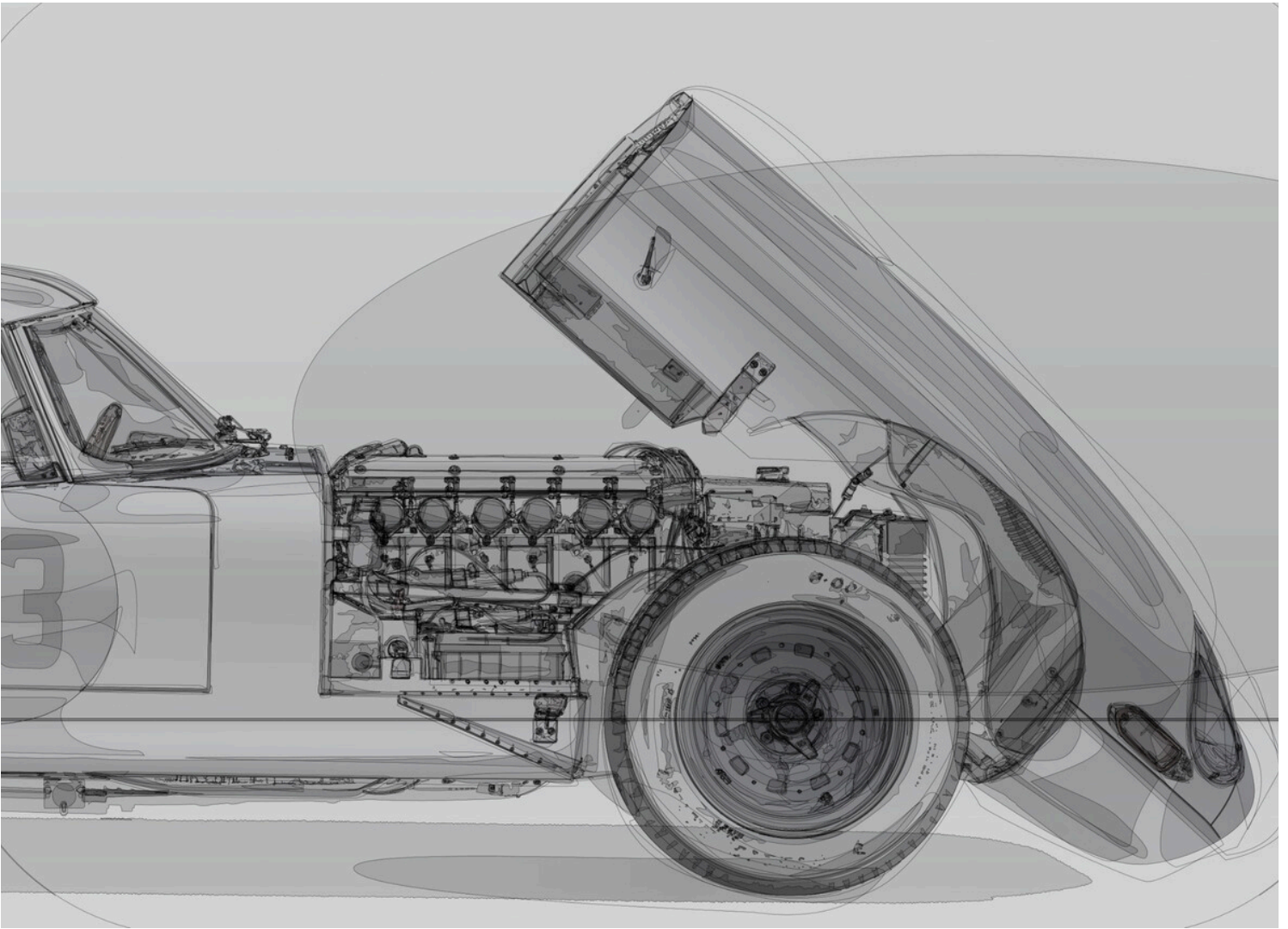
Tell us a bit about yourself and your background as an Artist.

My name is Marc Keeley, and I'm from the UK. I'm self-taught unless you count studying for 'O' level art at school. I've always been a techie interested in computers and software. My first digital illustration was for the annual school art competition and was before graphics apps were even a thing, so I had to code the drawing from what I'd created on graph paper. Yes, I'm that old! I was impressed with the results, but my art teacher, who was judging, not so much. I was just too far ahead of my time.

I became a programmer after school but still enjoyed art. My first venture into commercial art was creating application toolbar icons, but now it's creating random things I enjoy, including but not limited to photorealistic illustrations.



Jaguar A0



X-ray view mode in Affinity Designer

Your vector work is phenomenal; what makes you favour working in vector over raster?

I'm glad you like them. That's simple really, I've become pretty handy with the vector Pen Tool, but it's been a long time since I've done any raster work, and I didn't really do that much back then. I just enjoy vector. I'm not one of those who likes or is even tempted to mix the two—not that there's anything wrong with that! I would just rather do one or the other, not both. There are the usual raster vs vector pros and cons, too, but familiarity is the main reason.

