

“...try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” - (Rilke, 35)

Inspiration

As a storyteller who uses animation, drawing, and film as the canvas for self expression, there is a question that weaves through my work. The question I ask in all my work is: what is the difference between what I think, feel and experience and the nature of existence? There is often a gap in my narratives between what the protagonist perceives and the truth of the situation they encounter. Characters find themselves often living with one foot in another world. Sometimes it's a world of imagination, other times it might be the intersection of past events or future desires. Often, there is a spiritual component.

I find inspiration in a variety of life experiences, nature and culture. Music, books, religion and film influence my art. Just as children love to explore and find tangents, playful freedom provides my inspiration.

I love animators and animation but, my deepest influences come from cinema and in particular, the philosophy behind the film work of director/writer Krzysztof Kieslowski. He made a 10-part series for Polish television called *The Decalogue* (1988), based loosely on the ten commandments. *The Decalogue* shocks with its ability to fuse the mystical within the mundane in a very honest portrayal of the human condition. His work verges on Magical Realism, in the grey area between perception and circumstance when a series of events trigger tangential experiences that provoke the viewer to question the meaning of coincidence or if such an idea is the result of not seeing a larger vision.

The Swedish director Ingmar Bergman has had a great impact on the way that I perceive story and plot. His film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), in which the magic of childhood collides with death and beauty, touches on some of the same territory explored by Kieslowski. Bergman holds a deep perception of dialog, both verbal and non-verbal.

I also find great inspiration from *La Nouvelle Vague*, in particular the work of Jean-Luc Godard. A movement in film in the late 50's - 60's and meant to disrupt the lethargy of filmmaking in France. *The New Wave* was a rallying cry for the radicalization of film that in France had become clichéd. Godard along with Francois Truffaut and others, used film as critique by showing what it was capable of doing – not just to entertain, but to emotionally connect and tell stories that were relevant in their day and still relevant now. Godard's battle cry in *Arts Magazine*, April 22, 1959, states:

“...What we were getting at was simply this: your camera movements are ugly because your subjects are bad, your cast acts badly because your dialog is worthless; in a word, you do not know how to create cinema because you no longer know what it even is....We cannot forgive you for never having filmed girls as we love them, boys as we see them every day, parents as we despise or admire them, children as they astonish us or leave us indifferent; in other words, things as they are.”

Substitute animation for the word cinema and you get a sense of what I desire to do with my work.

Animations potential has hardly been tapped since its inception in 1906 with James Stuart Blackton's *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*. Indeed, one of its early innovators, Winsor McCay saw animation as a new art form.

“Take for instance, that wonderful painting, which everyone is familiar with, entitled *The Angelus*.... There will be a time when people will gaze at it and ask why the objects remain rigid and stiff. They will demand action. And to meet this demand the artists of that time will look to the motion picture people for help and the artist, working hand-in-hand with science, will evolve a new school of art that will revolutionize the entire field. (*Buffalo Enquirer*, July 16, 1912) It was too bad that Michael J. Angelo [sic] didn't draw for the movies.... The coming artist will make his reputation, not by pictures in still life, but by drawings that are animated.” (qtd. in *Canemaker*)

I hold a bitter/sweet love for the animation medium. Like a child you know could

do better if they applied themselves, I love it just the same. The medium has suffered from the costs and efforts involved in production causing the work to be timid. These factors help to create a medium that conservatively reaches for the largest common denominator of viewers to recoup the cost involved.

The current proliferation of low costs tools and accessible delivery systems has lead to an explosion of people exploring the medium. Much as cheap cameras and film made home photos a part of everyday life in the early 20th century. With the advent of inexpensive tools has come a large quantity of detritus but, the potential for pushing the medium is greater then ever as cost and delivery give way to opportunity for experimentation. Arguably, the great films of animation have yet to be made. Like any medium, in the right hands animation can move us, and it can inspire and provoke us to action. In some regards, this has happened, but there is so much more capability for the medium.

One animator/director who was willing to take the risks that Godard and others in the French New Wave explored was Ralph Bakshi. In a series of films made in the early 1970's, *Fritz The Cat* (1972), *Heavy Traffic* (1973), *Coonskin* (1975), and *Hey Good Lookin'* (1982), Bakshi broke new ground in animation, examining street life within an uncomfortable mix of humor, folk tales, sex, cute animal characters, and racial caricatures. Like all risk-takers, he had his moments of failure but, when it worked it was explosive. People bombed theaters and protested because of his animation! So incendiary was his work on *Coonskin* that when it had its premier at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Al Sharpton and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) picketed. The work was divisive. Others in the black community, like the NAACP, supported the movie and its use of satire to describe the terrible state of race relations.

