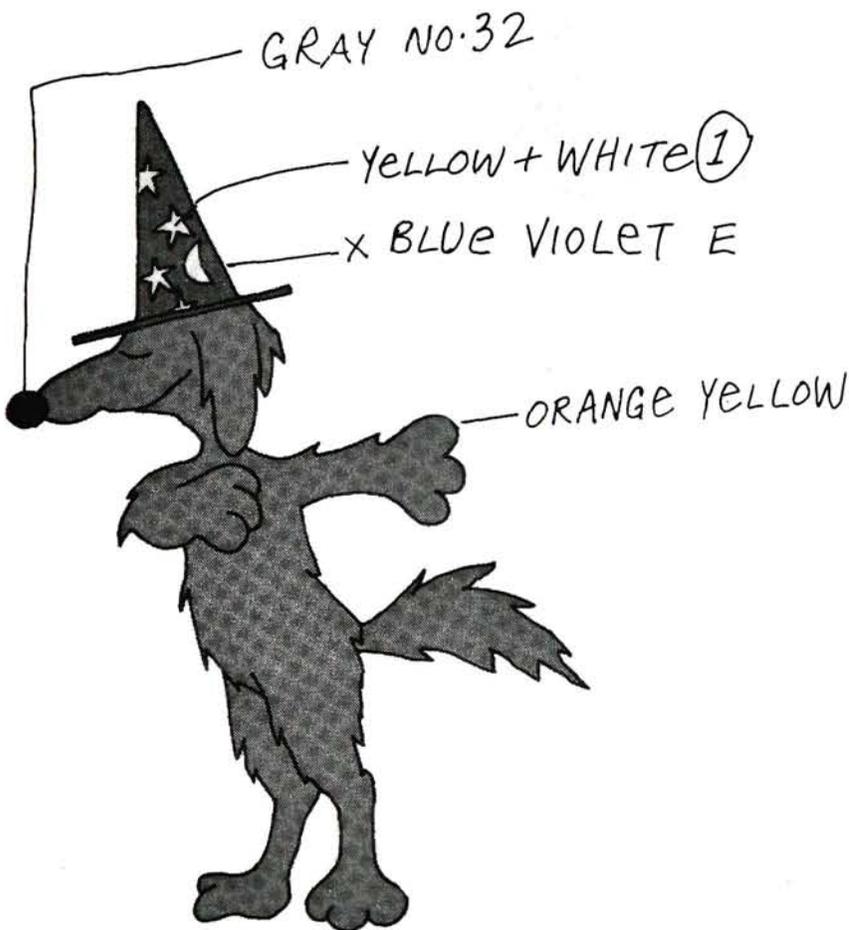


animation in vancouver

by N'eema Lakin

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(NOTE) DOGS EYES WHEN OPEN
ARE WHITE

MAGENTA
INSIDE MOUTH



Animation has often been regarded with something less than respect and appreciation by both filmmakers and the general public. The capture of cinematographic realism has always easily impressed viewers. Thus, live-action films are often seen as the appropriate medium for artistic expression, the discussion of philosophical issues, and the proper presentation of both personal and political ideologies.

Animation, though a film form, is paradoxically closer to the graphic arts – particularly the popular arts in that, from the beginning, an interchange has existed between cartoons, comics, and the animated film.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of animation as a film form. An increasing number of film festivals, articles, and courses are being devoted to both an historical view of animation and animation technique.

N'eema Lakin holds an MA in communication studies from Simon Fraser University, where she also worked as a teaching assistant. Having made some animated films and been active in founding the Burnaby Mountain Film Society, Ms. Lakin is presently working as a freelance writer in Vancouver.

In the traditional view, Canadian animation is centered in Montreal and begins and ends with the National Film Board. This assumption ignores the fact that much of the animation originating in Canada has been produced in commercial ventures, outside the confines of the NFB. Even independent filmmakers and small companies are gearing their production primarily towards the commercial and popular entertainment fields, though perhaps employing less traditional commercial styles to accomplish these aims.

