

**Q.** How do you capture that like, unhinged look that Rocky has? I know it's the too wide grin, the too big eyes, but like, I'm not good enough at art to tell what specific things MAKE the look. Can you provide insight?

**A.** Good question! There are multiple elements of an expression that can combine to read this way. There's no strictly formulaic knowledge I have for this or other expressions, though. I've learned what I know mostly from observation - mirrors and character actors make good reference - and much of the time, I feel my way toward what I intend with a lot of drawing, redrawing and adjusting.

Nevertheless, here's my attempt to dissect how it works:

## It's Mostly the Eyes

In relaxed human expressions, eyelids obscure the upper and lower parts of the iris.



Scleral show (or Sanpaku) - when the whites of the eye surrounding the iris are visible - is a visual cue we perhaps understand on some primordial level. Even without the context of the rest of the face, the upper sclera warns of a big emotion, like fright or fury.

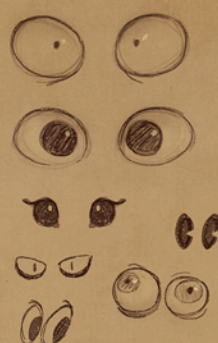


There's also something inherently predatory about a pinpoint pupil, like something peering at you with a little too much interest.



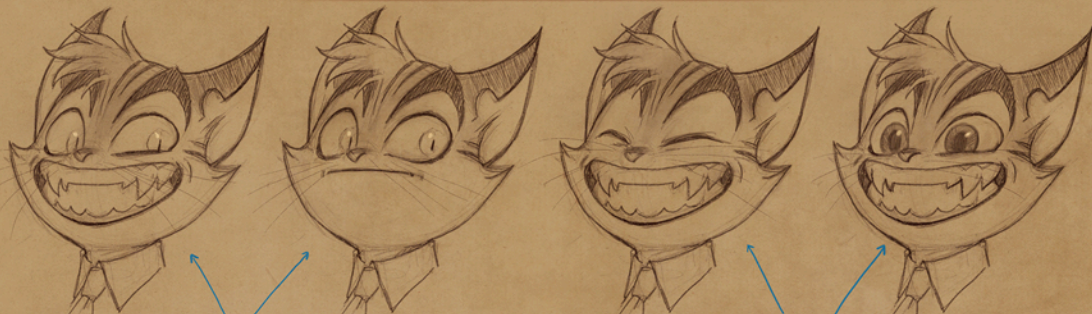
Deer might kill roughly as many people as tigers, but let's nevermind that. They look gentle with their big, dark herbivore eyes.

The point is, we react strongly to eyeball signals - messing with pupil size in distilled, cartoon form is quite powerful.



Some common cartoon approaches to eyes. The more anodyne looks have bigger, darker pupils relative to the vaguely discomfiting ones.

## For Example...

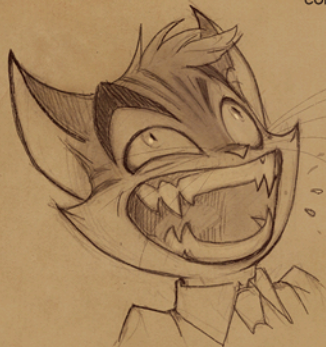


You can see no matter the lower half of the face, this still has a similar intensity.

Eliminating the more extreme scleral show doesn't quite "normalize" the look, but it does a lot to defuse it.

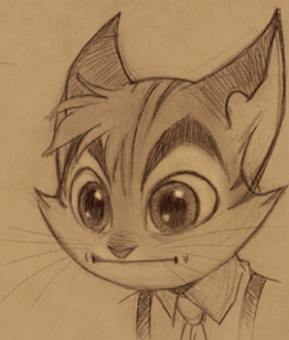
## Something's Off

There are an array of other visual indicators that tend to communicate a certain strangeness in expression too. Here are a few:



Asymmetries in eye shape and pupil focus in a, let's say, energetic context look scattered and unpredictable.

But the spittle really sells it.



Seeing moon ghosts? About to have a freak-out? Narrowed pupils don't quite have a monopoly on weird.



When the eyes fail to link up with the mouth in some expressions (usually by way of the cheeks), the effect is a sort of uncanny flatness or insincerity.

That's more in Mordecai's wheelhouse, though, so...

## Emphatic...Emphasis

Closely clustered, proportionally large features are cartoon basics, and are definitely also at play here. Part of the reason it's common is because it amplifies expression.

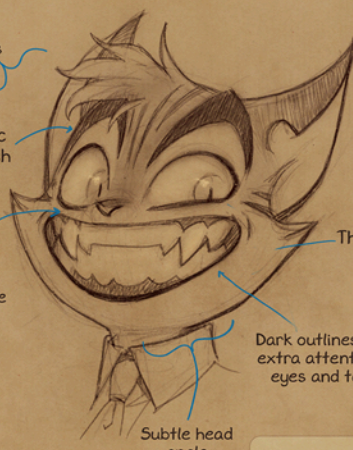


Expression involves the whole face

With features spaced out, there's less interplay between them. It still looks upsetting, just in a different way... that inflicts psychic damage. (Sorry.)

Dramatic brow arch

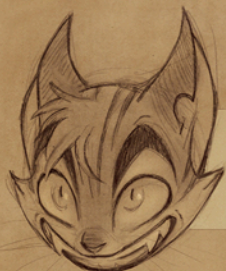
Implied nostril flare



The "smile"

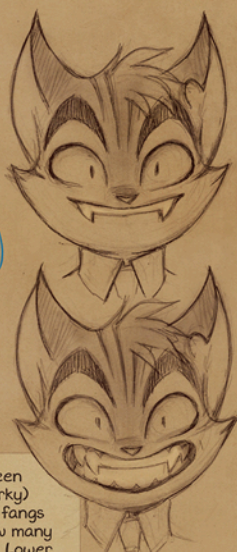
Dark outlines draw extra attention to eyes and teeth

Subtle head angle



Tilting the head back or forward dials up the perceived aggression in a wide-eyed stare.

The difference between an affable (albeit sharky) smile and bearing one's fangs is mostly a matter of how many teeth you put on display. Lower chompers don't typically make this much of an appearance.



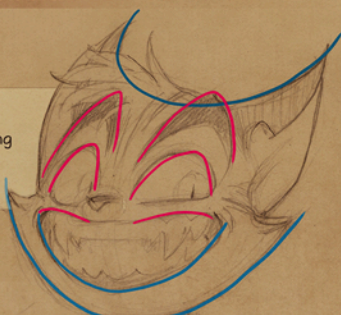
## Shape Language and Repetition

Pick a motif for the baby's room.



Generally we interpret spiky, sharp things as threatening, and soft, round things as safe (although if you've ever tried to hold onto an ornery bunny, you know better.)

Now, surround those threatening eyeballs with pointy bits.



The repeating arches and crescents create a sort of emphasis too, like putting things in (((too many parentheses)))

## Exterior Context

There are factors outside a character's expression that can contribute to an unsettling look as well. Heck, environment alone can turn a mundane look into something ominous.

This is a hugely broad topic, though, so I'll just suggest looking into how filmmakers, illustrators, cartoonists and other visual artists - especially those who practice in horror - create an environmental sense of dread and unease.



There's the face, but there's also the lighting, contrast levels, framing, camera angle, and perspective to play with.