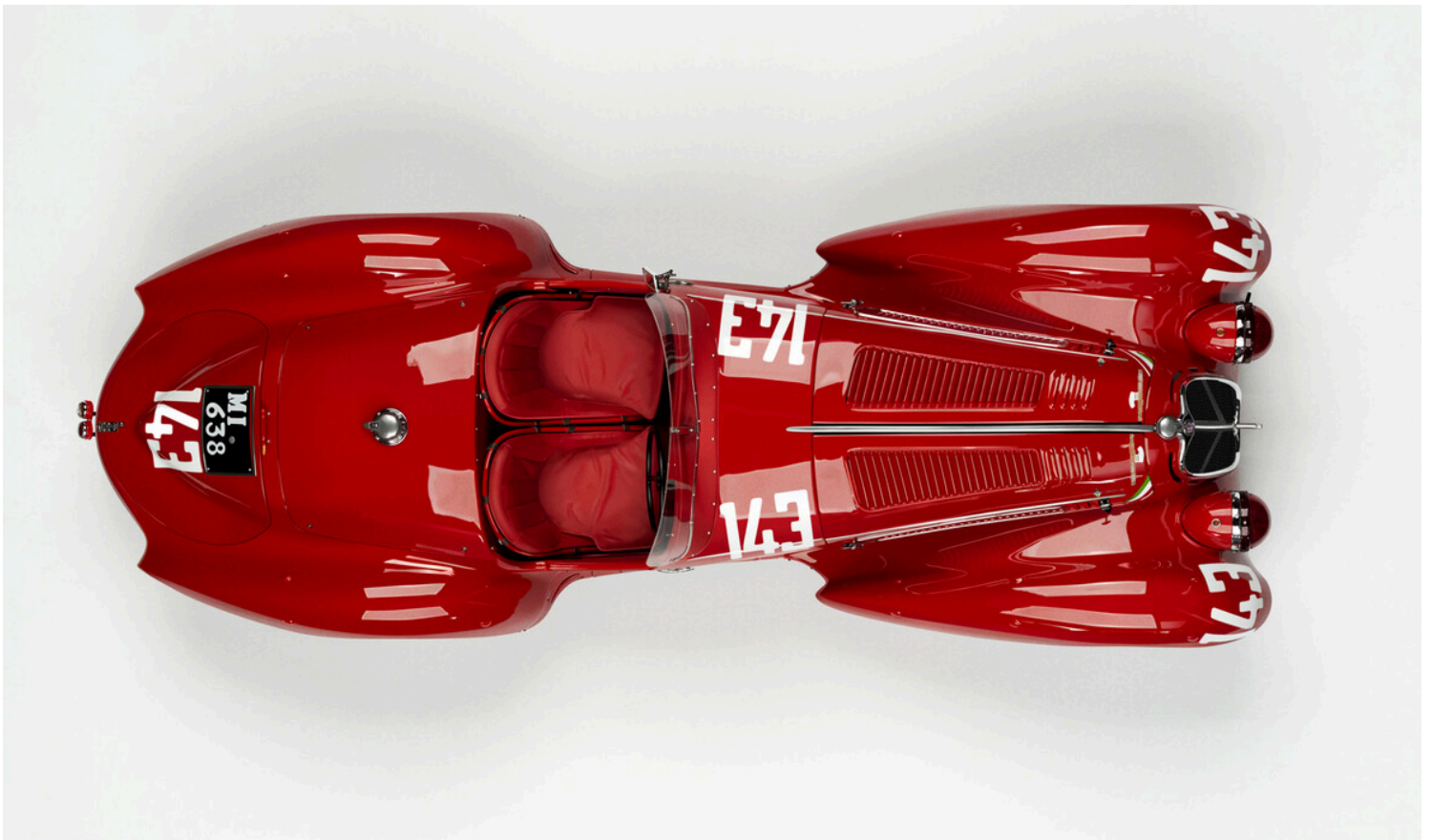
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**When did you first start creating photorealistic vector illustrations?
Where does your passion stem from?**

When I was young, I remember seeing books showing works created by the photorealism movement artists of the 60s and 70s, so people like Chuck Close and Richard Estes. I didn't really think that I'd ever attempt anything like that, even on a smaller scale and probably wouldn't have tried with natural media. But I was proficient enough at vector to give it a go in Designer. The first thing was accidentally quite photorealistic—it was meant to be just realistic, but I went a bit further. So after that, I thought I'd try purposely creating something photorealistic.



1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900

**How long does it take you to create such a detailed piece like your
'1938 Alfa Romeo 8C vector' image? Tell us a bit about this piece il_**

particular.

It took longer than I thought it would but that's often the case. I don't keep an accurate track of time, it's finished when it's finished, but I guess it was roughly 3-4 weeks doing a bit each day, not full days. I don't do modern cars. To me, they are just not that interesting—not that all vintage cars are. The Alfa, on the other hand, just has some really lovely curves to it, and the shading used to show off those curves and contours made it a more interesting subject. Also small things like the difference in texture between the leather of the seats and the shiny body.

