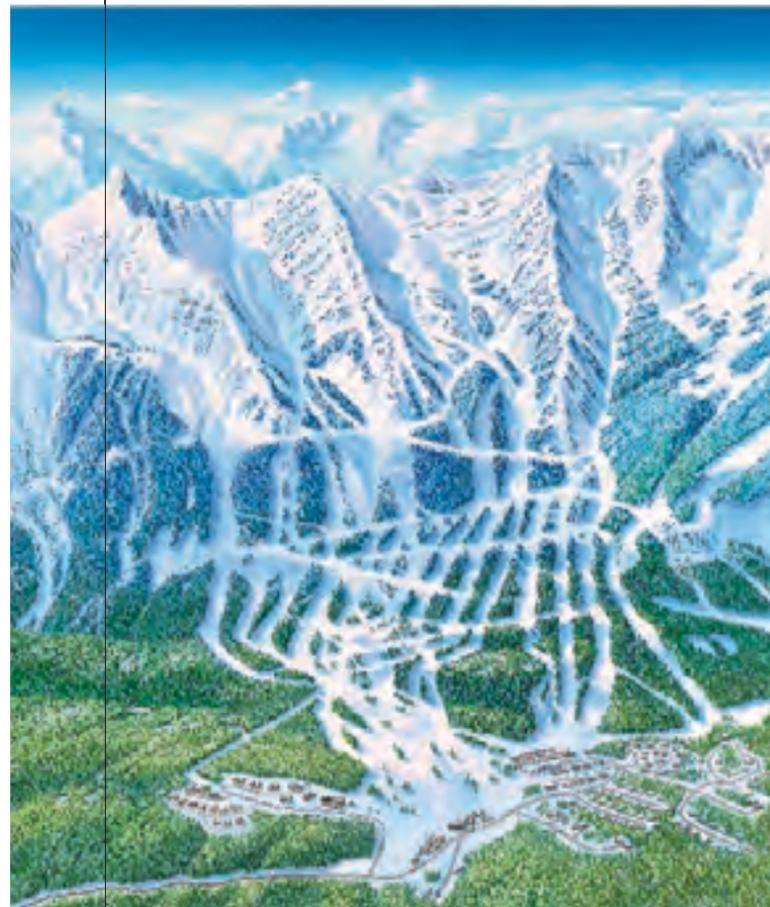


Blue Squares, Black Diamonds

You've likely skied a hill that artist James Niehues has painstakingly illustrated. *KMC* designer Chris Rowat uncovers his creative process, and asks "Is it art?"

By Chris Rowat



I DISCOVERED JAMES NIEHUES while designing a trail map for a Kootenay ski resort. I am a graphic designer, and part of designing a ski map involves adding the navigational graphics onto the painting of the mountain: ski runs, chairlifts, mid-mountain restaurants, even washrooms. As I worked, I would occasionally hide the graphics so I could study the base painting without clutter. It was a remarkable thing. The painting depicted a pristine mountain shining with dream-like perfection; the sun was shining, there was fresh powder on the slopes, the sky was blue, the forest lush. Even the peaks glowed pink with the early morning sunrise. It was utopia.

