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The Independents

There is really no definition for “independent” or “experimental” animation except that it is self-published, often by one artist, and it stretches formal conventions. These umbrellas cover a broad spectrum of practice, from entrepreneurs in the popular comic idiom, to makers of visual music and conceptual installations, to obsessive creators of hermetic alternative universes. Rarely self-sustaining, independent animation is less a discipline or profession; it’s more like a calling.

OUTSIDE ANIMATION

“Experimental animation” may apply to cartooning, abstraction or virtually any innovative approach to the formal elements of film. Some who do it identify themselves as avant-garde filmmakers rather than animators. Lewis Klahr’s¹ collage films rip images from a dazzling array of found media (advertising, comics, porno), to recompose them into compelling, spiky narratives with unconscious, sexual undertones. The animation is abrupt, indelicate, compared to, say, Larry Jordan’s.² There is little attempt to create articulated characters but subjective personae abound, and the jolting re-inventions are riveting. Klahr’s 1993 *Pharaoh’s Belt* grapples with the dream of American consumer culture. Janie Geiser’s³ work is more multilayered, using puppets, silhouettes and antique graphics, with her signature drawings of lonely women searching through deep, enigmatic dream space. The animation is often just glimpsed peripherally through

1 New York, NY, 1956.

2 Denver, CO, 1934.

3 Baton Rouge, LA, 1957.

superimpositions and soft-focused scirms, as in *Ghost Algebra* (2009). Stan Brakhage⁴ spent his last years returning to his early direct strategies by painting and scratching on film. Stephanie Maxwell and Jennifer Reeves continue this practice while adding sophisticated variations with digital compositing. Phil Solomon appropriates and recomposes existing footage such as computer-animated games to create a meditative counter-narrative: a moody dreamscape of meta-animation (*Last Days in a Lonely Place*, 2008)

DURATION: LONG FORM

Given its compression and intensity, is there an essential length for an animated film? The ideal standard of seven minutes arose in the days of studio hegemony and still has a hold on our expectations. As with any long performance, pacing is everything. Independent animators may look to historical precedents for feature-length productions, including Lotte Reiniger, Jan Lenica and, more recently, Bill Plympton. Another precursor is R. O. Blechman's⁵ 1984 *The Soldier's Tale*, the one hour PBS special based on the Stravinsky opera. Blechman's signature Everyman comes to life amid the hopes and delusions of post WWI modernity, including forays into medieval castles, advertising and conspicuous consumption. The wiggly-lined Blechman character introduced a spirit of introspective modesty, tinged with modern angst, whether acting as a worried stomach in a famous TV commercial, or as a perplexed American voter in a recent Web cartoon. Through his legendary studio, Inktank, Blechman carried on a tradition set by the Hubleys, and advanced animation by perfecting a minimal approach to design, which

⁴ Stan Brakhage (Kansas City, 14 January 1933 – Victoria, BC, Canada, 9 March 2003) was the most important American vanguard film artist of the XX Century. Beginning during a period of artistic ferment that included Maya Deren and John Cage, he created an unsurpassed body of work including *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), the *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), *Text of Light* (1974), and theoretical writing (e.g. *Metaphors on Vision*, 1963), all based on the poetics of personal vision. Of interest to animators is Brakhage's artistic approach to the material support of film through burning, scratching (*Chinese Series*, 2003), painting (*Chartres Series*, 1994) and appliqué (*Mothlight*, 1963).

⁵ R.O. Blechman (Brooklyn, NY, 1st October 1930), illustrator, writer and director, applied a personal, idiosyncratic touch to *The Soldier's Tale*, collaborating with character animators Tissa David and Ed Smith, and with the unique sensibility of Pop iconoclast Fred Mogubgub (1928-1989). Line-produced by the author.

always looked like a casual sketch brought to life. His work deals with serious themes and classics of high culture with a sly wit and a subtle touch: a sophisticated antidote to what passes today for “adult” animation.

