

# Meet Artist Soyeon Kim

Pairing of text and artwork is important in any picture book, but in *Wild Ideas* they play off each other in an especially rich way. Soyeon Kim is an award-winning artist and illustrator who specializes in work that merges real-world materials and fine sketching and painting techniques to produce three-dimensional pieces. Born in Korea but now living in Toronto, Canada, she is a graduate of the York University visual arts program and the illustrator of Owlkids Books titles *Is This Panama?* and *You Are Stardust*.

The art in *Wild Ideas* is done in the same delicate 3-D diorama style as in *You Are Stardust*, but with some new challenges and techniques. Here, Soyeon talks about the process and thinking behind creating the art for *Wild Ideas*.

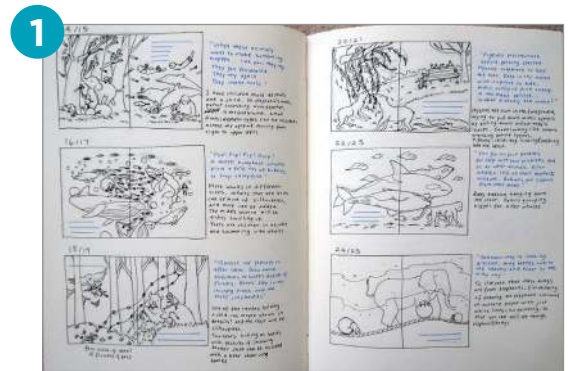
**Q:** Tell us a little bit about your process. How do you move from an initial idea to rough sketches to a final piece of art?

**A:** To start, I read the manuscript and try to picture each page based on my first impression of the text. I discuss the main ideas of the book with the author, editors, and designer, and then start my rough sketches. I begin with thumbnail sketches (image 1): small, quick sketches of each page with notes. After that, I do slightly larger sketches with pen and sometimes with some colors (image 2).

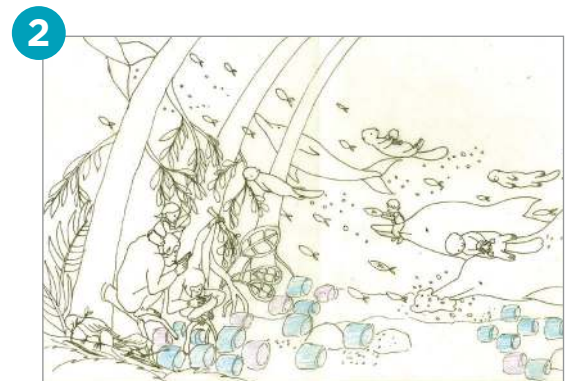
Once the rough sketches are approved, I start building the diorama structure with wood, glue, and nails (image 3). Canvas fabric is stretched and stapled on the bottom of the diorama. On the top, I use light screen fabric, which allows more light to shine through so we can experiment with light and shadow during our photography session.

Each spread in the book is a photograph of part of a larger diorama. Once the dioramas are all built, I map out each spread with strings so that I know what portion of the diorama will be for each page (image 4). Based on my roughs, I start drawing, inking, and painting, making each piece separately. Then I place them together with glue and string.

As for the background, I use special textured Japanese papers. For some pieces, like figures and animals, I use small pieces of tape to hold them in place temporarily for the photo shoot, so it's easy to move or place them differently to work with the text. After the photo shoot, I get to place everything permanently, including the background.



First thumbnail sketches



Rough sketch

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Diorama frames with fabric stretched on top, canvas stretched on the bottom, sanded and painted



Strings work as a guide for book pages

**Q: How long does creating one diorama usually take?**

**A:** It is difficult to tell exactly how long it takes, because the process includes everything from initial thumbnail sketches to rough sketches, art making, and some final changes. When you only consider creating artwork for the diorama and putting it all together with glue and string (so, without rough sketches or final changes), it usually takes about a week or two per diorama. But it really depends on the size and content of each diorama. Sometimes I get stuck with some drawings or paintings, and it can take longer.