As an animator, I am interested in work that makes people think, that incites responses that can range from surprise to unease. I aspire to art that asks questions, but uses subterfuge to grab you with its ideas. That hides within its innocent delivery profound questions, within it's senseless violence an observation about humanity.

Yuri Norshstein, the great Russian animator, inspires me with his simplicity of story telling hiding depths of thought and metaphor. In his short film *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) he envelopes us in a world of apparitions, dream and adventure. The hedgehog is seduced by mystery and enters the twilight of the fog, where he is transformed by the experience. In the world of the fog, reality takes on a gossamer elusiveness. Reality

is no longer what is visible but, what is imagined. Metaphor and symbol through this veil are accessible because of imagination.

Jean Baudrillard states: “All that is hidden and still enjoys a forbidden status, will be unearthed, rendered to speech and made to bow before the facts. The real is growing ever larger, some day the entire universe will be real, and when the real is universal, there will be death.” (Seduction 32) The clash between what is simulated and what is seductive, what is reality versus perception inspires my work.

Philosophy

The exploration of what is real and what we perceive plays out not only in the subject matter that I explore but also in the techniques with which I use to animate with. My goal is to bring the seductiveness of movement and illusion into the art, not to simulate reality but to create an environment that references the hand that creates it. This is in contrast to modern cinema.

The philosopher, Jean Baudrillard saw society as desiring more and more to be “caught up in the play of images, spectacles and simulacra” (plato.stanford entries/Baudrillard) but cinema was the spectacle he was particularly fond of, “I like the cinema. Of all the spectacles it’s even the only one I do like” (Baudrillard Selected Interviews 29).

During his lifetime, Baudrillard saw cinema transformed into the digital construct that we experience today. He became increasingly concerned with Western society’s romance with images and the replacement of images for reality. This concept he called simulation. He accepted cinema as a personal pleasure and an opportunity to give over himself to the image. “I am naive, but I accept an image for what it is. It’s a sort of ecstasy, but ‘cool’ ecstasy. It is not the innate significance of an image that I really receive, it is its charm. So, even if the image is horrific, it is always mitigated by its seductive remoteness.” (ibid. 31) He saw our continued thrust towards realism in film as having the same effect that he witnessed in our modern culture’s desire for perfection – the loss of relevance.

“Cinema has become hyper-realist, technically sophisticated, effective (performant). All the films are ‘good’—at least, you could never say they were of poor quality. But they fail to incorporate any element of make-believe (l’imaginaire). As if the cinema were basically regressing towards infinity, towards some indefin-

able perfection, a formal, empty perfection.” (ibid. 29)

William Kentridge, shares with Baudrillard an appreciation for seduction and with Godard the aesthetic of the avant-garde and the desire to “renegotiate the terms of perceived reality” (Rush, 49) The South African artist uses animation as part of his process to move an audience and inspire new ways of seeing. A number of his films and installations deal with his personal struggle with South African society and Apartheid. I find both his vision and philosophy exciting as he is also someone who mines similar ideas. I also find inspiration in his techniques.

Style

In early 2010, I spent the bulk of my time developing an animated short called *Delivery*. Within the process of the short, I worked with some of the techniques that Kentridge used, except with digital drawing tools. His additive/reductive methods of drawing with charcoal on paper I examined within the context of Corel Painter and Toonboom Animate Pro, two pieces of software. I explored not only the work of Kentridge but the inspirations of Kentridge. For example, his charcoal drawing technique can be traced to the early cinema experimentations of James Stuart Blackton, who used the same additive/reductive method with chalk back in 1908. Kentridge’s use of paper cut-outs refers back to the early German pioneer Lotte Reiniger. His interest in effects to silent filmmaker Georges Méliès. Kentridge is a gold mine of animation history coupled with an interest in expressing himself in ways that are provocative and compelling to the viewer.

While Kentridge uses charcoal, paper cutouts, installations, puppets and theater as tools of expression, I use digital methods to enable my storytelling, liberating me from the concerns and hindrances of physical tools besides my computer, monitor and digital tablet. Visually, my work has varied from flat inked cartoon styles to a mix of graphite, conte and pastels tones that have a sketchbook feel. A wide diversity of influences move under and over the surface of my visual style from the additive/subtractive works of William Kentridge to the stop-motion paper work of Yuri Norshstein and the art of Jerry Moriarity in *RAW* magazine, the graphic novel art of Dave McKean and pen-

cil animation of Fredric Back.