A growing number of animators are also working independently in individual styles on personal films as well as commercial projects, breaking the previously sharply defined boundaries between the amateur and the professional, and between the commercial and the avant-garde.

Vancouver supports a small but active group of animators. Perhaps not more than 12 individuals could be classified as full-time professional animators. Even among this group, several people occasionally take on odd jobs to supplement their incomes.

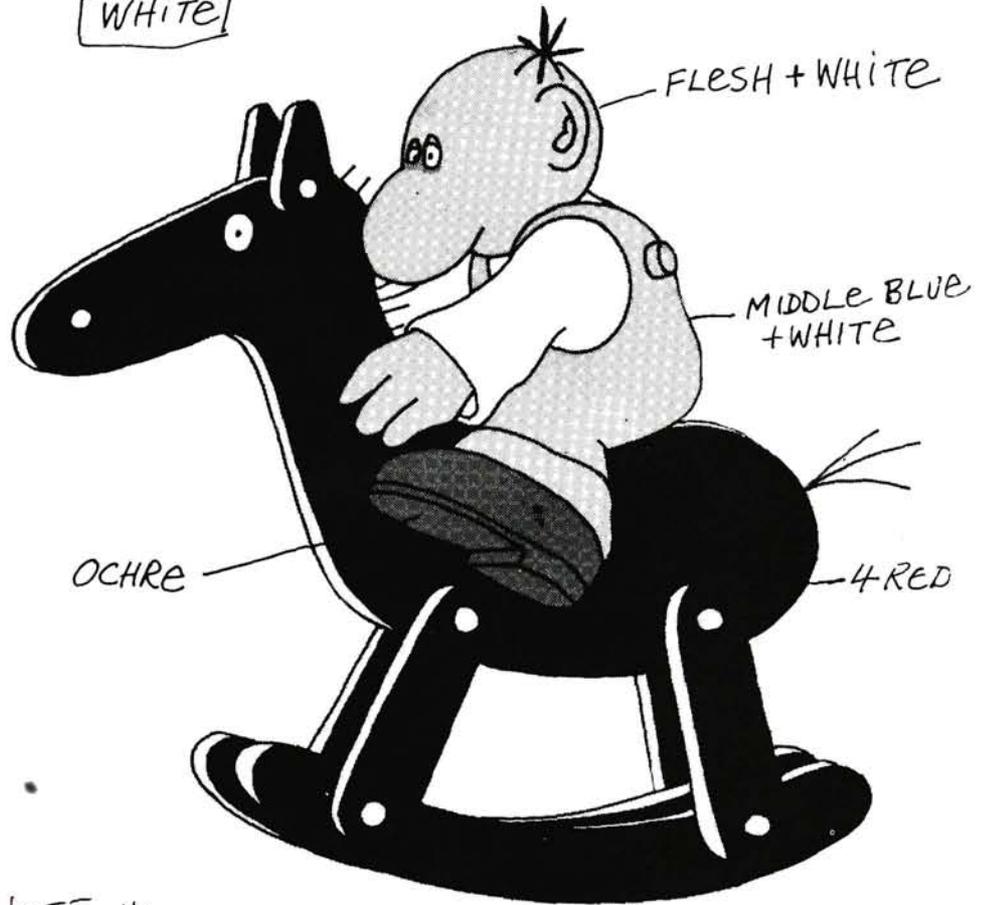
Due in part to the small size of the professional community, animators in Vancouver seem to have formed a rather tightly integrated group. As Don Worobey, head of the NFB's Vancouver animation studio, states, "The majority of animators here, especially those between the ages of 25 and 35, studied at the Vancouver School of Art, and share a similar training in the visual arts and graphic design. We also tend to maintain contact with each other and with film students currently enrolled at VSA."

As such, most animators are familiar with each other's films and often do subcontract work on each other's projects, as well as freelancing for the NFB or larger animation firms.

