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Chris Gray: Star Wars, as we all know, takes place in a galaxy far far away, but Placer County is a little bit closer to Endor than you might think. I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sando: I'm Scotty Sando and welcome to the Placer life. In today's episode we're talking with local artist Frank Ordas.

Chris Gray: Frank was a scene painter on Return of the Jedi and a lot of other great eighties blockbusters you remember.

Frank Ordas: My name is Frank Ordas and I live here in the beautiful gold rush town of Auburn, California. I'm an artist, and I've essentially painted, made a living as an artist, since I was 21. I consider that a blessing to be able to do what I love and enjoy and to be able to live off the fruits of my talent. It hasn't always been easy. It's a struggle because in the arts you essentially live on the whims and the tastes of your purchasing public, but I feel blessed living in a community, it really is a wonderful town.

I remember getting in line for Star Wars. I remember going to the Chinese Grauman's theater there on Hollywood Boulevard. I remember being in that long line. I remember seeing that opening scene and just going wow this is amazing. My friend dragged me from college. You gotta see this movie. I went there kicking and screaming and after I saw that I go man I want to work on that movie. It was a cultural statement. It was a cultural statement. It validated my culture of kids who grew up with Marvel comic books. That's essentially what it was. I remember watching Flash Gordon. They're kind of cheesy in the effect, but it's really cool.

Chris Gray: Okay so a little back story on Frank. Falls in love with art at seven years old. Growing up in a pretty rough part of Los Angeles. It's his ticket out of the neighborhood. Gets himself admitted into the prestigious Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and then from there finds his way into the film industry working for one of the century's great film directors Steven Spielberg.

Frank Ordas: I remember doing the opening to ET, it was one of my big jobs. It was only like a 10 foot by 10 foot canvas. I'd never worked that large in my life. I was working with Dennis [Beuren 00:02:40], who was the art director and he says, "This better look good because Spielberg is gonna be seeing it on Saturday. No pressure." I remember I was just a nervous wreck. I even came on Saturdays because I wanted to impress everybody like yeah I'm gonna work hard.

Scotty Sando: How did you get tap for that?

Frank Ordas: How did I get tap for that? George Lucas always wanted to go to my Alma Mater, which was Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. When he got a scholarship to go to UFC, then that's where he went. When they were looking for another artist where did they go to? They went to Art Center. I was one of the top students there so I got recommended. That's how I landed the job. It was being at the right place at the right time. That's how destiny works out.

Speaker 4: It is your destiny.

Scotty Sando: After working on ET with Steven Spielberg, Frank goes to work on Return of the Jedi with George Lucas.

Frank Ordas: There were three of us who worked in the matte painting and that's the department essentially that paints the backgrounds. If you see Return of the Jedi, there's a scene where Darth Vader on a ship is entering this docking bay. There's literally a series of about four or five matte paintings. That's what they call establishing shots. Gives you the feel of the movie. Those are all paintings with the addition of some models. Okay? That was done by three of us. Last movie there were 64 people who worked in the background. Okay? When I worked there, each of us directed our shot along with the supervisor. I was responsible for my shot.

Scotty Sando: One cool part about Frank's job is he gets to go from working matte paintings to working on models like the most dreaded weapon in the galaxy, the Death Star.

Frank Ordas: I worked on that. I was able to work in the model department. I worked directly with George Lucas. He'd come in, okay Frank do this, do that. Oh yeah that looks good. He's not a man of many words. It's like great. Do this. Okay next. I was also able to work in the art departments. I've worked on four Star Treks. I was able to move around like I said. They needed an extra for Indiana Jones, I was on set with a little loin cloth and turban. I got paid a dollar from the screen actors guild for being half naked. Small little person on the screen that only I know that's me.

Imagine if you had three artists all about 24 years old, 23, 24. Okay? I was just out of college. I'd just been out of college for about a year or two. We're all assigned to create these visuals for Star Wars. We're painting them. We're actually doing a traditional application on either glass or large pieces of Masonite and we're creating these backgrounds for this movie. Everything was done by hand, whether it was for models, whether it was animated. Everything was done on film, which means even the editors were cutting and splicing pieces of film. There was this very human element where if they needed somebody on set, I actually acted in one of the movies, where they'd call us and we'd go act. Again, can you see what's happened here? There's a very human element where they needed help to blow something else. We need some guys to hold some things. We're gonna blow this up. We'd all stop what we were doing, go on stage, and participated just like kids blowing things up.

