

## DOCUMENTARY • San Diego filmmaker's movie focuses on three artists

## FROM A1

makers are at Comic-Con 2011, exploring a theme that dwarfs the concerns of most blockbusters: Why do artists create? And how do they fulfill personal, often uncommercial, visions while still paying the bills?

One answer: by cutting more corners than Speed Racer. Kendricks, for example, could buy a clapper board for \$25, but he chooses to use his outstretched arms.

"Poor man's clapper," he said.

## Scaling the peak

An artist, Kendricks always travels with a sketchbook in his backpack. This isn't for fun — "I have to draw," he said — but it isn't for profit, either. He earns a living by teaching college courses in the arts, organizing film series at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and writing. (Until July 2010, he was a regular freelance writer for The San Diego Union-Tribune.)

He loves movies and comic books, two ingredients that blend like popcorn and butter. Multiplexes overflow with flicks inspired by comics; "Captain America" debuted this week, "Cowboys & Aliens" next. Yet films about comic books are rare. "Comic Book Confidential" is more than 20 years old.

How about "Crumb," the documentary focusing on underground cartoonist R. Crumb? "That's more about his family's dysfunction than comics," Kendricks said.

Last year, Kendricks contacted two friends in Los Angeles: cinematographer Nathan Gulick and Kathryn Panian, a film editor. Why not make the movie they all wanted to see, the ultimate statement about 21st-century comics and their creators?

The trio began shooting at last year's Con. They settled on three main characters: Danni Shinya Luo, 28, a Pasadena resident who has sold sexy covers to Marvel ("X-23") and even racier calendars and paintings to fans; J.J. Villard, 30, an L.A. resident developing a show for the Cartoon Network and hawking sketchbooks filled with X-rated images;



Filmmaker Neil Kendricks (left) interviews artist J.J. Villard (off camera) as Nathan Gulick films and audio specialist Sarah Moscos records the audio Friday.

and Daniel Clowes, 50, a graphic novelist — "Ghost World," "Mr. Wonderful," "Wilson" — and bona fide critical and commercial success.

"He's a master," Kendricks said. "Being able to have the freedom to do what you want to do is something every artist aspires to."

While Villard and Luo strive for this career peak, Clowes has summited. Even though "Wilson" won a 2011 Eisner award at the Con, its author chose to stay home in Oakland.

For Luo, though, there's no question about coming to the Con to sell and learn. "You get inspired by a lot of different things, not just art."

The convention also is the essential backdrop for "Comics Are Everywhere," Comic-Con International, the nonprofit organization that runs the annual event, has given the filmmakers passes and full access. Everything was going well.

Until it wasn't.

## Gods of the Con

On Wednesday, Kendricks' car began sputtering. By Thursday morning, as the Con opened downtown for its first full day, the '91 Honda Civic was in a Mid-

City shop.

"It's like the gods of Comic-Con were against you," a friend tells Kendrick.

If so, the deities relented. Kendricks found a ride and then found Gulick, the cinematographer; Adrian Talamantes, 36, a Chula Vista resident and San Diego State student; and Sarah Moscos, 20, the sound engineer who will enter UCLA's film school in the fall. (Panian, the film editor, remained in L.A. with the roughly 100 hours of already-shot film.)

All four carry backpacks stuffed with pencils, notebooks, sketchbooks, release forms for interviewees; lenses, batteries, memory cards; microphones, boom pole, digital recorder, tripod; and two cameras that shoot up to 12 minutes of HD-quality video at a time.

The crew is toting about \$10,000 worth of equipment, but some of it is rented and some borrowed.

"There's more opportunities now for self-publishing and digital publishing," David Lloyd, an artist whose "V For Vendetta" was made into a big-budget film, said as Kendrick interviewed him on camera. "There's no longer any real excuse for any creator to say, 'I can't

do that.'"

## Better than sugar

Villard hears "can't" and "don't" often, but he usually ignores these warnings. In the Con's exhibition hall, the 5-foot-5 artist poses between two busty models promoting a video game, leers at another blonde not-quite-dressed as Teela from the "Masters of the Universe" cartoon, peers beneath the pelt worn by a larger-than-life-size statue of her friend, He-Man.

"J.J.," Kendricks notes, "is a circus of the Id."

At the Con, he sells sketchbooks full of gory and/or obscene images. But at DreamWorks, where he



Artist J.J. Villard reacts while being interviewed by filmmaker Neil Kendricks at Comic-Con International 2011. NELVIN C. CEPEDA • U-T PHOTOS

## ONLINE

"Comics Are Everywhere," but so far evidence of the movie exists mostly online.

On the documentary's Facebook page — on.fb.me/nRB6cl — you can find a three-minute preview of the movie, plus photos and tweets from the team as they explore the world of comics and comics creators.

designed Rumpelstiltskin for "Shrek Forever After," and the Cartoon Network, where he's prepping the post-apocalyptic series "King Star King," there are PG-rated limits.

Nonetheless, Villard traces his love of edgy art back to network TV shows he loved as a boy. "It's better than sugar," he said, "the things it does to your brain, all the explosions and stars and splatterings."

Comics and animation burst with excitement. Why haven't we seen a documentary on Comic-Con?

No matter what happens to "Comics Are Everywhere," we will: "Comic-Con Episode Four: A Fan's

Hope," from director Morgan "Super Size Me" Spurlock. Shot at last year's Con, it's due in theaters later this year.

The director took a victory lap around the Con Thursday, briefly plugging his movie and its affiliated book.

"We should have hip-checked him," Gulick joked.

While Spurlock has money and name recognition, that's no reason to make a documentary. Creators create because — well, let's go to the tape.

On the high-def video, we see Kendricks questioning Tim Seeley, writer of Image Comics' "Hack/Slash" series.

"How do you hold on to your passion for art?"

"It's tough," Seeley said. "The only reason to make comics is not to get rich. You make comics because you love comics."

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