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## Charles Solomon reviews **The Animation Show of Shows**

Off Ramp animation critic Charles Solomon | Off-Ramp | January 9th, 2013, 10:33am

Frédéric Back

Still from "The Man Who Planted Trees" (1987) by Frédéric Back.

**Almost since the art form began, there's been a split between animation as a studio product and animation as a vehicle for individual expression.**

The enormous succe

features and TV shows has kept the work of the major animation studios uppermost in the minds of American audiences recently. But beginning with the pioneer cartoonist and filmmaker Winsor McCay - - back in the early 1900's -- independent artists have treated animation as an art as personal, flexible and immediate as painting or sculpture.

Their work is an entirely different vision of what an animated film can be, as the new DVD box set [The Animation Show of Shows](#) richly proves. Volume 3 just came out. The artists who create these films may teach or support themselves with other jobs or work at a government-sponsored body, like the [National Film Board of Canada](#). Some are students, and some are professionals pursuing their visions in their spare time. They're united by a commitment to the art of animation. Many of the films in *Show of Shows* use techniques that are too impractical or personal for large scale production. In *The Street*, Carolyn Leaf uses the masochistically difficult medium of paint on glass--which she invented--to present a story by Mordecai Richler. She begins with a painting, then slightly alters it between frames to create movement in perspective and an illusion of life. (It's also impossible to imagine a Hollywood studio greenlighting an animated feature about a lower-middle class Jewish family in Montreal.)

In the same way, *Wild Life* by Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis, and *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by William Joyce capture the highly individual art styles of the filmmakers. Other animators are more focused on telling stories. In *La Maison en Petits Cubes*, Kunio Kato recounts an aged widower's battle with loneliness as he struggles against an inexorable flood. *Rubicon* by Gil Alkabetz offers an off-the-wall spin on the old puzzle about how can a man get a sheep, a wolf, and a cabbage across a river in a small row boat. Some of these films are even educational. The hilarious *Hot Stuff* is actually a fire safety film: the gods give man fire, only to discover it was a mistake to do so.

*Let's Pollute* pokes fun at our slovenly habits. And the Oscar-winning *Every Child* present the rights children are guaranteed by the United Nations.

Two Oscar-winning films by Frederic Back, *Crac!* and *The Man Who Planted Trees* combine all these qualities. His stories are pleas for ecological sanity, told through exquisite colored pencil drawings on frosted acetate. It's visual poetry. The shorts in *The Show of Shows* are not superior to features from Pixar, Disney, DreamWorks, or Sony, any more than a solo piano recital is better or worse than an orchestral performance. They're just a different approach. Not every film in the DVD set is a gem: a few will leave you scratching your head, wondering what the artists (and awards committees) were thinking of. But they're all reminders of the extraordinarily diverse visuals animation can produce, a diversity more than a century of filmmaking has yet to exhaust. (*Charles Solomon is author of The Toy Story Films: An Animated Journey and The Art and Making of Peanuts Animation.*)

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