Chris Gray: Do you remember what you blew up?

Frank Ordas: Uh yeah we blew up, in Jedi, we blew up Jabba's barge. That was great. We were up watching that get blown up. That's the only thing I can remember because that was the big thing because these guys they built this thing to blow it up. It was like everybody came out of the building to watch this. I remember the opening to Jedi. I was a nervous wreck because we knew our shots were coming up at the very beginnings so it was kinda like oh man this better look good, this better look good, and say yes. It looks good. Okay good.

Scotty Sando: Are there any scenes from Jedi that you're particularly proud of looking back now or at the time back then you thought I really have my heart set on this one scene?

Frank Ordas: I think the opening scenes of Jedi still hold up. I did one scene with the million falcon where Lando, Chris walking towards it. I thought it was a great shot, but the way it was shot it didn't turn out. In fact, I was just on the internet and somebody voted that image the worst matte painting in Jedi. Again, I thought it was pretty good, but the way it was filmed it looked like a painting. Those sort of things will drive you crazy. Of course, you'll have somebody go it was the worst matte painting. Then on the other hand, there's this scene at the end where Darth Vardar throws the emperor down into that shaft. That's my painting. I thought it was okay, but there's some people just love that. Oh yeah I remember that. Okay. Sometimes it could be your favorite, you don't get that reaction from the movie audience.

In fact, the [inaudible 00:08:11] cameraman, Terry Costner when George is coming through, he was photographing everybody, there's a photograph of me which was really cool. I've got a picture of George talking to me with Joe Johnson, the art director, and Tom Smith who ran ILM for George. I'm describing that scene. I had put a lot of blue in that shaft and I thought George was gonna say that's no good or whatever and he goes yeah okay that looks good. What are you gonna do here? I go, well I'm just gonna give it a little bit more depth. Okay. That's cool. That's it. Okay next. That's how it was other than I went up to him and hugged him to the consternation of my boss, but I always thought I'm just gonna throw that out there. Again, that's me. That's the human element. Trying to have a connection. How many people out there can say I hugged George Lucas? Okay. I did. I figured I was his employee. I was 25 years old, I think, at that point. I figure what is he gonna do? Fire me? I just figured I'd just hug the guy.

Chris Gray: Did he give you a hug back?

Frank Ordas: No. He stiffened up. It was really weird. He just kind of stiffened up like okay. What's this kid doing? You have to remember I was 25 years old. I was really wild.

Chris Gray: No regrets?

Frank Ordas: Absolutely none. I'd do it again. At that time, we're talking early eighties ILM was still considered, we were at the top of our game, so a lot of movie stars came in there, musicians, to see what we were up to. It's like these are the guys who create special effects. It's cool. I want to see it. I want to see what the Death Star actually looks like. I want to see what the Millennium Falcon model actually looks like. I hear these backgrounds are paintings. I want to see one of these paintings. Okay? Some of them were disappointed because we're painting for the camera. Probably my favorite [inaudible 00:09:55] story I think was meeting Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson came by with his little monkey and at that time I guess he was getting a nose job because he had that little white mask over.

Scotty Sando: You say it like it's just common. He just came in with his monkey.

Frank Ordas: Yeah. He came in with his monkey. He was being led around. He was with one of my idols which was Quincy Jones because I was into jazz and Walking in Space was one of my favorite albums. He'd come up to us. He goes oh. I just started to talk like him. I'm sorry. Sorry Michael. Wherever you are. I didn't mean to imitate you. He says if I could paint like you guys I'd give up singing. Somebody famously said I don't think you would take the hit in money. At that time working on Captain Eel and I remember seeing him at a party. We had a party over at Skywalker and at that time I was always very bold about walking up to people that I liked. I walked up to Quincy Jones and I said, "You know Quincy I just love your music. I love Walking in Space." He kind of just stopped. He goes, "You know that album?" I goes, "I love that album. Killer Joe." I just rattled off. He goes, "Whoa man that's cool. You want to party with me tonight?" I go, "Yeah." I hung out that evening with Quincy Jones. At that time his wife was Peggy Lipton from the Mod Squad. The daughter she was holding is now that actress that was in The Office.

