

BOOK REVIEWS

The Drawings of Norman McLaren,

Tundra Books, 192 pp, Hardcover \$25.00

Film is most consistently described, and presented, as reality in motion. Too seldom does a filmmaker venture into his imagination for visual content, except in 'experimental' shorts, so the film audience rarely has the opportunity to travel along a flight of fancy. Fortunately, in Canada we have Norman McLaren, and with each film he provides a trip beyond the bounds of reality, but firmly grounded in it. Therein, I think, lies the richness of his work. While not making films, McLaren has always indulged in an activity that he uses in his films, but with a different goal: drawing. And his drawings, presented in this volume for their first public exposure, are not intended for eventual screen treatment but are very private play.

"Filmmaking is my work; drawing is my play," says McLaren, but adds that it is a serious play. I would describe it as an exploratory play, and while the movement, energy and constant motion of the drawings stems naturally from his filmmaking — or vice versa — the fact that they are not collaborative or compromised by budgets, or affected by the time limitations, allows McLaren to fully vent his imagination, and to voyage to and through his subconscious. Which is exactly his goal in drawing.

He began as a student at Glasgow Art School, but almost immediately began making films, and stopped drawing because he was forced to simply reproduce the static. Later he discovered surrealism, and therein found an approach that offered possibilities and potential pleasure. So, in the early 1940's, he began to draw for himself.

The resulting art work was never intended for sale or public viewing, and McLaren says he agreed to publish this volume because then people could see the work without asking to buy it. In fact, he adds, if he were allowed to keep forever only a small part of his life's oeuvre, it would be his drawings, not his films, that he would retain.

the drawings of / les dessins de Norman McLaren



Five hundred of the drawings are reproduced in this beautifully-printed book. They are divided into sections based on common themes, and each section has an introduction from McLaren, taken from interviews conducted by art critic Michael White. A major complaint to start with is that nowhere is there any indication of the original size of the given drawing. Sometimes several are grouped on a page, sometimes only one appears. What kind of scale does McLaren consider? Since his films and his drawings seem to move on a level of intimacy, probably these are original size, but this information is very basic for a better understanding.

After all, to see McLaren's work in book form is an experience very different from seeing it on a screen: time can be taken in perusal, and parts can be sampled and returned to according to the reader's desire. A film flows over you in one sitting and it may be ages until you can revisit it.

McLaren works with pencil, brush, ink, and, most successfully, with pen: his line carries more force when it is very well defined. Each tool seems to be for a particular purpose at a particular time. Pencil offered greater ease in conveying sensuousness; colour is used rarely, and only for the most dramatic effect, rather than in a drawing that asks the reader to explore all over it. Landscapes rarely appear, except in his China efforts, and when he becomes interested in what he calls "undulations."

Undulations implies movement and energy, and all of his drawings try to present activity in an overt way: and change, metamorphosis, labyrinths and mazes are favorite subjects. The latter also offer a measure of the man. He loves labyrinths, and he'd even like to build one in real life, but with compensations for those who come to dead ends: benches, flowers, sculpture. In fact in these works there is more of McLaren than is evident in his films. As he considers the drawings private, so he uses them to reveal and analyse much from the most private areas of his life. All of the drawings present what can only be called a real humanism.

What he really enjoys is intellectual exercise carried out with visual means. Faces become trees, alphabets are used literally to write letters, furniture is designed as a complement to the human body, cubes become creatures, a sideways glance is done by the head, not the neck. Even the fourth dimension is probed, with designs for bicycles with spherical wheels and four-dimensional cubes presented. And, thankfully, they're all done with a smile. It's really only when McLaren tries to be perfectly accurate that he produces dull results: a group of human figures all look the same. Still-life pears are too still to be alive.

Certain effects, such as the curlicue are used often enough to be called a basic tool, and there is a definite style evident in the work as a whole. Just as definite subjects and themes recur: eroticism, Freud, symbols such as birds. All of which are part of the contemporary artist's vocabulary, and to which McLaren adds little new knowledge. It is here that his drawings differ most from his films: in the films you get a sense of seeing something, totally or an aspect of it, for the first time. An example is **Pas de Deux**: it's the old routine in a breath-takingly new frame. But with the drawings this effect is absent: little over-all insight that is fresh in its thoughts about our world. But what the drawings do offer is insight about Norman McLaren and his world: that's reason enough for publishing this book.