Nina Paley⁶ is a natural cartoonist who can make a flurry of effortless rough gestures snap into a character. She burst out of her syndicated comic strip world by drawing directly on film, then progressed to drawing directly in Flash, which seems custom-ordered to her agile talent. A string of shorts, highlighted by *Fetch* (2001), a bouncy riff on Escher’s spatial conundrums, led to her ambitious feature, *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008). It manages to meld the personal (I got dumped, sob), the mythic (the Indian national epic poem, the Ramayana, as told from the point of view of the jilted wife and mother), and the political (gender politics on a historical scale), with a witty reflexivity (a babble of contemporary Indian voices provides ironic interpretations). Sita (all bosom and hips with Betty Boop mannerisms) sings her bluesy tales of woe sashaying through extravagant Bollywood settings. Cut-out, hinged animation with florid air-brush gradients and Art Deco detail set a high standard for what used to be called stylized or limited character animation. The first person story of “Nina” is told as a generic, unfinished sketch. Various re-tellings of the legend resemble clumsy paintings as if to suggest the primitive burden of national myths. Key musical passages are garnished with astonishing psychedelic effects based on a rotoscoped dancer and pulsating images of popular Hindu iconography to project Sita’s flaming rage. Paley is THE pioneer in the “one-person, one-feature film” field and in her spare time continues to champion the concept of the Creative Commons⁷.

In 2009 Paul and Sandra Fierlinger⁸ released their feature *My Dog Tulip*, based on J.R. Ackerley’s eponymous memoir. From his roots in Czechoslovakia, to Sesame Street, to

⁶ Urbana, IL, 3 May 1968.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_Commons

⁸ Paul Fierlinger: Ashiya, Japan, March 15, 1936; Sandra Fierlinger: November 16, 1953, Westport, CT. We have already met Paul Fierlinger for his Oscar-nominated *It’s So Nice to Have a Wolf around the House* (1979).

sophisticated engagement with inner narrative, Paul's work has been marked by a refinement of his loose drawing style coupled with a canny sense of timing that fill his baggy characters with subtle grace. Sandra's role extends well beyond color and production to include co-writing and co-directing in this "paperless studio" of two. Early adopters of the digital workflow, the Fierlingers made the first autobiographical feature, *Drawn From Memory* (1995), followed by *Animated Still Life With Dogs* (2001) and *A Room Nearby* (2003), all delving into deeply felt personal stories with uncommon sensitivity. The Fierlinger touch is evident in the spare linearity and muted tones of the characters — ordinary folks, caught up in the drama of quotidian lives. Focused throughout on a German Shepherd's excretory and reproductive functions, *My Dog Tulip* would seem an unlikely story for a feature film. But its underlying theme is the stultifying effects of class and family in Pinteresque England, and the transformation of a crabby old bachelor into a more liberated, more humane man. It makes other animated pet stories seem childish by comparison.

Faith Hubley⁹ said she and husband John Hubley vowed to make at least one of their own films every year between commercial jobs and, after his death in 1977, she kept that promise, until her own death in 2001. The work has a consistent, innocent design: watercolors referencing mythology and ritual, organized into cyclic rhythms. Considered together they work as an extended tone poem celebrating universal spiritual and aesthetic values. Emily Hubley¹⁰ often helped produce her mother's last films even while her own short films diverged into a more narrative, intimate, confessional mode, peppered with word play, using collage and abstracted cartooning, as in "Pigeon Within" (2000). Her writing and directing gifts came to the fore with her 2008 feature, "The Toe Tactic," a live action drama about a confused young woman whose nattering inner voices are effectively illustrated by quirky cartoon characters, layered into the frame.

DURATION: TIME AND SPACE

⁹ September 16, 1924-New York, NY, December 7, 2001.

¹⁰ New York, NY, March 24, 1958.

Animation installation, playing continuously or initiated by a viewer, redefines the viewing experience from a passive, sedentary reception to an active, environmentally immersive experience, grazing in real space and unreal time. The father of this practice is Robert Breer¹¹ whose mutoscopes, flipbooks, wall-mounted cards, and randomly creeping “floats” are physical complements to his kinetic films. Throughout his creative life he retained a deep fascination with the still image and its potential for animation. This was most evident in the barrage of single-frames in his 1955 film, *Recreation*, and his radical use of rotoscoping to break down and compress the ephemeral flow of movies into discrete sketches. Later work, like “Bang!” (1985), continues his uniquely witty, discontinuous sense of time to mash-up abstracted doodling and collage. “What Goes Up?” (2003) shows a more introspective artist, poignantly juxtaposing autumnal glimpses of nature, eros, bouncing kites, soaring jets, with a view of life tapering off. Breer’s influence on both esthetics and kinetic art practice has been enormous.

When Paul Glabicki¹² moved from film to animate his densely layered collages digitally in 1991, he expanded his complex vocabulary of tilting/orbiting/rotating planes. He exhibited the animation directly on computer monitors together with paintings and drawings, yet often discovered that his multi-dimensional designs pushed the limits of digital animation beyond its capabilities at the time. (Getting animation out of the computer onto an affordable, high-resolution medium is a relatively recent option for independents.) In “Full Moon” (2001), Glabicki constructs a Newtonian universe of spherical wonders, slyly substituting Acoma pottery, rotating parasols and a silhouetted hand. His last animation installation, “Red Fence,” involving multiple screens in and out of synchronization over its 61 minute duration, was last mounted in Hiroshima (2002), accompanied by a traditional tea ceremony.¹³

¹¹ Detroit, MI, 1926-2011.