Do you have any top tips or rules that you follow when creating?

For photorealism, use high-resolution references. It's much easier to ignore detail from them that you don't need than it is to add detail that isn't there. Think about how you work, so for me, it's the Pen Tool, and whether the subject is even doable and if it is, are there any problem areas? So, for example, for me, something like fur would be a no.

Guestimate how long it would take and whether the end result is worth that amount of effort. Photorealism with vector isn't a two-minute job—at least, it never is for me. So don't bite off more than you can chew, or you're likely to give up on it.

“For photorealism, use high-resolution references. It's much easier to ignore detail from them that you don't need than it is to add detail that isn't there.”





Omega Seamaster

What decides your subject matter in each illustration?

It's really whatever takes my fancy, that I know is possible and that I can finish in this lifetime. Of course, if something is going to take a week or weeks, then it needs to be something that I find interesting, and not just doing it for the sake of it. Whereas if it's not photorealistic and will take a fraction of that time, then it ca

anything. You could argue that it's a better idea to specialise in a certain style and subject, but I haven't as of yet.



Some of your pieces could be easily mistaken for a photograph; how did you hone your style to create such realistic artwork?

I didn't hone my style as such. Of course, the more you use an app, the more comfortable you are with it, but that's not really the same thing. It's right there in the name photorealistic (or hyperrealistic, which I don't think is really a thing but sounds good). If someone instantly knows it's a drawing, you can call it photorealistic all you want, but it's not. The longer it takes for someone to realise it's drawing, the better you have done. It's even better if they never realise. So it

about details and not skimping on them. Of course, it's always going to be simplified to some extent, but you can only go so far.

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When did you start using Affinity and how has it changed the way you work?

I downloaded Affinity Designer when it was in the initial beta. To be honest it was just to have a play and see what it could and couldn't do. I started using it for real in 2017, v1.5.

Being someone who only uses a very limited number of features (Pen Tool, gradients, blurs, colour picker, the odd shape), it wasn't so much that it changed the way I worked as it was a more pleasant, streamlined experience in certain areas. Whilst each may be small things when taken on their own, if you are using them hundreds of times in a piece of work, then it ends up making a big difference.



Do you have a personal favourite piece of work? Why do you favour this over others?

Yes, I do, but it changes. I'm like everyone; some I finish and like and then come back to at a later date and not hate but don't like so much. Others it's the other way around. It also depends on how I'm ranking them. For example, I'd choose different ones for detail vs do I want that on my wall or which I'd like in a particular room.

Talk us through your process.

It starts by finding or taking good references. Sometimes one can be enough, whereas other times, it's better to have several or you need multiple references—usually close-ups of certain parts. Depending on what it is, I might use bits from different reference sources. There's no right or wrong way to go about things but take a car, for example. I will block in the body shape and work on the details—after all, they're usually the interesting bits to do, and then at the end, do the body shading. I do have a habit of working on a number of parts rather than fully finishing each part in turn. But it doesn't matter as it all needs to be done in the end. I do add a little film grain as the output just looks better that way.

“It starts by finding or taking good references. Sometimes one can be enough, whereas other times, it's better to have several or you need multiple references—usually close-ups of certain parts.”





Porsche 917K

What are your passions outside of work?

I've always been a cyclist, so I go for a bike ride when I have the time, and it's not pouring down or blowing a gale or freezing cold. I stick to off-road as much as I can these days.

What's the most complex piece you've worked on to date? How long did you take to work on the details as a whole?

I created the front half of a Jaguar E-Type Lightweight with the bonnet (hood) open so you could see the engine, and that overall took roughly three months working on it pretty much each day for a while. However, I did do that in two blocks as I wanted a rest from it, so I did something else and came back to it. To be honest, it was too much effort for the end result, but I was glad to finish and not just give up.

What artists inspire you and your art?

There isn't anyone who I use for inspiration or try to emulate. That's not to say I don't see work I like and sometimes would like to be able to do, but that often wouldn't translate to vector, so I don't. Of course, as far as photorealism goes, it's not really anything to do with emulating that style. It either is or isn't photorealistic.



Do you have an ultimate ambition for your work? What would be the dream assignment for you?

Up until now, it has just been for fun. Although, I am now just starting to sell prints. If people like something I've done, then that's always nice—especially if they comment too. As for an ultimate ambition and dream assignment, it's not really something I've thought about, however, it probably wouldn't be photorealistic, but what style it would be, I'm not sure. So just I create things I like, and hopefully, others do too, which is enough.

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You can find more of Marc's illustrations on his [website](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

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Melanie Khareghat

Spotlight editor

As editor of Affinity Spotlight Melanie oversees the stories, interviews and tutorials published on the site. Outside of work she enjoys travelling, reading crime thrillers, Pilates and dabbling in a spot of oil painting. [Get in touch](#) with Melanie if you would like to contribute or be featured on Affinity Spotlight.

TAGS

Affinity Designer

illustration

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Marc Keeley

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