

RICOCHET....4 FILMS

As of 2006 I had been making films for 37 years. The conventional wisdom is that my most creative period was the mid 70s to the late 80s, with a blip (“Little Routine”) at 1994. The earlier films were more experimental, dealing with self-reference, process, installations and such, relating to art world practice without actually being a part of it. This was the period of the animators’ group, Frames, and the flipbook projects. And, after “Lineage,” which I thought of as a kind of anti-cartoon summa, the later work was more accessible with narrative or musical structures. Then, for a decade, I lay fallow as my commercial profession grew. That sputtered to a conclusion when Colossal Pictures collapsed and I took on more modest projects without a permanent staff. I gave away my camera stand, moved upstairs where the light and quiet were abundant, and adapted to a digital work-flow which would end up as film.

But these enhancements did not lead to an outpouring of personal work. In fact I was stuck, more blocked than ever, in what was an ideal environment. Little jobs and temporary teaching gigs filled the gap. The schools were floundering in the digital transition; I was labeled a “traditional” animator, expected to impart the wisdom of practices I had largely abandoned; the kids were mainly a conservative lot, yet miles ahead of me on the social network and tech curve. I have never kept a regular sketchbook or journal but noticed that many students did, so during this period I jotted down lists of words and images. One, depicting a square man and woman spouting speech balloons over a café table, seemed to fall into a sequence with a punchy beginning and end. I set out to fill the gap.

IT PAINS ME TO SAY THIS

The beginning balloon speech includes the word “cunt.” And the last scene shows the woman pulling a machine gun out of her vagina and slaughtering the man in a hail of bullets and smoke. There had been an exhibit of early feminist art across the street at White Columns that spring which displayed Carolee Schneemann’s scroll of complaints (the actual stained artifact) which she had extracted from her vagina in performance. This had been the 70s when such things, while far from routine, didn’t create much of a flap in the media or at City Hall; it was an ephemeral event in the volatile Soho loft gallery scene, but documented by a photograph showing Carolee nude, reading earnestly from the scroll as it emerged. Ideas began to form unconsciously in clusters: concealed weapons, concealed language, the body as battleground, weaponized discourse (“Weaponized” had emerged during the post-2001 anthrax scare).

The storyboard was tied together with a voice-over, an omniscient narrator, a conventional device. It was a nearly universal commercial conceit. It was also the bane of documentarians who rebelled against the voice of authority inherited from propaganda. I had used it just once before (“Lineage”, which was a logorrheic essay), so I felt compelled to push the narrator’s stentorian theatricality, to treat it as an ironic, inverted provocation.

When the board was finished I showed it to the Pratt thesis class as an example of a first production stage. They tittered over the language in the balloons and were perplexed by the continuous, ironic voice. Next came the scratch track and animatic to see if the timing worked; they seemed to grasp how this process might be applied to their own projects. By the end of semester, when their films were due, I had completed the color rendering and animation, and showed it to them. I was trying to stimulate them but the actual consequence may have been just the opposite: futile competition with the teacher-pro, dangerous self-doubt and hostility: "Who cares about YOUR film when we're having so many problems?"

I was lucky to catch the jazz pianist Joel Forrester between touring and gigs to do the voice-over in his suavely detached, ironically professorial mode. His continuously running text is delivered as an authoritative yet highly unreliable narrative because we prefer to believe what we see and read in the speech balloons instead of his arch commentary. He introduces the characters, Ken and Celeste, having a drink at their "reunion" and immediately sets up the disconnected memories and interpretations of each character, as well as his own inability to describe the action.

When I had finished the 2-minute film my wife was horrified. She thought this is what I thought of her, of feminists, or perhaps of all women. I was equally confused and claimed to have made it without any real intent or plan; it had just happened "spontaneously" (that quality I had so often held to be ideal). I showed it publically as a work-in-progress at an art school and a festival. But I was confused about how to continue. I doubted that the dramatic death of the stupid male protagonist was a sufficient resolution for a 2-minute film. I began to construct a series of critiques of the film and the character, Ken, who in true cartoon fashion isn't dead after all. These various points of view are voiced by a chorus of cartoon characters representing political, psychological, esthetic arguments, summed up by an anodyne "forgive and forget" sentiment delivered by a talking dog.

Then, my married life entered a real-life emotional crisis as we began to confront my history of infidelity. This developed through the spring of 2005 in psychotherapy, couples therapy, quarrels, rage and tears - but we survived. And then began a long journey of reassessment and reconciliation. During that summer I went on two solo hiking treks, in Iceland and Vermont. At one location, in the most stunning landscapes, I called home on my cell and heard my wife's intense announcement, with a kind of "eureka" passion: "I finally understand what the film is all about! It's about her, not me! You must finish the film! I will help you write it! Better yet, I'll write it myself!" I hurried home, not a little worried.