Canawest Film Productions, the largest commercial animation studio in Vancouver, is a division of KVOSTV, the CBS network station from Bellingham, Washington. Although only three people, Cathy Madsen, Liz Edgar, and Barrie Helmer, are employed on a permanent basis, Canawest also hires a large number of Vancouver animators for freelance work. According to Cathy Madsen, "Our connections in the American Northwest, as well as in Western Canada, enable us to obtain many contracts from both areas. Along with animated commercials for Hollywood Pacific and the National Bank of Seattle, we have produced TV serials for Hanna-Barbera, such as *Abbott and Costello*, *The Beatles*, and *Wait Till Your Father Gets Home*. These serials follow the traditional animation style esta-

EVERYTHING ELSE

WHITE



NOTE * MOUTH WHEN OPEN

MIDDLE RED B

The Rocking Horse made by Hoskin and Morris for *Sesame Street* complete with instructions

lished by the Hanna-Barbera studios."

In Canada, Canawest has produced films for the governments of Saskatchewan and Alberta. One of these commercials, a 30-second spot, entitled *Aware*, made for the Saskatchewan alcohol control program, won an award at the US TV Commercial Festival. The animation division of Canawest also produces titles and inserts for films made in their live-action studio.

Although the majority of animated films produced in Vancouver have been made for commercial or informational purposes, the NFB continues to provide an alternative as a non-commercial forum. The NFB's contribution to animation is a substantial one. With the introduction of a regionalization policy, a few years ago, both a regional approach to animation and the personal styles of west coast animators have emerged at the NFB.

The animation section of the NFB's Vancouver division was established four years ago. In 1974, the group moved to its present location on Vancouver's Granville St.

Don Worobey recently became head of the animation division, taking over from John Taylor, another Vancouver animator. After graduating from the Vancouver School of Art in 1970, Worobey did a postgraduate year with animator Ryan Larkin. He then worked for the NFB in their Inuit animation workshop at Cape Dorset: "I started working with animation because though I had been trained as a painter, I wanted my work to move; to be dynamic. Eventually, I decided to become completely involved with film.

"I think my orientation towards animation is different from many of the other animators in Vancouver. The majority of them are basically character animators; interested in



A Quiet Day by Al Sens

storyline and character development. I'm predominantly a visual animator. I'm excited by abstract design and geometric shapes; the conceptual and experimental aspects of film.

"The concern here at the NFB remains with the fairly traditional NFB approach to animation. The style and overall orientation is towards films with social commentary, and which emphasize social issues. However, I do feel that animation produced at the Vancouver studio does possess definite regional flavor and character, both in its subject matter and approach. Films here tend to be lighter, more humorous, and less overtly political."

The NFB in Vancouver has funded diverse projects in the past, which have been quite successful in commercial theatres as well. **Land Use**, by Hugh Folds, is a theatrical short made for use by community groups, detailing the trials of a young couple who attempt to go back to the land. **The Twitch** by Al Sens (in collaboration with Hugh Folds and Wayne Morris) is a film about prejudice, which focuses on a king with this particular disability. It was shown in local commercial theatres along with **Jaws**. Hugh Folds and Wayne Morris also produced **Citizen Harold**, which received an honorable mention at the Australian Film Festival. **TV Sale**, by Ernie Schmidt, provided a satiric look at television, and was also shown in local commercial theatres.

Due to budget constraints, production has been cut by about half. Yet, several projects are currently underway; a film about supertankers off

the northwest coast, a documentary about children's animation, and some theatrical shorts. Worobey himself is currently working on a film about Egyptian architecture with experimental filmmaker Al Razutis.

Worobey is particularly pleased with certain aspects of the NFB's program. "One of the innovative features of the Vancouver program is the support that is available to the beginning and the independent filmmaker. If the NFB likes the rushes of a film, and the filmmaker lacks the funding or the facilities to complete it, the NFB will provide the needed funding and facilities. If the final film is thought to be good, the NFB will buy it from the filmmaker, paying up to \$5,000, and consider the film to be an NFB production. If not, all rights revert back to the filmmaker. The NFB will also buy complete films and script ideas from local filmmakers."