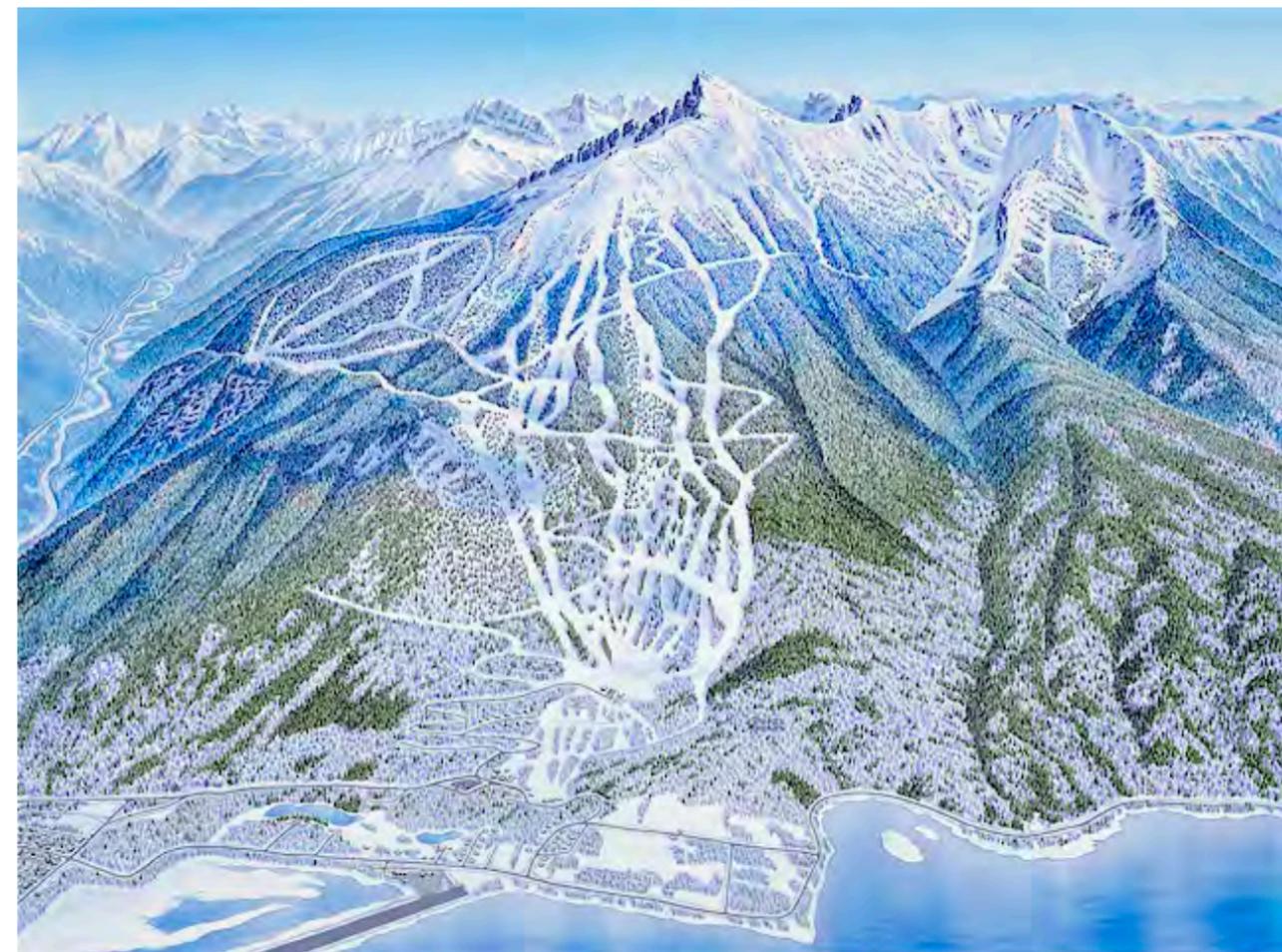
Back to work. Turn on the map graphics. Add some green circles, blue squares, some black diamonds. Send it to the client for review. I've gotten some of the runs confused; this is black, that's a cat-track, those trails don't connect. As the cacophony of icons approaches black-hole-like density, I can't help but think I'm ruining this work of art. But is it art?

It's easy to argue it's not because of its commercial application. It's a ski map. It tells you where to go. It's an illustration — a contrived abstraction — distorted to show all sides of a mountain that can't possibly be seen in one view. Some would argue it's too fake looking, or it's too perfect. Where is the beetle kill? Or the burn from last summer? What's with the cheesy sunset? The mountain isn't that steep! And they would be right. It is an illustration, and its primary purpose is to explain a complex environment. And it does that very well.

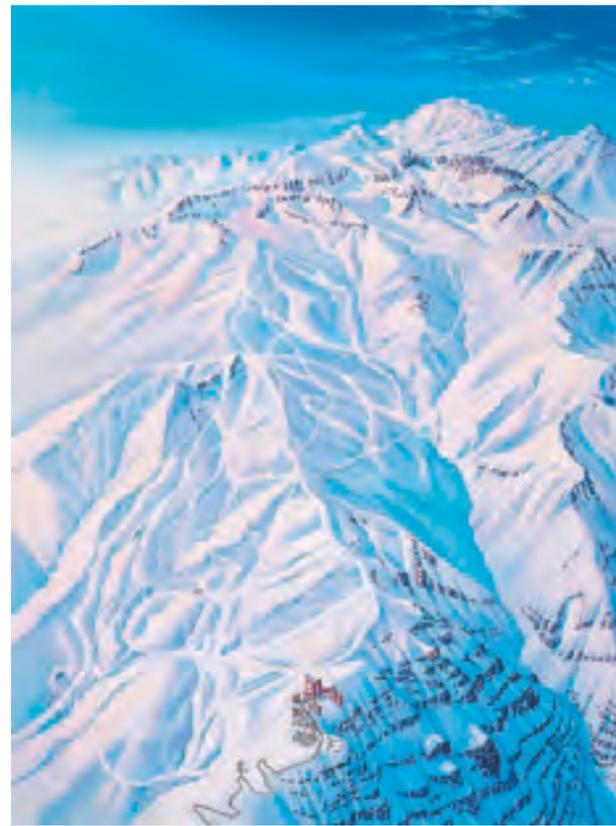
I turn off the graphics again. I want to look at the naked mountain. I discover a stylized signature in the bottom corner, tucked among the trees: James Niehues. Who is this man, this Picasso of powder, this Monet of mountains? I Google him and find his website. I have found the source. Like the headwaters of