¹² January 17, 1951.

¹³ Glabicki has since exhibited only drawings of his work.

A classic of onsite “concrete animation” is Bill Brand’s¹⁴ “Masstransiscope,” installed in 1980 and restored in 2008. It is a linear sequence of brightly-lit panels of abstract/ cartoony images mounted in an abandoned Brooklyn, NY subway station, hidden by a black wall with cut-out slits. As commuters travel past the station, their continuous view is intermittently obstructed to transform the images into a brief vision of playful transformations. In a more technological mode, Eric Dyer¹⁵ has made large zoetropes based on video footage, then re-animated with a video camera aimed through the viewing slots, simultaneously displaying a live feed. His “Copenhagen Cycles,” installed in art spaces such as the 2007 Platform Festival in Portland, was also released as a short film with music by John Adams. “Bellows” (2010) updates the continuous spin-cycle with laser-sculpted figures, animated intermittently with LCD shutter goggles worn by the bedazzled viewer.

Gregory Barsamian’s¹⁶ extraordinary work consists of carefully sculpted objects positioned within a rotating matrix, lit by a synchronized strobe light. The content is typically a surreal transformation minutely crafted in a wide variety of materials: green hands scooping text out of a book to form a lizard, or a tiny brass man running on the teeth of a spinning saw blade. His latest piece, “Artifact” (2010), is a recumbent steel head, 12 feet in diameter, with windows cut all round to view the interior of sinewy, synaptic tangles of random tracery coalescing into transmutations. Barsamian’s main subject is the very process unfolding before our eyes: actual objects, not just images, hurtling through space, arrested momentarily for our astonished delight.

Rose Bond’s¹⁷ early direct animations deal with mythic themes from Celtic and African cultures, made with sensitive attention to texture and rhythm. Now she transforms windows in urban spaces (synagogue, office building, historic hotel) into rear-projection

¹⁴ Rochester, NY, 1949.

¹⁵ Baltimore, MD, November 11, 1971.

¹⁶ Evanston, IL, April 18, 1953.

¹⁷ Victoria, BC, 1948.

screens. Her simple comic strip style animation, effectively silhouetted, often covers ethnic history related to the specific architecture. But “Intra Muros” (2007), also at Platform, was an introspective glimpse into the creative process that was both a mesmerizing nocturnal spectacle (with samples of McLaren and Lye) and a hilarious misadventure involving obsessive, diversionary vacuuming and a squawking chicken.

PERFORMANCE CATHARSIS

Are there regional influences in animation, or is it mere coincidence that Appalachian Pennsylvania has nurtured three animators who share a kind of outsider sensibility: roughly improvised techniques performing dark, operatic, personal tales — a kind of Rust Belt Gothic. Working in a barn in rural Pennsylvania, Brent Green¹⁸ creates wild concoctions of cartoon, object and puppet animation, which playfully disregard professional slickness (dirty cels, flickery, uneven lighting). His films are intricate stories narrated and sung in his dirge-like, quavering voice. They are presented as live performances or, like “Hadacol Christmas” and “Paulina Hollers”(both 2006), installed in gallery spaces projected on and within his sculptures. Green’s most ambitious work is “Gravity was Everywhere Back Then”(2010) a short feature shot in his backyard re-enacting the life and architecture of an eccentric hardware store clerk. Green’s work bears some resemblance to that of Chris Sullivan,¹⁹ whose meandering, wobbly, dark characters (line drawings and cutouts) enact mysterious personal and social traumas, both real and imagined. From “Master of Ceremonies” (1987) to his 2011 feature “Consuming Spirits,” Sullivan has demonstrated an intuitive knack for rendering nightmare narratives of dysfunctional families, laced with moments of mordent wit. Fifteen years in the making, “Spirits” focuses on the interconnected, small town lives of quietly drunken desperation as chronicled by the local paper (The Daily Suggester) and by all-night-advice-radio host, Earl Grey. Martha Colburn’s²⁰ films are bursting with improvised, kinetic energy. Her rock-inflected rhythms drive swarms of marauding figures, animals, soldiers and natives, as in “Triumph of the Wild” (2008), a stinging

¹⁸ Baltimore, MD, 1978.

¹⁹ Pittsburgh, PA, 1960. “Master of Ceremonies,” 1987; “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” 1992.