Locally, the NFB maintains strong ties with the Vancouver School of Art. Their consultation services are made available to students, along with occasional use of NFB facilities. Some graduates of the VSA have come to work for the NFB on special projects.

Worobey would like to encourage greater film and script production, and more experimental techniques of animation (i.e., computer and optical animation), but budget constraints make this difficult. He is also somewhat frustrated by what he believes to be excessive centralized control by the NFB.

"Budgets must be approved by the bureaucracy and unfortunately projects from the west are pitted in com-

petition for funding against those from other regional offices. However, since the NFB is less subject to commercial pressures, we are still able to get a considerable amount of support for developing and refining various ideas."

Al Sens is perhaps the best known and most influential of the Vancouver animators. Sens, who runs his own independent animation studio, began making animated films in the 1950s. He has done work for the NFB, the CBC, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, the Learning Corporation of America, Cinemedia, Infomedia, Public Service Commercials, and Habitat, as well as numerous independent projects. His many films include **A Quiet Day**, **The Twitch**, **Puppet Dream**, **The See Hear Talk Dream and Act Film**, **The Sorcerer**, **Timmy**, and **The Bureaucracy**. He has been mentioned as a major Canadian filmmaker in Ralph Stephenson's book, *The Animated Film*, a part of the International Film Guide Series. As a past teacher at the Vancouver School of Art, and present instructor in UBC's Theatre Department, Sens has also influenced the work of many Vancouver animators.

Sens became interested in animation as a vehicle for the further development of the cartoons he had been drawing for magazines like *The Post* and *Maclean's*: "I got into animation because I felt it would allow me to extend the characters and ideas I had originated, in a combination of graphics and short stories. I was self-taught; there really was no place to study animation in those days. However, my work was influenced by various European graphic artists such as Richard Williams, animators like George Dunning, Chuck Jones, and Tex Avery.

"To me, animation is a hybrid art form. In fact, I really don't think that there are many similarities between live-action and animation. Actually, animation itself is more like an individual actor."

While Sens asserts that he likes the freedom of working as an independent, he emphasized that if the workload becomes too heavy, there's a good "telephone network" of people who can help out with the technical and graphic work.

"I find that my style is constantly changing. I like to experiment with different methods, particularly those techniques which help to alleviate some of the more tedious aspects of cell animation. I also enjoy caricature and the various aspects of characterization. Of course, sometimes the techniques you can use are limited by cost and by the demands of a particular client."

Sens describes most of his films as mild social commentary, usually made within an interpersonal context: "To me, the content is more important than the technique, and I enjoy making my points with humor. Paradoxically, the restrictions in terms of content and humor are less stringent in commercial work than in most educational projects. Often educational groups are so intent on getting across the facts, they can become too didactic. Personally, I like to lighten difficult clinical or technical information and convert it into a more generalized type of film."

Sens's ability to achieve this type of balance is evident in the series of films about learning disabilities which he made for Simon Fraser University. Ordinarily a difficult and even painful subject, Sens, using a combination of stills and cell animation, manages to both enliven and enlighten.

Teaching at UBC has enabled Sens to supplement his earnings as a filmmaker and to enrich his style and perception: "I get a different perspective from my students. An engineering student, for example, has a very different approach to animation than I do, and I can get new ideas from this type of orientation."

Both Sens and his cameraperson, Richard Bruce, agree that since funding is such a problem for filmmakers /animators, they would like to see a system implemented that would be similar to that of the medieval guild. In this type of apprenticeship system, a beginning animator could learn by actually making films, and be ensured of some form of monetary support during this time period.

Another of the small independent companies in Vancouver is Synch-Pop Animation Studios, founded by filmmakers Mal Hoskin and Wayne Morris, and accountant Paul Royce. Both Hoskin and Morris attended VSA. During that time, they were co-subjects in a CBC television documentary about young filmmakers in Canada. Animated films produced by Morris and Hoskin during their student years received distribution by Universal Films.