Clockwise from top left: Red Mountain Resort; Kicking Horse Resort; Aspen Highlands, Colorado; Revelstoke Resort, B.C.; Snowbird, Utah.



“YES, EVERY TREE IS PAINTED BY HAND”
— JAMES NIEHUES



Clockwise from top left: Crested Butte, Colorado; Valle Nevado, Chile; Whakapapa, New Zealand; Panorama, BC; Blue Mountain, Ontario; Crystal Mountain, Washington;



the Ganges, here is the home of the ski-map god. I click through endless galleries of paintings, and I'm on a veritable trip around the world: Portillo, Chile. Whakapapa, New Zealand. Australia, Japan, and Korea. There's Stowe, Vermont. Alta, Big Sky, Jackson Hole, Mammoth, Mt. Baker, Taos, Telluride and Vail. And closer to home are Whistler and Blackcomb, Lake Louise, Kicking Horse, Panorama, Revelstoke, Sun Peaks, and Red Mountain. He's done them all. How does someone become a ski-map god? I picked up my special white phone and called Mr. Niehues to find out.

James Niehues has worn numerous hats over the years: army guy, offset pressman, ad layout artist, model maker for automobile accident trials and partner in his own advertising company. He eventually sold his company and moved to Denver, Colorado. There he met Bill Brown, a veteran map artist who gave Niehues his first job, a trail map inset for Winter Park, Colorado. Early trail map projects for Vail and Jackson Hole have led to over 100 resort maps around the world. And the job has its perks. For most gigs, he visits the resort, where he rents a plane and flies around for a few hours taking pictures. He starts about 1,200 metres above the summit to get the big overviews, then works his way down to capture details lower on the mountain. Along with photography, Niehues gathers old trail maps, site maps, and photos of buildings and structures.

Back in the studio, Niehues makes some quick sketches of the views he thinks will work best. After a few faxes with the client, he'll make a full-size 30x40 sketch using pencil on vellum. Some maps require a bit of twisting of the mountain to make sure all the runs are visible. This has to be done carefully to ensure all distances and relationships remain realistic. When the big sketch is revised or approved, the painting begins. Some clients let him make all the decisions, while others are picky. According to Niehues, none have ever allowed him to add storm clouds: "For some reason all the marketing managers want a sunny day," he notes. He uses air-brush to paint the sky, clouds and snow, but after that it's all brush. "Yes, every tree is painted by hand," says Niehues. Once every last snowflake is added to every last tree, and Niehues has ordered some stronger eyeglasses, the painting is photographed, scanned and shipped on CD to the client.

There is a strange effect when you view his paintings together in one place. The world appears to be one massive ski resort — an endless expanse of snow, trees, rock and sky magically combined in infinite variety. And all with the same telltale spaghetti maze of gladed runs.

I'm not a globe-trotting resort skier, but I would argue these paintings — when freed from their blue-collar day jobs — strike a chord in the heart of every skier. Without their navigational overburden, they become the stuff of dreams. Perfect skies; cold, fresh powder; no crowds. You can't help but imagine perfect lines through steep trees or alpine bowls. You escape to faraway places, to exotic alpine resorts without a track in sight. You spot the steep chutes and dream of first descents. I propose it is this capacity to fire the imagination that moves his work into the realm of art. Maybe he is a fringe member, but like the cult-classics section at the video store, he deserves his own special place on the wall of mountain art. When presented in a different context, his paintings become more than commercial illustrations. They become a commentary on the modern ski experience.

Chris Rowat is KMC's art director and designer.