²⁰ Gettysburg, PA, 1971.

indictment of American militarism, and “Myth Labs” (2008), which juxtaposes our Puritan ethos with the menace of drugs. Colburn embodies an avant-garde insouciance toward craft as she wrangles her cut-outs spontaneously under a Bolex. The full-frontal effect on screen (her films have been displayed on a huge Times Square screen), with or without live music, is electrifying. These artists work in the outsider tradition of weirdness—the animation equivalent of Greil Marcus’s *Invisible Republic*.²¹

After Kathy Rose²² made a self-portrait-as-cartoon, “Pencil Booklings” (1978), she “went live” into dance performance, using projections of animations on and around her body in motion. Adding elements of Butoh-inflected puppetry with video and digital compositing, she has expanded her practice both as installation and multi-layered theater. “She” (2009) is a hypnotically rhythmic arrangement of subtle head and arm gestures into an exotic, ritualistic vision, with music by C.P. Roth.

“Bad animation,” like “bad” drawing, painting or taste, is another way of saying, just wait, this is only a phase. Don Hertzfeldt²³ elevates the stick-figure to the heights of existential despair by writing caustic satire that brilliantly skewers our culture of emotional myopia and miscommunication. From “Billy’s Balloon” (1998), a sadistic parody of the classic “Red Balloon,” to “Rejected,” a series of darkly anarchic proposals to the entertainment industry, the humor is both self-conscious and adolescent, trading on the curious innocence of American optimism and sight gags arising from the extreme minimalism of the design (including brilliant cartooning on crinkled paper). With “Everything Will Be OK”(2006) and “I am So Proud of You” (2008), Hertzfeldt adds a confessional voice of depressed self-deprecation that rivals Woody Allen.

JJ Villard’s “Son of Satan” (2003) contains scenes of pimply-faced, adolescent cruelty rendered in an assortment of grunge styles, on pulpy brown wrapping paper, with

²¹ Holt Paperbacks, 1998. An insightful analysis of Bob Dylan’s seminal “Basement Tapes” filtered through the musicology of legendary animator Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

²² New York, NY, 1951.

²³ Fremont, CA, August 1, 1976.

random notes appended, awkwardly arranged to illustrate a harrowing Charles Bukowski tale. These disorienting esthetic strategies parallel the psychological torture at the film's heart.

DOCUMENTARY

Collisions of truth and artifice can occur either within the same frame/space or as an eclectic montage strategy through time. Paul Vester²⁴ creates disturbing juxtapositions of documentary footage with a *mélange* of graphics to deal with subjective and political states of consciousness. In "Abductees" (1995) peoples' re-telling (often under clinical hypnosis) of their experiences with extraterrestrials is illustrated (often with their collaboration) through animation. The result resembles the nonsensical grammar of dreams, suggesting the ongoing traumas of survivors of severe sexual abuse. "In the Woods" (2008) mixes sound bites from George Bush ("War on Terror," "tax cuts") with a spirited cowboy yodel, then brutally undercuts the blather with vernacular cartooning of stark political realities, continuing the satiric spirit of Stan Vanderbeek.²⁵

Sheila Sofian²⁶ uses audio interviews with victims of domestic violence in "Survivors," (1997) graphically illustrated with minimal line animation to evoke experiences that are harrowing. By including voices of clinical therapists, the film acts as a mental health public service, yet also rises to the level of art. The first-person confidential voice-over also works for Andy and Carolyn London²⁷ in "Back Brace" (2004), a comic memoir of a child's orthopedic ordeal told with collaged cut-out figures, and "Letter to Colleen" (2007) a starkly rotoscoped descent into a teenage sexual twilight zone. The Londons synchronize Harlem street voices in "The Lost Tribes

²⁴ Cambridge, England, December 28, 1941.

²⁵ Vanderbeek (1927-1984), known for his later experiments with computers and innovative film installations, attended Black Mountain College and began animating in New York with irreverent madcap collage cartoons like "Science Friction" (1959), which influenced a generation of independent animators.

²⁶ New York, NY, October 8, 1962.

²⁷ Andy: New York, NY, January 18, 1968; Carolyn, Chicago, IL, November 1, 1972.

of New York”(2010) with characters digitally invented from found objects like suitcases and manhole covers in a clever send-up of the man in the street interview.

