



# A FANTASTIC VOYAGE: BEHIND INFECTED MUSHROOM'S PSYCHEDELIC NEW SHOW

BY: **KC IFEANYI**

Hollywood's historic venue the Avalon hosted the band Infected Mushroom's first unveiling of its new stage production--a trippy tour de force of audio and visual that incorporates the latest in 3-D mapping technology.

When Vello Virkhaus of L.A.-based visual arts studio V Squared Labs signed on to create a show for the psychedelic trance duo Infected Mushroom, the concept of 3-D mapping a visual journey onto two giant spheres in which the band was expected to play naturally elicited lighthearted, ribald banter. "We joked and said, 'Yeah, we're gonna make you two big balls!'" recalls Virkhaus, CEO and director at V Squared Labs, which has created live music experiences with artists from Coldplay to Amon Tobin. "But now it's like, fuck! This show is far more complicated than our original meeting."

In conjunction with the release of its eighth full-length album *Army of Mushrooms*, Infected Mushroom (Amit "Duvdev" Duvdevani and Erez Eisen) unveiled a new live show May 12 in L.A. The band enlisted Virkhaus and his team, as well as Heather Shaw of design studio Vita Motus, to construct a new stage production that, in many ways, pushes the concert-going experience to intensely sensory levels and that has been a seven-plus-month challenge of coordinating each element of a multi-layered show--a show that does indeed start with those big, and purposefully fragmented, balls.

"From the beginning of the process, the guys told me they wanted to be inside of spheres, so I knew we were going to be projection mapping," says Shaw, production designer of Vita Motus. "But the challenge was how to make it 3-dimensional so that you could tell we were projecting off the object--a sphere without any ridges or angles lies pretty flat."

So Shaw took to deconstructing the sphere into puzzle-like pieces, building 3-D replicas with CAD software. Once the designs were finalized and sent to Virkhaus to start mapping the accompanying media, the physical elements came together as the steel framed pods spanning about 13 feet in diameter and made out of relatively lightweight composite materials for easy touring capabilities. And as far as the structural components present in Infected Mushroom's show, two big broken balls is all one can, and should, expect.

"The concept usually with something like this is that you make a sculpture that's a blank canvas and that can constantly be changed and turned into anything that you want it to be," says Shaw. "So sometimes a little bit less is more."

If the "less" are the pods, then the "more" is most certainly the 3-D and lighting effects from Virkhaus and his crew.

Dreaming up what will be the show's 90-minute abstract odyssey of sight and sound began with creative powwows to pull together a cohesive, if not psychedelic, show. To capture the essence of style befitting an Infected Mushroom concert experience, Virkhaus created "mood boards" consisting of hundreds of images varying in content, color, and texture that could possibly be integrated in the show. "I was looking all over the Internet at biology websites, Wikipedia, chicken larva, *The Matrix*, underwater photography, surgery on tumors, all kinds of weird stuff," says Virkhaus. Though the samples pulled may seem like an amalgam of disparate oddities, Virkhaus assures the final product is a lucid narrative from start to finish. Without revealing too much of what the show has in store, the following keywords should provide a rough sketch of what those aforementioned mood boards congealed into: birth, death, space, aliens, sea snake monsters, mushroom forests, and planetary civil war.



"It's an interesting progression," Virkhaus notes. "The CG animation for this was brutal because we did more than 60 minutes at 2K resolution." Mapping their collaborative vision had the inherent challenge of working with spherical objects, but even the solution to fragment the pods wasn't necessarily a cure-all. "Because the pieces are attached with a Velcro of sorts, they're in a slightly different place every time, so we actually have to go to each individual section for each calibration and slightly rotate and shift them around the central axis of the sculpture," says Virkhaus.

Challenges in animation and mapping aside, what Virkhaus believes to be the true crown jewel of the show is working in a synchronized light show--a feat which may sound typical for a concert, but is noteworthy in the effort to balance out an experience that's dominated with distinct and discrete visuals. "To put lighting in our system and bring that to life was something we didn't have any comparison to--I've only done lighting at one other event in Dubai and it was nothing like what we've done now," he says. "It was really an experimental push, but one that I'm so happy with the depth of the effect that we achieved."

Virkhaus and Shaw are no strangers to high-profile projects--constructing stages for *American Idol* among other notable credentials--but both agree that working on Infected Mushroom's stage production was a unique endeavor that easily provides a glimpse into the future of how far a concert's limitations can and will be pushed.

"We love making these show experiences, and I think we're just going further and further into the most immersive presentations possible using all the mediums available," says Virkhaus. "Every time we do one of these productions we're learning and developing new software and new techniques along the way to keep advancing what we're doing--continuing