

## 2/23/10 Program Notes for Poznan Animation Festival

### INDEPENDENT AMERICAN ANIMATION

I am asked to assemble a program (or 2) of American independent animation. A blizzard of joy and dread fog my clarity of thought: these are my favorites? But are they too old, too innovative, too timeless, too boring, too language-based, not funny, too diverse, too personal, too East Coast-Elitist, too experimental, too sexy; or have I ignored animators who are now making long films, or have become “multi-disciplined”? And maybe I should be worried because “American” often irritates artists working in the southern or northern parts of our continent.

Also, “experimental,” that term we often associate with this kind of work, has ceased to exist as a meaningful classification for me. I see it in too many unexpected places (commercials, on-line, portable devices). The animation I like is always stretching time a bit over the expected limits or compressing it into bundles of mystery, whether it’s a comical cartoon using 4 loose sketches per second, or a CGI musical. The operant word is “expected.” For too long, experiments were confined to abstraction, “visual music”, direct manipulation and the like. But just as Philip Guston shocked his Abstract Expressionist pals by returning to iconic cartoon images, many of the animators who interest me now just call themselves “artists” even though animation is their obvious passion and strength. (I still refer to myself as an animator, because it’s more than just a practice; it’s a calling.) And of course the best cartoons have always broken some kind of convention.

Finally “independent” has wildly morphed from “undeground” and “avant-garde” to animators hold fast to their artisanal spirit, working alone or with an intimate crew, without commercial sponsorship or eye to a waiting market. They are supported by teaching, commercials, and some, like Bill Plympton and Don Hertzfeld, on the popularity of their art.

Some of these films (Brent Green, Martha Colburn) could be called *sauvage* if only I could find the right word for the opposite. They are made with a raw, angry nonchalance that thumbs its nose at nice animation formulas in order to spit out a political or

personal message. Well, more like a howl. It worked for Allen Ginsberg too. Amy Kravitz would also qualify for the emotional depth welling up from her visceral jumble of texture and phantoms. Ditto Kathy Rose, the legendary dancer>animator>multimedia performer who weaves a multiplicity of twitching “primitive movers” into her Butoh-inspired dream-scape.

Then you’ve got your refined, well-crafted cartoon, but wait a minute: there’s something going on, and we don’t know what it is, do we Mr. Jones? Take Pat Smith, the natural animator/anatomist, Plympton, the feature-directing, natural gagman, John Dilworth, the arch-perfectionist — they make weirdness into humor, then into something almost personal, then almost uncomfortable. In particular, Plympton’s trademark deadpan slapstick is here complimented by a satirical text brimming with political insight. And Signe Baumann’s continued focus on sexual frankness here transcends cheap raunch for a disturbing look at traditional reproductive health values. Gone is the feel-good cartoon of yore.

Of course almost everyone uses a computer: some, like Joshua Mosley, layer CGI with hand-drawn textures; Joanna Priestly, effortless sketches in Flash; Fran Krause Flashes minimalist cartoons; Aleksey Budovskiy sets rhythmic silhouettes in motion with Director; James Duesing lovingly treats his wacko 3D personalities with therapeutic understanding. They all bend the code to their personal demons and whims. OK, not “everyone”: computers don’t work for most of the hands-on *sauvages* who want a quivering rough edge. And I have to agree that once you are swimming in the digital crucible you have to work hard to retain the hand’s authentic hesitation and shudder. The computer gives us perhaps too many choices, not just in how we animate, but how we edit, distribute, display: how we see the work. Thus, the irony: Green shows his work in galleries digitally projected onto his sculptures while one of Colburn’s latest venues was the huge MTV electronic light board in Times Square.

Which brings us to Eric Dyer and other practitioners of “concrete” animation that is most successfully experienced in a specific site. In Copenhagen Cycles, he repurposes live video into giant zoetropes, then videos them again through pre-cinema slots. He is now experimenting with shutter glasses that create intermittent vision, so you can walk

through real space to experience the animation of sequential objects. Carl Staven's cyclical nod to Muybridge has a similar, yet more primitive association with our perception of actual city sites. We welcome his *plain air* documentary (Philadelphia) as much as the wild animals on his index cards. And, by the way, coyotes have been spotted in New York's Central Park!

Many animators are moving beyond the short art film genre into longer, modular and serial forms. Following Bill Plympton's feature-length examples (well received in Poznan last year) is Nina Paley, whose "Sita Sings the Blues" premiered world-wide last year. "Agni Pariksha" is a lively fire dance chapter using popular Indian music and rotoscoping to take your breath away. Debra Solomon's funny yet personal "Leaving Him in 8 Songs" is represented by one song which features her signature loosey-goosey, straight ahead drawing style, clever lyrics and satirical vocal delivery. Jeff Scher has signed on to produce short animations, lyrical editorial cartoons, in various innovative techniques like his signature painterly, flickery, rotoscoped free-associations, for the staid The New York Times website. PES has made three gemlike stop-motion pieces that also seem like chapters in an on-going inventory: real objects transformed into nuggets of surreal pandemonium.

While it's a truism that animators tend to act with their pencils, use their characters as surrogates for their own temperamental personalities and wallow in unconscious auto-bio projection, some more than others march boldly forth to stage center, like John Dilworth's "Life in Transition," a wobbly, wall-eyed, tour de force of a self-portrait. Pat Smith's masochistic puppet fable suggests not only Pygmalion and the Sorcerer's Apprentice but also contains just enough of Pat's own self-image to push the narrative into a self-conscious tale of an animator's self-destruction. Andy and Carolyn London's "Backbrace" uses clever, angular cut-outs to illustrate a tale of youthful misery narrated by the artist. Much lighter and funnier than their recent "Letter to Coleen," "Backbrace" follows in the grand confessional redemption tradition of "Frank Film" and "Catcher in the Rye." Laura Heit's wistful fantasy on the emotional consequences of invisibility follows a similarly intimate mode, balanced by a minimalist, hard-edged design.

Both Paley and Solomon construct musical entertainments (one could even say “extravaganzas”) out of their personal misery over the dissolution of their love relationships. But Don Hertzfeldt is the undisputed master of revealing every minor nodule of pain and suffering inflicted by friends, foes, family and, in the case of “Rejected,” potential clients. We are totally seduced by his stick-figure reductivism and his voice-over/tale-of-woe commentary, so redolent of Woody Allen. Like other confessional animators, the writing is so vividly “personal,” that we cease to wonder if it is truth, slightly embellished, or fiction masquerading as memoir.

Lorelei Pepi’s work-in-progress, “Happy and Gay” is an updating of the 70s Feminist mantra, “the Personal Is Political,” but goes much further by delivering a rollicking dose of media theory, “queer” theory, cartoon history, and radical swagger. She has shifted from meditative layered nocturnal poems like “Grace” to Fleischeresque funny party animals without skipping a beat. And, like Rose, Colburn and Green, Pepi is seriously involved with animation as performance art.

Skip Battaglia, the only animator to have completed the 2000 mile Appalachian Trail in one year, would qualify as a *sauvage* if his work weren’t so meditative, so serene, so dedicated to finding beauty in the smallest swirl of nature. (He is currently animating an opera based on a fatal automobile crash.)