John Canemaker’s²⁸ personal films have often been delightful shorthand sketches that pay homage to the history of the American animation studio he has so generously chronicled in his many books.²⁹ His latest film is a notable breakthrough. “The Sun and the Moon, an Imagined Conversation” (winner of the 2005 Oscar) is a half-hour, intensely personal examination of his troubled relationship with his father. It uses photos, home movies, and evocative, symbolic cartoon design: Dad as a stick of dynamite, Mom as a nurturing, protective marsupial. Canemaker’s ambition to humanize his own family’s hidden history, aided by the superb voices of Eli Wallach and John Turturro, ends on a shockingly honest Oedipal note as a cartoon argument concludes with his father’s image being erased.

NEW YORK INDIES

New York City has long been super-saturated with animators of all stripes, mostly transplants, who hustle back and forth from free-lance advertising work, or practically any paying job, to their own independent, personal work. The prolific and entertaining Bill Plympton comes to mind first. Among many others are Candy Kugel who, with creative partner Vincent Cafarelli, has produced many films including “The Ballad of Archie Foley”(1995) and “Command Z” (2005), with witty lyrics and a range of bright, toony styles that often resemble neon signage. Kugel made her first film, “InBetweening America”(1977), based on a New Yorker cover by Saul Steinberg, while working at her first job, inbetweening TV commercials.³⁰ Michael Sporn’s³¹ “Champagne” (1996) and “Mona Mon Amour” (2001), both anchored by the voices of real people telling their own

²⁸ Waverly, NY, 1943.

²⁹ Canemaker’s tenth book is *Two Guys Named Joe: Master Animation Storytellers Joe Grant and Joe Ranft*. Disney Editions, 2010.

³⁰ It was not finally completed until 2001, when the Saul Steinberg Foundation gave its permission for release.

³¹ New York, NY, 1946.

stories, demonstrate this filmmaker's subtle and versatile narrative skills. His numerous sensitive adaptations of classic children's books are themselves classics of animation.

The stop-motion animator PES (Adam Pesapane)³² has developed his trademark style by wrangling unlikely objects into short, spirited struggles of perfectly pulsating timing and candy-coated color. "Roof Sex"(2001) stars two lusty, overstuffed chairs (in broad daylight); "Game Over"(2006) is a cheesy video game and "Spaghetti Western"(2008) demonstrates a cooking lesson with a cornucopia of delicious inedibles. John Dilworth³³, known for his hit series "Courage the Cowardly Dog," has created several absurdist shorts: "The Dirty Bird"(1994), "Mousochist"(2001) and "Life in Transition" (2005), the last a self-portrait rendered in a style reminiscent of Salvadore Dali crossed with Basil Wolverton. More inspired nonsense comes from Alex Budovsky (AKA Aleksey Budovskiy)³⁴, whose music video, "Bathtime in Clerkenwell"(2002) transcends the form as an antic silhouette world of teakettles, assembly lines, militaristic cuckoos (and a bather) becomes a mad clockwork, all bopping and strutting to a relentless toe-tapping beat.

Pat Smith³⁵ brings professional animation chops to his tales of innocent suburban teens undone by comic contrivance. A handshake becomes an anatomical disaster, a sock puppet (Puppet, 2006, an update of the "Sorcerer's Apprentice") drives his maker into masochistic self-destruction, an innocent drink unleashes a ziggurat of multiple personalities. His silent gags spill out as effortlessly as Chaplin's. Smith is also a graffiti-style painter noted for writhing piles of nude cartoon figures which, for all their suggestive posing, retain a clinical innocence. By contrast, Signe Baumane³⁶ has earned a reputation as the dirtiest animator in town, with her outrageous serials, "Five Fucking Fables"(2002) and "Teat Beat of Sex"(2007). The ribald humor derives from her no-

³² May 26, 1974.

³³ New York, NY, February 14, 1963.

³⁴ St. Petersburg, Russia, January 21, 1975.

³⁵ San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 18, 1972.

³⁶ Auce, Latvia, August 7, 1964.

nonsense, cartoon simplicity matched to the nonchalant feminism of her voice-over confessions and instructions. Bauman has a more serious, mysterious side with films about veterinarians, dentists and the need for sex education for teens (“Birth,” 2009). Debra Solomon³⁷ uses her wobbly-lined, nebbishy characters to transform life’s awful emotional storms into hilarious musicals of self-preservation: a wife’s jealousy of her painter-husband’s young models (“Mrs. Matisse,” 1994), a couple’s obsessive quest (“Everyone’s Pregnant,” 1997) and a woman’s search for love and happiness after divorce (“Getting Over Him in 8 Songs or Less,” 2010). Solomon writes lyrics spiced with irony and belts them out as sarcastic bubble gum pop tunes: Connie Francis, with a sneer.