Chris Gray: That actress is Rashida Jones who plays Karen on The Office.

Frank Ordas: Michael Jackson was kind of in tow, kind of like a little puppy dog. He was just by himself. I tell this story because here's the guy who's on top of the world, just kind of lonely. Literally just holding up the wall and just wanted to be left alone. It was kinda sad and tragic. The real personality for him at that time, like a father figure, was Quincy Jones. He was just going in tow. I didn't speak to Michael other than when I was at ILM because he just put out that vibe that I don't want nobody to talk to me. I just want to be left alone. It was really sad.

Then other people like Robin Williams. I remember meeting him. He was just the nicest guy. Very calm. Then you meet other people and you just go, man they're real idiots. Nicest guy I met was Luke Austin Jr. I worked with him on Enemy Mind. We were talking with him for hours during shoots and just sitting down just talking like you and me. Then other actors had a chip on their shoulder. You really could see people the way they are. No, the Michael Jackson

experience was really telling because obviously his life ended tragically, but to kind of see that first hand ... A lot of these people, like with George when he was working around him, he's a very shy person. Doesn't open up unless it's to somebody he really knows.

I remember when I was working for Indiana Jones, at that time all these video games, like arcade, Spielberg brought two of these to the set. One was this arcade game where it was kind of like a Monte Carlo game. I forgot what the other ... Anyway I was in there playing on that and he was in there playing for the other and we're both in there playing this game. It was one of those funny moments where one of the producers came in and goes okay, "Steven, we gotta shoot. We need you." He goes, "Oh no. I'm at 50,000 right now. I can't quit." We're in there another 30 minutes. I should be working, but I figure okay if he's there, I can be here. He's trying to hit another 50,000. Everybody's waiting for him.

Scotty Sando: Sorry folks. Steven's going for a high score.

Frank Ordas: He was going for a high score. Those were the funny light moments. At the end of the day we're all human right? That's a fun story.

Scotty Sando: That is a fun story.

Chris Gray: That's a great story. How did you end up in Placer County?

Frank Ordas: I wanted a place that was Christian friendly. I wanted a place that was at least where people were open minded to different belief systems. I wanted a place that was a wonderful wholesome environment to raise my two young children. We had homeschooled them for a bit, but we wanted to enter them into the public school system. We had some friends that moved up here and they said, "You need to consider Placer County, especially Auburn." We visited up here and literally put my house up on the market in the Bay Area to move to Auburn. I chose Auburn. Being an artist I can essentially live anywhere as long as there's a FedEx. I just love the beauty of the fact that you can mountain bike. I was a mountain biker. I also like the fact that there was a symphony. There's the arts. There's a radio station. Here in Placer County you guys doing podcasts. In fact, I recently did a project for a Hollywood director who moved into town and I asked him, "Why'd you come to Auburn?" He goes, "Well, first of all, we have horses so we wanted a place that was horse friendly and we wanted a place where I can get to the airport quickly because I have to still direct films in Hollywood, and all of culture is here."

Chris Gray: What makes it a good place to make art?

Frank Ordas: What makes it a good place to make art? A good artist can make art anywhere, but if you have other artists who are talented in their field, who are accomplished in their field, and if you're surrounding by these people, then you

have fellow travelers who also can speak into your life. I feel fortunate that there's some world class artists in this town. I'm always inspired and challenged. I don't feel by any stretch of the imagination that I've arrived. There's so many good people here.

Scotty Sando: How have the people and the landscape of Placer County intersected your life artistically?

Frank Ordas: That's a great question. A lot of it has to do with my faith. What a man produces is essentially what he feels in his heart. I tend to paint people from a wide spectrum of life. People that come into my gallery, not just the successful, but also the people that struggle. I believe the God spark is in everybody and every part of humanity. It's part of my vocation to bring that out in my portrait paintings and in any other type of painting. Also, when I paint landscapes, it's the wonderful creation of God. When I paint, I do have a historical reference in terms of the importance of the arts and how the arts impact the environment, how you impact the world with essentially the message or the messaging that's in your art. What's amazing with art is that it stops time. I'm a little older than you guys. What you end up finding out when you get older, time just really starts racing.