Not only was the other woman the real "cunt" but she herself would follow all the other explainers to set the record straight, to deliver the final analysis of and verdict on Ken. Without actually having me, the animator/author deliver a live action coda to confess my culpability, the text was nonetheless painfully explicit. I revised the script of "the aggrieved wife" considerably (with much debate) and began to design a cartoon wife, one we could both accept. This proved to be very difficult. I have used the square man in very subtle variations as a reduced self-portrait for over 30 years; it's part of my

psychic architecture. But this woman was Not a Square! When I thought I had her character perfectly designed, the nose had to be changed to a little point. That cinched it. In the film's coda, as we lie in bed reading, with the purring cat nestled between us, she delivers the last line, still critiquing the design of her own character, "Next time, kill the baggy pants. And were the hairy armpits really necessary?"

While making the film we shared our problems with some friends, but not others, and this affected who would read the dialog. Debra Solomon has a very particular nasal tone with a Queens/Boston accent that projects a sharp, witty, accusatorial voice that embodies a note of authoritative aggrievement. And as it turned out Debra was also coping with a painful separation in her own life (which she turned into a brilliant half-hour animated musical special for HBO). Animator Kathy Rose has a diverse repertory of characters to draw from, as she did for "Lineage" in 1979. She does the castrating researcher and the mystical goddess with wildly differing readings. Jim McGuane, has a mellifluous, non-regional, broadcasting voice: perfect for Bob Authority, the jovial master of ceremonies. Animator Skip Battaglia voiced the common-sense dog, via telephone, in his broad Mid-West, good fellow inflection. Filmmaker Ken Kobland plays the silken-voiced psychiatrist who lectures the witless Ken on the esthetics of film, while I voiced the angry old professor, the "open carry" gun-nut, as well as the self-effacing, whispering Ken. This wide range of voices, delivered with crude mouth actions, represent a kind of cartoon truth, undercutting the omniscient narrator's misleading descriptions and faulty analysis.

When I was present at the screening at the Ottawa Festival the first 2 minutes got a few yucks, but halfway through I could detect a kind of nervous irritation with how personal, or self-indulgent, it had become. The audience politely applauded when I stood up, more out of respect for past work than this particular film. Since then, I haven't been very eager to push it out into the world.

MACDOWELL: A USER'S MANUAL

I got a call from Robert O'Neill (Robin to those who know him), the retired PBS newsman and MacDowell Colony board chair, who explained that the Colony was producing a film to honor its centennial. Would I like to make part of it? This was the best commission I have ever received: the budget I submitted was accepted, I had free rein, the other three filmmakers involved were name brands so I felt in good company (though none of us were in contact during the production). Each of us was to do a season which would be one of four chapters in an hour long film. I chose winter because it seemed like a blank sheet of white paper: no distractions from nature's allure. Then, after some months sketching and writing, I was asked if I wouldn't terribly mind taking autumn instead, due to someone's scheduling conflict. OK, even though the season had already passed, and I was expected to finish sometime around then, autumn would have to be a kind of fantasy, an artificial construct: a challenge, an opportunity?

It's a documentary, mostly live action with animated effects applied sparingly. It's also a narrative about a man, portrayed as jumble of twig-like strokes, who goes to the colony

to do his (unspecified) art and perhaps to get away from his hectoring wife/girlfriend. She's intent on providing cheery advice; he's mildly depressive, worried about the leaves. This dialog, delivered off-camera, gradually gives way to the man's interior monolog: fear about creative block in this most ideal environment, obsession with a deceased composer who had worked in his studio 50 years before; the trees seem to be lurking; time takes on tangible, tangled form. He decides to go for a walk.

Here the film shifts gear to observe 5 artists who consented to my request to visit with a camera: a painter painting, one currently working in paper-folding, a sculptor working on a plaster figure, another sculptor engineering an interactive sound installation, and a team of two Australian filmmakers editing a documentary about an imaginary Paris street. Their documentary was based on Georges Perec's novel *Life: A User's Manual* which helped me discover a title, which always adds an incentive to a project in progress.

Again, Ken Kobland reads the text, adding a few emendations and an overall feeling of skepticism. He is joined by Ken's good friend, actor Ellen LeCompte, who happens to be his former girlfriend. Their dialog and his doubts give way to the artist's impressions which lead to a figure seen in silhouette against a window sitting down at a table, finally beginning to work. I am that figure, unfettered by the sketchy lines which pour out his pen. I have certainly experienced the sentiments Ken reads (as has he), so the film could be seen as part autobiography, yet once the chaotic marks cease to define the man's figure they coalesce into an external line. This line appears at the film's conclusion, where we can assume the fictional narrative is about to begin.