Stephen Chesley

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS



Angèle Knight as Catou Brunet in **The Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck**

new comedy team. Millette (Belletête) has Peter Lorre's alligator eyes and the same nasal drawl, "No rough stuff when we grab the kids, Napoleon." Kurt Schiegl, whose bald head and large nose I vaguely recognize from some shaving cream commercial, plays the lumpish Napoleon.

There is something satisfyingly palatable about this film yet, in the end, it lacks Crunch. The problem might be one of pacing, certainly strong elements of action and comedy are present in the script.

The important thing is, the film was made. A maturing film industry in Canada cannot ignore the fact that young Canadians, now developing a cinematic aesthetic from American films and television, will one day be called upon to support our national cinema.

Joan Irving

Beyond Shelter

d. Ronald H. Blumer, **ph.** John Geeza and Erik Block, **additional footage,** Bill Ewing, **ed.** Ron Blumer **sd.** Julian Olson, **narration:** Budd Knapp, **exec. p.** Gilbert Rosenberg, M.D., **p.c.** Maimonides Hospital and Home, 1975, **color:** 16mm **running time** 25 minutes, **dist.** McGill University Film Library.

Ron Blumer's **Beyond Shelter** is educational in the best sense of the word; not only does it teach, it raises questions and goes on inside one's head long after the film has stopped. Subtitled "Ideas from Denmark on Housing for the Elderly", it is an intense and provocative film whose impact is to underline the indifference with which older people are treated in North America. Although the film takes us to Denmark and shows us a variety of housing, it is centered around questions of concern and apathy rather than around questions of architecture.

The opening black and white scenes of Maimonides Hospital (a chronic care facility in Montreal) are eloquent and beautifully done. The antiseptic hallways shine as the camera moves silently across old faces full of character but now subdued with age and helplessness. In 'recreation rooms' the wheelchairs are gathered around the television but little note is taken. No one speaks to anyone else. The air seems heavy with drugs, distress and monotony. When the camera begins to follow an elderly patient shuffling quickly down a long and empty corri-

dor, Blumer has us where he wants us; we know the woman is trying to escape rather than to go for a walk. And we are at once reassured and surprised at our cynicism when she is turned around by an aid and taken back to her room.

What would we become if *those people* should be out among us? It comes as no surprise when the medical director of the hospital tells us that though Maimonides is the best chronic facility for the aging in Montreal, he wouldn't want to see his mother institutionalized there. The institution itself seems to have made the patients different from the people outside the walls.

The camera moves on to Denmark, this time in color, showing lively street scenes, old folks sitting together on park benches or walking down the street. We see and learn a lot. As a Copenhagen city planner explains a new public housing project geared to make life easy and stimulating for the aged, the emotional tension of the film relaxes. Here are apartments for the aged, built in a low lying complex which includes a grocery store, a laundry and a day-care center for children. There is a communal dining room for those who wish to eat together but each apartment is equipped with its own kitchen. A constant-care wing is there for those people who become ill, and so they are cared for without being uprooted from their neighbors. People exchange services and keep one another company because of the diversity within the living structures: those who are less ill help the others, neighbors do each other a good turn. There is an acceptance that life means change, and that people are resourceful, regardless of age.

The film deals with attitudes. There are scenes in which the elderly themselves tell about being able to look out the window and to see the children. They even complain sometimes about the noise and fuss which the children cause. The film teaches too. There is a marvellous apartment built for the handicapped wheelchair person, complete with adjustable counters, wheel-in showers and emergency cords to alert the support staff in the building. Although the capital cost of

**canadian
filmmakers
distribution
centre**

We are the
largest
distribution
outlet for
independent
Canadian
filmmakers.

406 JARVIS ST. TORONTO, ONTARIO M4Y 2G6 TEL. (416) 921-4121