John Schnall’s³⁸ world possesses a uniquely macabre view of life which thankfully has not mellowed over the years: a tasty Thanksgiving turkey witnesses its own demise, an arguing middle-aged couple dismembers themselves into skeletons before retiring, a dreadfully bad comedian “dies” before his non-existent audience (“Dead Comic,” 2007, 7:00). His characters, ghoulish amalgams of German Expressionism and Alfred E. Newman, luridly rendered in a variety of graphic textures, pull the viewer into the retro-vortex of their own private hell, like Poe or Lovecraft on laughing gas.

Jeffrey Scher³⁹ stirs up experiments in perception by melding rotoscoped home-movies and found footage with a plethora of iconic shards. They are interwoven, densely collaged, discontinuously flickering in the manner of Breer, and consistently astonishing. His prodigious output includes “All the Wrong Reasons” (2008) where roughly sketched glimpses of aggression, courtship, sports, and a multitude of gestures, random bits of type and abstracted pastel smears make subliminal impressions somehow coalesce into a single, indelible vision. Often masquerading as animated home-movies or lyrical paeans to nature, they engage the eye and mind without straining to make an overtly polemical point. Another animator with a distinctive style is the prolific illustrator Gary Leib. His

³⁷ Boston, MA, 1956.

³⁸ Rahway, NJ, 1961.

³⁹ Greenwich, CT, 1954.

hilarious comments on the quirky nuttiness of urban life appear as if sketched doodles in a ruled notebook. Both Sher and Leib have developed a new distribution paradigm: their short films regularly appear on the New York Times website as visual Op-Ed pieces.

Lisa Crafts⁴⁰ performs hypnotic collages by compositing digitally captured puppets, drawings and objects. “Flooded Playground” (2005) is an eerie narrative of tormented childhood where even the wallpaper comes to life to harass a lonely Victorian doll. Ruth Peyser⁴¹ uses an expressionist palette to depict a grotesque underbelly of dark emotions where women and children are frequently under attack: a kind of animated Sue Coe. Her work uses hand-painted photos, cut-out drawings, and, most recently, a wide range of digital animation and compositing techniques to mash-up fantasy with documentary realism. “There was a Little Girl” (2010) is a harrowing memoir of childhood abuse that extends her personal journey into art to wider social issues, and it even has a happy ending.

OUT THERE

The American landscape is studded with pockets of animation activity, often centered in college towns. Skip Battaglia⁴² is interested in transforming simple actions through his particular flurry of splintery sequenced drawings. “Second Nature” (2000) transforms a carnival peepshow into an Edenic misfire, while the patterns of water ripples, as in “Crossing The Stream” (2006), expand into an ecstatic vision of nature. Suzan Pitt’s⁴³ “Joy Street” (1995) illustrates a woman’s growing depression, suicidal fantasies and exotic redemption in a rain forest. Even more enigmatic is “El Doctor” (2006), set in a Mexican town brimming with cartoonish hospital horror, mutilation, uncontrollable mutant birth, alcoholism, and rainy death. Her most recent film, “Visitation”(2011), a nightmare

⁴⁰ Massachusetts, 1953.

⁴¹ Sydney, Australia, July 23,1954.

⁴² Buffalo, NY, August 14,1948.

⁴³ Kansas City, MO,1943.

in the mode of Goya's *Caprichos*, introduces a black-hatted father figure amidst others in her cabinet of horror. Pitt retains a mainline access to extravagant, subconscious material and the painterly chutzpah to render it into a garish, quixotic vision. In a similar vein is the monochrome collage film, "Phantom Canyon" (2006), by Stacey Steers,⁴⁴ which deploys Muybridge figures to mingle with engravings of beds, bats, beetles, fish and quivering abstract textures to suggest the risky and lovely aspects of an erotic life.

David Ehrlich,⁴⁵ isolated in rural Vermont yet truly international through his ASIFA collaborations, continues to produce exciting work on his own terms. His hard-edged, systematic, linear abstractions, radiate limpid chromatic textures and follow cyclic, natural rhythms. The hand-made design, at times resembling Klee in color and form, can be read as a defiant rebuke of digital animation. Ehrlich's design world suggests an astringent dichotomy as right angles, perfectly straight lines and folding spaces compete with undulating arcs and curves. A new spirit of improvisation emerges in "Etude" (1994): a flamboyant spectacle of smeared clay, swirling and pulsating between flat and sculpted form, perfectly complemented by Tom Farrell's eclectic music. Ehrlich recently returned to his roots in performance art by accompanying the swirling abstractions of "Posnanie" (2009), playing his compositions on toy piano.