Although *Delivery* remains a work in progress, it has connections to my most recent work called *Breath* (2012). In *Delivery*, I am narratively exploring inner anxiety and stress brought on by my childhood struggles and their outward signifiers indicated by eating disorders. The character based on myself struggles to find freedom through walking and exploring the world. In the short, his search for bird feathers becomes a lifelong mission that ends in a revelation of freedom from inner bonds. The title *Delivery* speaks to this freedom. The character makes a connection between his childhood, the natural world and his dreams to give opportunity to a new reality. What happens when the dream intrudes on reality? The short *Wet Dreams* also asks this question in a humorous fashion.

Wet Dreams

Timing and pacing for storytelling is an important part of the short, *Wet Dreams* (2011). I drew inspiration for timing from the comic panel work of Charles Shultz for *Peanuts*, especially his ability to move viewers, make them laugh, inspire and make them cry within the poetry of 4 panels. *Wet Dreams* is the start of a series of semi autobiographical shorts that are succinct, yet provide laughter, inspiration, and touching emotion all within a minute of animation.

In *Wet Dreams*, I again explore the difference between reality and perception, the blending of the two and the internal tension that comes from not living in the present moment but dwelling in idle dream. How does reality and dream play against each other? In the short, the character of Dick wonders to himself, “what it would be like to make love on this dock?” He daydreams in a cartoon fantasy about a buxom singer, who is an homage to the director Tex Avery from his short, *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943). He is woken from his reverie by the cast shadow of a good-looking female photographer. He attempts to make conversation that comes out awkwardly and is ignored. He sighs at his awkwardness and looks up at the sky as clouds slide downward. The brief story is meant to be self-deprecating, Dick sighs at the end in frustration at his awkwardness and in critique of his desires.

In the short, I am breaking down the technique of animation, balancing imagery

with movement. Deconstructing the traditional technique with the use of drawn puppets in which the line and the fill have semi-independent life. I am fascinated with the way that we can symbolize and give life to a drawing, puppet, paper bag or an object and substitute it for real. What emotions or ideas can be conveyed by juxtaposing different styles of movement and art against one another?

The Box

What happens when life gets in the way of expectations? And how much of our lives are lived in dreams, desires and fantasy? *The Box* (2012) is a humorous, exaggerated romp that pokes fun at the notion of the 'grass being greener' and our desire to escape from everyday life. As in *Wet Dreams*, I mined semi-biographical material basing the short on my personal frustrations caricatured along with character drawings based on myself and my home.

The opening line is drawn from a very short story by Dave Eggers, which inspired the tone of the writing and was instrumental in formatting the animation from a proposed twenty minutes down to two. Within the short, the main character must deal with his expectations for a vacation being dashed by the emergencies of life cropping up. The refrigerator breaks, the car needs new tires and soon vacation has become a literal fantasy as he in anger, decides to spend the next week living in the basement in a box "on vacation". The main character deals with his expectations, dreams that are dashed, and paranoia—he believes that his wife is having an affair with his dog, From this starting point, he enters a dream/fantasy world of underground houses, princesses and mushroom tending. Life in the fantasy world soon takes on echoes of the mundane world and finding a lost postcard from his wife, he learns she has married the dog. He may be a hypocrite (he's been living with a princess who looks like a wild boar), but he can't stand the idea of his wife sleeping with the dog and quickly, he kicks the dog out of his bed. The animation ends with a wild story from his wife that brings us to the point of the animation: Are some things better left unexamined?

The mechanics of trying to pack as much story into as small a time frame as possible propels the use of a narrator for the voice in the animation. Verbally, the words playfully push and pull against the visuals adding another level of humor to the anima-

tion. The stark black and white animation is in contrast to a situation that is rife with issues, questions of ethics and escapism. Inspiration was drawn in part from life experiences and the constant struggle of balancing expectations with reality. An example would be the main characters' infatuation with a sleeping princess and a fairy tale life that quickly adds up to mortgages, children and mushrooms to tend. The concept of a house underground beneath another house was inspired by a radio play I heard as a child on the *CBS Mystery Theater* (1974-1982) called: *The Ninth Volume* (episode 761)

Breath

Movement is magical to me. At the heart of the movement studies on nature that I have been exploring is an attempt to express the forces that push and pull in the world surrounding us. In the five examples drawn in the short, *Breath* (2012) I began the process by drawing the animation frames primarily outdoors on location as Plein air drawings. I used an animation pegboard on a folding watercolor stand and worked with pencil and oil pastel on paper. The frames were drawn while studying the effect of wind and currents on water and trees. The movement of water or air on materials is visual evidence of the flow of energy that propels their physical change in the environment. Capturing this in animation and training my eyes to see more critically were the challenges I was interested in exploring.