After graduating from the Vancouver School of Art, Hoskin taught a course at VSA for three years. In 1974, he founded Synch-Pop Studios with Morris and Royce.

Since the establishment of the company, Hoskin and Morris have produced, among other films, sequences for the CBC's French section of *Sesame Street*, animated segments of a navy training film, a film about physical fitness (made in collaboration with Al Sens), and various commercials

and advertising shorts. These films include **Metric System** and **Metric Slide Show** for the Provincial Educational Media Centre of B.C., the '74 **Tax Guide** for Canadian Cinegraph of B.C., and commercials for Rainier Beer, *the Rolf Harris Show*, *What's the Good Word?*

Wayne Morris has worked as an animator, scriptwriter, and director on various productions. He has also worked on films for the NFB; **Citizen Harold**, **Tilt**, **BC Centennial Clips**, and **For the Good of Mankind**.

As Hoskin states, "We like having our own company and being in control of our situation. Our talents mesh well, and complement each other. Wayne concentrates on character animation, whereas I tend to prefer abstract and logo work. Then again, Wayne has a fairly definite style, whereas mine is subject to constant change."

Morris remarks, "Our style is basically traditional cell animation. I'm personally interested in characterization and the dramatic possibilities of scripted animation, rather than just film technique. I have a well-established animation style, which I'm quite happy with. In developing this style, I'd say that I was influenced by American cartoons - Disney characters, and Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny, etc. I think what I'd really like to see is that type of animation technique applied to a dramatic situation; or a situation with a socio-political content; a kind of animated Pogo strip."

One of Vancouver's independent animators is Audrey Doray, a well-known artist and sculptor. Doray views herself primarily as a painter and sculptor, who began working in animation as a result of her frustration with the static image: "I was always fascinated by the idea of motion. I experimented with different materials in terms of light pattern and movement; for example, paintings with sound tracks and moving sculptures. Gradually, I realized that my work involved a cyclical repetition of

image patterns. I thought animation would enable me to accomplish this type of image flow on a smaller and more manageable scale."

Doray's first film **Zodiac** involved cell animation of drawings depicting the interaction between the 12 signs of the zodiac and the four basic elements; fire, air, earth and water.

Her current project, as yet unfinished, is entitled **Poppy Talk**. As Doray describes the film, "It concerns the lyrical yet somber contrasts between a poppy and an iron gate. The whole concept can be viewed on different levels; the poppy as the symbol of the battlefield, as a part of the cycle of nature, a mystical symbol, or a representation of the pop culture." The film is to be a combination of animation and live action, color and black and white.

Unlike many other Vancouver animators, Doray works solely on an independent basis: "I feel that my films are highly personal, and this is probably the reason that except for occasional technical assistance, I tend to work alone."

At the present time, Doray has temporarily abandoned animation for the production of a slide/sound documentary about China, which she visited a year ago: "I could see making an animated film about China or a film with animated sequences. Animation could be a very powerful political tool. For example, an animated newsreel or certain Czech animated films I have seen are extremely simple and direct but also incorporate a statement about the human condition.

"I like animation to be compressed; short and relatively simple. Otherwise, I feel there is a danger of information overload, from too much stimulus. Through my work in sculpture, I've learned that it is very important to pay attention to the projection span of a potential audience. I appreciate a director like Antonioni, who holds a shot and give you time to absorb all the information which is in that particular shot."

In general, the animation scene in Vancouver is an active one, which given the opportunity could become even more vital and exciting. Many other filmmakers such as Howard Peddlar, Norman Drew, Marv Newlands, John Taylor, Ken Wallis, Richard Watson, an Malcolm Collett are also working in the animation field. Students too numerous to mention individually, as well as amateur animators, are also busy honing their skills in courses at the Vancouver School of Art, UBC and SFU. With this type of training combined with the highly personal west coast style, Vancouver animators will continue to contribute interesting dimensions to Canadian animation. □



The goat from **Zodiac** by independent animator Audrey Doray