Karen Aqua's⁴⁶ films blend abstract forms with stylized figures, caught up in the spunky rhythms of dance and gesture. The design often weaves primitive symbolism with an angular, contemporary inflection, evoking specific places and cultures (Spain in *Andaluz*, 2004, co-directed with Joanna Priestly, or the American Southwest, *Ground Zero/Sacred Ground*, 1997). She created a body of lively, exquisitely chromatic animation over 35 years. Her last films imbue a more complex graphic mix with a profound depth of personal feeling. *Twist of Fate* (2009) uses clinical x-rays, self-images, swarms of pharmaceuticals, and biomorphic shapes to evoke an inner landscape, to stare directly at

⁴⁴ Denver, CO, 1954.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth, NJ, October 14, 1941.

⁴⁶ Wilkes-Barre, PA, February 2, 1954-2011.

her own mortality. But this meditation on disease manages to emerge, in lively Aqua form, aided by the music of Ken Field, as a buoyant, hopeful testament to life.

Deanna Morse's eclectic films freely try out all techniques (drawing, collage, CGI) as a chef might concoct a dish with local ingredients. She is at her best with deceptively simple work like *Sandpaintings* (1992), a whimsical meditation on the transformative nature of symbols, mixing a real infant's innocent face with shadowy flipbooks of hands and the granular texture of sand. Lorelei Pepi followed her eerily mystical debut film, *Grace* (1998), with dual pursuits: animation history and physical, concrete animation (e.g. performing phenakistoscope motion with strobe lights). In *Dem Bones Wiggle* (2005) a skeleton dance is replicated as a primitive, pixillated trickfilm, while her latest project "Happy and Gay" ambitiously pays homage to the rollicking spirit and style of the 1930s Fleischer "Talkartoons" as fun-loving party animals boldly strut their sexual preferences in a brash send-up of the strict moral codes of our cartoon past.

Amy Kravitz⁴⁷ learned animation as a child in Yvonne Anderson's legendary Yellow Ball Workshop in suburban Boston. Emphasizing direct processes, neo-primitive/intuitive design and deep emotional content, the essential Anderson principles continue through Kravitz's own work, her curriculum at RISD and even, by a stretch, to the work of her husband, Steve Subotnick.⁴⁸ Both animators set up short, dense, turbulent enigmas with a suggestive quote or title, and follow through with an intense parable-like experience. Kravitz's "Roost" (1998) creates a mad scramble of charcoal gestures to suggest birds' manic behavior, while Subotnick cooks up a stew of bristling calligraphy in "Devil's Book" (1992) and shows a wicked wit with "Hairyman" (1994) a delightful fairytale cartoon puzzle featuring a tea-sipping, pipe-smoking grandma. "Glass Crow" (2004) employs collaged materials (photos, leaves) with scattershot glimpses of maps, men and arms, to suggest the turmoil of warfare.

⁴⁷ Wilmington, DE, March 6, 1956.

⁴⁸ San Francisco, CA, October 21, 1956.

Initiated by the Hubleys' in their seminal work in the 1960s, the use of a conversational, non-professional voice-over, for both spontaneous documentary and contrived fantasy, became, by the 1970s, an important way of juxtaposing the flow of familiar, narrative sound with oblique, abstract visuals. In Frank and Caroline Mouris's⁴⁹ 1973 masterpiece, "Frank Film," his voice correctly predicts winning an Oscar, but then sarcastically wonders about the next film. "Frankly Caroline" (1998) finally fulfills that promise in spades. Amid Caroline's repeated attempts to tell her story, punctuated by Frank's punning intrusions, a kind of contrapuntal couples' therapy emerges to drive the Mouris genius for buoyant collage invention. The graphic constructions have become leaner, cleaner, more clever, juggling Constructivist typography, symmetrical crosswords, architectural facades and cute pussy cats in a wink of the mind's eye. The intimate, confessional voice of Laura Heit underlies the poignant love story, "Look For Me" (2005). Wondering what she would do if she were invisible, the wistfully uninflected character, designed (one might say disguised) in cut-out flatness against an equally bland cityscape, slips from one mischievous encounter to another, oblivious to her desperately searching boyfriend.

Newcomer Jodie Mack⁵⁰ combines two virtuosic talents: musical wit and a playful approach to the possibilities of unlikely materials in free-form, torn-edge, spontaneous collage. She makes simple, hand-made experiments, using optically-printed images and woven patterns, which hover between conceptual performance art and fun-loving, rough and tumble 16mm filmmaking. Much of her output has been silent studies of fabric patterns, often accompanied by her singing in performance. "Yard Work is Hard Work" (2008) at 28 minutes, is a delirious collage jumble (a left-handed "Frank Film"), a musical (with tunes she writes and sings), and a stinging satire on American media and materialism.