Examination of natural movement forces me not to look at the details of rock, leaf and water but, at the environment as a system of movement such as waves of wind rippling through trees or swirls of water patterns that are always evolving yet, have relationship with one another. The technique for *Breath* was inspired by the great 2-D effects special effects animator Joseph Gilland and the academy award winning short, *The Man Who Planted Trees*. (1987) by Frédéric Back.

Once the first drawing is complete, I create another exactly like it to act as the end of the cycle. Then, I carefully begin tracking a segment of movement such as a tree branch being buffeted by the wind. I consider the branch itself with the amount of resistance it has to the air movement, drawing each branch to act as a support for the additional oil pastel marks that represents leaves. I draw them with consideration to the easing of movement (speeding up and slowing down), the arch of position and

the amount of time it seems upon viewing that it takes the limb to complete its cycle of change. Then I go through and consider each mark as it was originally drawn to determine its relationship to the branch, the flexibility of the material it represents and the easing and small loops of sways and ripples that might occur within its particular path. This is repeated over and over again so that a series of 40 drawings might have hundreds of moving pieces that have all been considered and positioned. The work is tedious, tracking blobs of oil pastel on paper while critically looking at the relationships between shapes and time.

When the frames are complete, they are scanned and composited on the computer then the timing is tweaked, the camera movements planned and sometimes minor tweaks made to the animation. Finally, it's combined with the other scenes in video editing software along with the sound.

It was during my M.F.A. that I started to look for a way to express the essence of the natural world that surrounds us while dwelling in a city environment. It's easy to take for granted the natural world that is within footsteps of our sidewalks and chain stores. Previously, I had felt that to enjoy the environment one had to leave the city and get out into the wilderness. Through reading the work of Chinese mountain poets and their response to the natural world and the walks I was taking to work, I began to see the natural world as always there, always ready to engage us if we were willing to see it. *Breath* will eventually include a short Chinese poem by Han Shan (c. 7th -9th centuries) read while this urban natural animation plays.

If you are climbing Cold Mountain way,
Cold Mountain Road grows inexhaustible;

Long canyons open across fields of Talus,
broad creeks tumbling down mists of grass.

Moss is impossibly slick even without rain,
but this far up, pines need no wind to sing.

Who can leave the world's tangles behind
and sit with me among these white clouds?

(Trans. Hinton, 130)

At first glance, this piece visually does not connect with *The Box*, *Wet Dreams* or *Delivery* but philosophically it is rooted in the same examinations on truth. Like the previous pieces, it explores the gap between perceived reality and inner reality by accentuating the contrasts between the visuals and the words spoken.

The audience is me.

I find inspiration from Krzysztof Kieślowski, Jean-Luc Godard, Ralph Bakshi, William Kentridge, Yuri Norshstein, and Charles Shultz, among others. Yet in the end what drives me to create is simply this: I love the magic of seeing drawings come to life. To tell a story, to draw, to bring the inanimate to life, these acts give me freedom. If I was stuck on a deserted island or had to work a hack job—which, of course, I have had to do, I would make art. It is not a choice. All of my career, I have made compromises and taken jobs that allow me the time to make my own visions. It is what makes me who I am. This demand creates within me a nagging dissatisfaction with life, one that is like a piece of sand in an oysters shell.

Art makes me soar, it makes me who I am really supposed to be. As a child, I made art and wrote because I wanted to see and hear the pictures and stories in my head—this is still true. When I make animation, I make magic. I live for the moment of flipping a drawing and seeing the struggle between vision and execution overcome and something new live in the world that had never moved before. This sensation, coupled with giving voice to character and ideas and communicating with the audience something that goes from insubstantial to clear—drives me.

I ask questions in my work about life, about the nature of reality, about who I am, and about the nature of truth. I ask these questions not because I have the answers, it's enough to discover the questions. As my understanding grows through my work, perhaps gradually, as Rilke says, without noticing it, I will live the answers.

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