Mice and Elephants

Animation has never just been about animation. The cave wall sequential etchings of prehistory, of human in pursuit of beast, spears suspended mid-flight, were perhaps as much about ritual and social cohesion—a talisman for future success and group survival—as they were about ‘story’ and the illusion of life. Eadward Muybridge’s human and animal locomotion studies, the photographic origins of the moving image, are as much about zoology, physics, and anatomy, as they are about a travelling show and that legendary wager regarding the cadence of a horse’s trot. The thaumatrope, praxinoscope, zoetrope, etc. doubled as middle-class toys of enchantment as well as devices of inquiry into human perception; in offering a contemplative distance on the illusion of life, they were sometimes labelled “philosopher’s toys”. Animation arose out of these inquiries and pursuits: the pointy bit, the tip of an iceberg, a mouse atop an elephant.

Evolving from the printed comic and the vaudeville stage, animation connects with slapstick via Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck; with the printed panel through motion comics, superheroes, and the “flash aesthetic”; with live action via “Disney realism”; 3D features, and special effects; with the television sit-com through The Simpsons and Family Guy; and with music through Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong, and Gorillaz. Animation draws on sculpture through claymation (think Aardman and Gumby) and on puppetry via Henry Sellick, Jiri Trnka, and George Pal. Design, illustration, painting, photography, fashion, architecture, and theatre—both east and west—are integrated into, and have empathies with, the animated image. No man is an island, no medium, nor no mouse.

In the independent sphere, where the personal is given free flight, there is ample evidence of animation as a means to, and expression of, something else. Godhead of all things animated, Norman McLaren was fascinated by movement, dance, abstraction, and music. His stylus was paint, pixilation, printed visual data, and hand-drawn sound. The animation was not the objective—not the drawings but the drawn movement (to paraphrase his famous quote)—the research, not the outcome, was the key motivation. John and James Whitney used animation to explore mathematics, music, the numinous—all abstract principles for which animation was a viable method—which fortunately benefitted the evolution of computer graphics. Oskar Fischinger explored synaesthesia through his colour music kompositions, studies, and poems; according to William Moritz, Fischinger’s ruminations on music took him so far afield as to posit that the “inherent sound” of objects, if photographed on the soundtrack of analogue film, might be “released to speak”.

Fischinger’s wax-slicing machine evidences an interest, shared with the surrealists, in the revelations of chance. Jan Svankmajer’s celebrated animation oeuvre also results from a sustained interest in the surrealist project. His puppets, unsettling objects and juxtapositions evoke the unconscious, and childhood; they challenge certainties and the status quo. Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling’s seminal visual music Symphonie Diagonale (1924) eventuated from a journey in the depiction of musical concepts that began with single-frame paintings and traversed horizontal scrolls to find full expression in consecutive images in time.

The accommodating nature of animation, its embrace of many techniques, goes some way towards accounting for the dexterity of its practitioners. Talented artists already working in the handmade, the drawn, the sutured, have extended their inquiries into movement and sound. Others, finding favour in a particular animation technique, have gone on to explore its possibilities more intently outside of the animated frame. Lotte Reiniger’s famous silhouettes (populating the first feature-length animation) had their origins in the theatrical wings as Reiniger caricatured her actor friends with paper and scissors. Caroline Leaf has pursued painting and drawing “to explore complex pictorial structures that are not possible with images designed to move”, since her wonderful animations in sand, paint and scratched celluloid. Works in rice, coffee, ink, puppet, person, pin-screen, and all manner of media and things, have both serviced the varied interests of animation practitioners and inspired the pursuit of tangential endeavours.

The mouse, a small creature, looms large in a history of animation; the computer mouse, another small thing, clicks away at the heart of all digital animation workflows. These ironies of scale are not lost on the animation enthusiast; often overlooked, however, are the many and varied pursuits undertaken in the shadow cast by these prominent meeces—a shadow that is not only lengthy but wide ... wide and elephant-shaped. If the Disney mouse is acknowledged as the symbol of the animation industry, of big-business entertainment, and the computer mouse is appreciated as the ubiquitous tool of animators, teachers, and academics—meeting deadlines and ticking boxes—then what is of interest to this exhibition is the work that is undertaken unbidden, downtime, for love and not for money, which springs out from the shadows of capital ‘A’ animation.

Shadow of a Mouse brings to light artistry and expression that has until now been eclipsed by cartoon characters—the extrovert alter-egos of often shy and retiring animator personalities—or just kept in the dark for want of an occasion and deserved recognition. Shadow of a Mouse
speaks to the creative artistry behind, beyond, inside, or beside the animated image. It presents the work of artists who happen to have an interest in animation, in its breadth of accommodations. The artists represented here work in ink, pencil, paint, porcelain, 3D software, digital ink and paint, and scissors and paper. Female identity is teased out via ‘babes, broads, biddies’ and ‘beautiful useless women’. The eroticism of the nude amid the traditional landscape nudges work that pitches beauty against suffering in surreal gothic environments. Autobiography features strongly in this exhibition—importantly, this forum provides opportunity for personal stories to be brought to light. Teapots reflect home and conceptions of self, interiors speak of the experience of migration and inner journeys, visual diaries explore the blurred distinctions between ‘truth’ and subjective experience. Sufi ideals fostering tolerance and respect meet political commentary, while Indonesian shadow puppets, superhero comics, Persian carpets, and the satirical cartoon form a backdrop to, and inspiration for, this breadth of conceptions. While these works may have informed or grown out of the animated image, they now stand alone as unique and holistic expressions contributing to the breadth of medium and styles reaching beyond animation and cartoon preconceptions.

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1 Alan Cholodenko takes this label as a cue to declaring that “what is at stake in

2 In 2001, Ross Olson identified a number of aesthetic elements associated with animations created with Macromedia (now Adobe) Flash, including a 2-D style with heavy outlines. This aesthetic can be found in still-frame illustration, television commercials, and music videos. It is also reminiscent of the bold graphics of comics past and present. Ross Olson, “The Flash Aesthetic,” A List Apart, 12 October 2001, http://alistapart.com/article/flashaesthetic.


4 Cab Calloway and his orchestra provide the scores and feature in the live-action introductions to the Fleischer Studios’s Betty Boop cartoons Minnie the Moocher (1932)
and The Old Man of the Mountain (1933). Calloway sings “St. James Infirmary Blues” and voices Koko the Clown for Fleischer’s Snow White (1933). Calloway’s signature dance routine is rotoscoped for character performances in both The Old Man of the Mountain and Snow White. Louis Armstrong and his orchestra provide the live-action bookends to Fleischer’s I’ll be Glad When You’re Dead You Rascal You (1933); in a climactic chase sequence, Armstrong’s singing face is matted into the action in pursuit of Betty Boop and Koko the Clown.

5 Gorillaz is a contemporary music and visual project created by Jamie Hewlett and Damon Albarn featuring a virtual band of animated characters.


9 Acknowledgment should be made of other publications sharing this title: Donald Crafton examines the notion of performance as underlying the construction, execution, and reception of cartoons in Shadow of a Mouse: performance, belief, and world-making in animation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); J.B. Kaufman explores the many silent films leading up to Steamboat Willie (1928) in “The Shadow of the Mouse”, Film Comment, September 1992, 28.5: 68.