**Q: Did you learn anything from creating the art for *You Are Stardust* that made you approach things differently this time?**

**A:** One of the biggest lessons I learned was leaving enough room for the text and book elements in general. When the book is made, each page needs room around the edges, and there shouldn't be anything important in the middle of the page, where the spine falls (known as the gutter). In both of these places, images can get lost or cut off during the printing process. For *Wild Ideas*, we decided to use thinner wooden frames for the dioramas and sometimes hid or disguised the frames with paper or rocks to extend the image and create more space. I also sanded and painted in lighter colors to reflect more light onto the artwork.

**Q: How much direction did you have when creating the dioramas? How much was left up to your own imagination?**

**A:** This is a tricky question to answer. I'd have to say that it was about half and half. There were directions on what kinds of animals had to appear on each spread and specific actions that they needed to be doing. These were important directions, because certain actions were to show the animals' creative way of problem solving. My imagination came into play when filling in what the children were doing or how they would interact with the scene, and what kind of environment the animals and children were in.

**Q: Careful readers will be able to identify some of the materials you used to create the book's art: paper, fishing twine, felt, wire, hot glue, and so on. What materials might we not expect or notice you used?**

**A:** Did you notice the road for the squirrel scene is made of clay? And the silhouettes of jungle plants in the gibbon scene are held up with wire. I used beads in several scenes — for example, to create a watery atmosphere for the humpback whales. For the dung beetles spread, I mixed silver sparkles with Mod Podge to illustrate the Milky Way.

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**Q: *Wild Ideas* has a more down-to-earth, urban feel than *You Are Stardust* — we see sidewalks and skyscrapers, as well as oceans, forests, and constellations. What new challenges did this present for the artwork?**

**A:** It was tricky to create environments that are realistic and relatable and which, at the same time, have a little bit of whimsy and magic to them. The scene with chimpanzees and sea otters together is a good example of how I had to create a new make-believe environment. In the real world, chimpanzees inhabit the jungle, while sea otters live in the ocean. In the art for *Wild Ideas*, the jungle merges with the ocean world where dolphins and sea otters swim.

**Q: What is the most fun part of creating artwork for children's books?**

**A:** The most fun aspect for me is knowing I am creating three-dimensional worlds that children can imagine themselves being part of. Anyone who reads and explores *Wild Ideas* can inhabit the worlds I create: cities, oceans, forests, or even outer space.

**Q: What is the most difficult or trying part of the process?**

**A:** Sometimes I want to put too many things inside one diorama! While making the pieces and artwork, it's easy to get carried away and forget how many things I've made. I want to fit them all in! For this book, at times I had to stop myself or take out some drawings or paintings to create more room.

It's also different to make artwork for a book, rather than solely for art itself. For the book, since the three-dimensional diorama is being photographed and printed on a flat surface, different kinds and amounts of pieces need to be placed to create room for text and allow for better composition.

**Q: Which wild idea from the book do you find especially awesome or inspiring?**

**A:** I'd have to say that the humpback whales' idea to blow fine nets of bubbles to trap fish is especially great. The whales are so smart. In fact, this was one of my favorite spreads from the book. I couldn't wait to make the artwork. Imagine these giant, textured humpback whales creating tons of beautiful bubbles to capture a shiny school of fish. Isn't it a spectacular scene?

**Q: As an artist, how do you relate to the idea of creative problem solving? Why is it important for young people to dream up innovative solutions?**

**A:** I think creating art itself is a form of creative problem solving. I always wonder how I'm going to craft a scene. I ask myself: is everything going to be inked and painted? How can I capture a humpback whale's texture with paint? Are there ways to illustrate bubbles other than just cutting paper into circles? I believe the entire process of creating art requires creative problem solving. I also think that it's important for young people to dream up innovative solutions and think outside the box. Sometimes this kind of thinking can help others, or inspire those around us to be creative and imaginative.

Visit Soyeon's website: [KimSoyeonArt.com](http://KimSoyeonArt.com)

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