DIGITAL PULP

⁴⁹ Frank: Key West, FL, 1944; Caroline: Zurich, Switzerland, November, 19, 1945.

⁵⁰ London, 1983

Over the past two decades the computer has become embedded in the animation workflow. The gains (speed, ease, exponential expansion of design and movement complexity) and the losses (fetishized technology, alienation from real material and hand-craft) continue to affect many animators. Flip Johnson's⁵¹ magnificent "Pulp" (1990) is a deep plunge into the physical sensuality of the printed page and the rich medium of paper, including its bristling arboreal origin, with brilliant music by Caleb Sampson.⁵² Johnson's prescient window on the waning of the age of print, may also seem an elegy for animation composed of marks and smears on paper. But, make no mistake: it is foolish to call drawing by hand a "traditional" practice, whether shot on film or scanned into a digital environment.

CGI methodology, now pervasive in the entertainment industry (Pixar, Dreamworks, et al.), is also used effectively by many independents who have mastered Maya and other tools. James Duesing⁵³, is an early adopter, whose over-the-top, chattering characters might be the next generation of Sally Cruikshank's surreal party-animals. His dysfunctional band of pals ooze with catty put-downs, but the writing is infused with seriously clever satirical jabs at our cultural values and self-delusions, particularly "End of Code" (2010). David Lobser⁵⁴ creates dazzling worlds of creepy beauty which seduce the viewer with Kawaii, before revealing, as in "Elephant Girl, Part One" (2008) the horrid slimy truth. The kandy-kolored creation myth of "Mother's Day" (2007) follows the life-cycle of cute little worms through the cruel yet gorgeous world of predators, only to end up back with their smothering, voracious mom. One floats through Lobser-World with a chuckling sense of dread.

"The Hunger Artist" (2001) is Tom Gibbons' 3D version of the Kafka classic. It uses both stop-motion puppets and CGI to visualize a haunting, claustrophobic cityscape, with a society of mocking tormentors (monstrous clowns and harlequins) orbiting around the stoic, saint-like artist. The theme of this desolate performance, enhanced by the use of

⁵¹ Stamford, CT, October 16, 1954.

⁵² 1953-1998.

⁵³ Cincinnati, OH, 1958.

⁵⁴ Cleveland, OH, 1977.

graphic 2D puppets and the subtlety of the character movements, is rare for American animation.

Joshua Mosley's⁵⁵ work contains CGI animation but also retains a puppet-like, even a scratchy hand-drawn, graphic look. It is quiet, sober, and moves with subtle, enigmatic understatement. Often composited with live action and placed within sculptural installations, it is an eclectic hybrid bristling with complex narratives involving imaginary conversations and unlikely philosophical relationships. "Commute"(2003), for example, involves Descartes, a businessman on a cell-phone, and a young man climbing a ladder through a small hole; there is tension, but the relationships are illusive. "A Vue" (2004), involving a lonely park ranger's search for love, is focused as well on rock climbing and a 150 foot high bronze statue of George Washington Carver, glimpsed in miniature through a window. Mosley is using animation but isn't bound by its history, conventions, or techniques. He is seeking a new context for dreamlike moving images forged with a computer, grappling with language, while keeping one foot planted in the real space of the sculptural object.

Finally, there is the enormous world of anonymous animation embedded throughout the Web: animated experiments shot on cell-phones, anarchic personal home movies filled with clichés and mistakes—a true tsunami of animation spread by and across the social network, garnering millions of hits. All of this would be inconceivable without the computer's innate compulsion to compress, duplicate, simulate, and distribute. When uploading a movie file to a vast server like YouTube makes a short animated film available to many millions of viewers, it is clear that certain rules and terms of the art have changed. It's now ubiquitous (on hand-held devices) and anonymous, yet also chaotically blended into both mass marketing and private, home-made journalism. In this digital milieu we are apt to see more self-taught, artless animators using simple Flash-like tools having an increasing impact on society, particularly politics and social action.

SO WHAT?

⁵⁵ Dallas, TX, 1974.

Clearly the independent animation scene is staggeringly broad, viewed in the gallery or the communal context of the movie house; and it's made with myriad techniques. New tricks and accents pop up daily, even as the laborious slog of drawing upon drawing still yields startling ideas and visions. Animators cannot afford to be hobbled by limited categories like digital, traditional, cartoon, experimental. The possibilities for cross-pollination are simply too vast.