There's part of me goes how do I just hold on to this moment? You can't because you're moving through time and one day you wake up, it's kind of like that Talking Head song, I'm dating myself here, I've got my beautiful wife, I've got my beautiful family, my God how did I get here? With art, you have a record of what you were thinking, what you were feeling. That's what's great about movies. You can go back and you can see how men treated women versus now and vice versa. It's an amazing thing. Arts and books, they give us that. They give us that moment in time. You can look back in the early Star Wars where you can just see really George Lucas, his world view, his corniness because a lot of his humor is very corny and in many ways it's very innocent and he showed that in his movie American Graffiti, you saw that and how in that moment in time ... I remember cruising. You guys probably haven't done any of that, but I remember getting in hot rods. We're talking 1974, '75, getting in my friend's supped up hot rods going down Whittier Boulevard checking out the girls and the action. That was part of our culture. If you see that movie, it's a record in time because that doesn't happen anymore.

Chris Gray: You've talked a little bit about why art is important to you, helping you connect with people and helping people connect in general. I wonder if you have any thoughts on why the arts are important to communities?

Frank Ordas: That's a good question. The arts are a temperature of where that community is at. It's a social thermometer. It's a barometer and gauge of the quality of life for that community. A community that has a symphony, that has like our state theater. I'll use our town. Like a state theater which wants to show movies from the past to in essence, enlighten the people of the community what is done. Here's a little plug, there's gonna be a sci-fi festival at the state theater in

January and I'm gonna be one of the keynote speakers. We're showing some slides of my work at ILM. Stay tuned for that. It gauges how people are involved with the life of their city, that they love it. Anybody that loves their home will naturally want to beautify it with landscaping, with decorations. It's part of the human condition. You want to care of yourself. A community that takes care of itself, takes care of its appearance, clean streets, freshly painted buildings, artwork to be seen, whether they're murals or whether they're sculptures, that shows the healthiness of that community. I think that's why a lot of the communities around here are so healthy because you do have a vibrant sense of self within the public. It's really important for gaging the social thermometer for where people are at. Spiritually as well as physically and mentally.

Chris Gray: You mention landscapes and being inspired by what's around you. What locally in the foothills, maybe the mountains, what are those landscapes that inspire you now?

Frank Ordas: I've done paintings going down to the American River. I've had some amazing experiences meeting people down by the [inaudible 00:20:22] especially by the Mount Quarries Bridge known as No Hands Bridge. I also like traveling up to Tahoe. I go up there once a year, stay at a friend's cabin and I enjoy painting Emerald Bay. In many ways I try to capture a mythic quality, the iconic topography of the land. Almost like a postcard. When you go somewhere, you can forget where you've been, but a postcard essentially gives you a remembrance of that time. When I paint something now, my thing that interests me is painting something that spiritually, physically, and emotionally connects with an experience that other people have had to the land that's particular to here in California or to the Southwest. When I paint scenes around Donner Lake, I will use the bridge. I will use looking down at the lake when I'm painting Emerald Bay. It's to give the people that almost subliminal thought of having been there. That's what it's like when I'm there. I still work very cinematically. George Lucas, the people that I've worked with, still inform how I work now. I like creating, for lack of a better term, establishing shots. Things that inform us of our story, our living cinema.

Chris Gray: I thought it was really cool what he had to say about bringing a cinematic quality to his landscape paintings from Placer County. You can almost see a little ewok poking out from his painting on the No Hands Bridge.

Scotty Sando: How about a Death Star hanging over Lake Tahoe.

Chris Gray: That would be awesome.

Scotty Sando: It certainly is really cool to have world class artists like Frank living in Placer County. It gives us a much deeper sense of culture and appreciation for our community.

Chris Gray: I think Frank said it best, the arts are tremendously important to communities and that's why Placer County is proud to support the arts through partnerships with local organizations like Placer Arts. They put on events throughout the year to help us connect with our local artists and better appreciate the arts. Go to [placerarts.org](http://placerarts.org) and check out their calendar of events and go check out one near you.

Scotty Sando: I certainly am excited to go back and watch Return of the Jedi and look for Frank's work.

Chris Gray: Yeah. Me too. Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of the Place Life. I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sando: I'm Scotty Sando. May the force be with you always.