THE BATHER

A woman is observed as a soft-focus impression, showering behind a foggy, water-beaded curtain. Gradually the view is obscured by a superimposed hand-held flipbook, a sequence of line drawings of a woman dancing nude. As a harpsichord prelude interrupts the environment of natural sounds, the dancer is freed from the pages and cavorts in a multiplicity of erotic gestures as if propelled by the throbbing contrapuntal tempo. Moving through the overlapping images a string of words suggests sources, motives, and memories.

Voyeurs and bathers occupy a rich thematic coupling in art and cultural history, from Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* to Bonnard. "The Silence Before Bach," Pere Portabella's 2007 evocation of music as an intensely corporeal catalyst, entwining past with present, inspired me to reconsider and re-compose a short animation I had made in 1972, *Trikfilm I*. It was to be part of a projected series using flipbooks and Bach keyboard music, concise fugues and inventions which my mother played when I was growing up. But the series ended later with

Trikfilm III, the film which pulled the camera back from the linear dance movements of the woman's figure to include a twitching photographic document of real hands drawing.

The question, then as now, becomes who is moving or causing to move. The amber-lit bather is focused on her own physicality, performing the sensual practical stroking movements of cleansing; she's completely unaware or indifferent to being watched. By contrast, the animated dancer is beckoning, welcoming, seductively writhing for our attention. Is this the leering "male gaze" superimposed on what would otherwise be a contemplative song of domestic beauty? The tension between the two is fractured by a line of text running horizontally through the frame's center line. The dry, descriptive commentary on what appears obvious evolves into a historical explanation, then a personal declaration of love, which refers to the past (drawing, dancing, sexuality) but is also folded into the present.

YOU'RE OUTA HERE

A feisty descendant of Betty Boop tells her no-good boyfriend to hit the road, her litany of complaints set to the barrelhouse rhythm of Fats Waller. "You're Outa Here" starts with stride-master Dick Hyman's pounding out the high-voltage intro to "The Minor Drag." As our leading lady strides forth to make her case, her cat-clock, her dog, and her pet piranha also demand his exit. She attempts to oust him from his Barcalounger, badgers him to start packing, and recounts his various shortcomings: he's lazy, he sleeps around, he called her doorman "Pancho," her Uncle Bob a "queer." *You're Outa Here* is a conversation stopper: "Shut up and leave now before I start screaming!" It's primarily an eviction notice, delivered with emphatic gesture, like a baseball ump to an offending player who has just gone "beyond the pale." It was sung by the producer, Lorraine Feather, who also wrote the lyrics.

Each character is a pastiche of cartoon conventions. She is short, cute, sexy in her faux leopard-skin miniskirt, no-nonsense in her designer glasses, and she has to do all the heavy lifting by herself. He is tall, spiky, mute, clueless; more comfortable guzzling brews with his buddies than making up with his girlfriend. His face is a variation on my "Square Man" design that has for years been a kind of default "everyman," so simple a six-year-old could do it (even better), yet also a self-portrait/doppelganger through whom I can act. A wooly turtleneck and jeans give him the attributes of an over-educated, urban sophisticate, indulging in a life of "creative poverty." She wears her emotions on her sleeve and doesn't hesitate to name each and every transgression; her solo has the feeling of a complex legal brief, dramatically argued at breakneck speed by a tough trial lawyer.

“The Minor Drag,” provides the melodic and rhythmic structure for the animated characters, and when Hyman goes solo, the action cuts back to his energetically playing hands and “Lindy Hoppers” rotoscoped from movies of Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom in the 1930s. The first section is meant to have the effect of pulling us back from the text of her critique to imagine the couple dancing together in an earlier sensual period of their relationship. The second solo section is abstract, cluttered, discordant, pressured, as if to suggest that something is about to explode.

Dick Hyman was filmed at the Nola Sound Studio on West 57th Street in New York. This studio has witnessed recording by the biggest names in twentieth-century American pop and jazz: Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Charlie Parker. Hyman played the complete 3-minute piece flawlessly for 8 takes.

Making *You’re Outa Here*, based entirely on a pre-recorded song, was like producing a music video but with an essential difference. There was no live performance by the singer (this was Lorraine’s only stipulation), even though the cartoon character veers closely to a caricature portrait of her. The mood of a Fleischer “Out of the Inkwell” cartoon comes through the heroine’s feisty personality, the slightly retro apartment décor, and the bumptious pulse of the stride piano. As the song is so clearly jazz and references an earlier period in our culture when jazz was THE popular idiom, and short documentary films of great artists like Waller were called soundies, it seems appropriate to call *You’re Outa Here* either a “Neo-Soundie,” or “Jazztoon.”