

Caroline Leaf – An Interview

Nag Vladermersky March 2003 Feature Articles Issue 25



A retrospective season of Caroline Leaf's films will be screening early in 2004 at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, as part of the "Masters of Animation" series curated by the Melbourne Animation Posse. The series will run from mid-2003 and also include retrospective screenings of Robert Breer, Yuri Norstein, Bill Plympton, Georges Schwizgebel, Phil Mulloy, William Kentridge and Faith and John Hubley.

A Caroline Leaf filmography is at the [tail](#) of this interview.

In March of last year I was lucky enough to be invited to take part in a weeklong animation event called Rencontres in the gorgeous surroundings of Brittany, France. The event took the form of a series of workshops and talks given to animation students by master animators from many parts of Europe, as well as the UK, USA, Canada, Africa and Australia (from where I was the representative). For me it was a dream come true. I not only got the chance to meet many of the world's greatest animators but also to attend their workshops and talks and gain the benefit of their experience. The talks and workshops took place during the day, leaving the evenings free for visits to the many little bars and cafés in the centre of town. Caroline Leaf was there from Canada and it was a joy for me to be able to get to know her a little and experience first-hand her generosity of spirit and warmth. This interview was subsequently written over various email exchanges during the last month.

Caroline has been making films since 1968 where she discovered the world of

animation at Harvard University, USA. Her initial technique was animating beach sand on white glass lit from below. The resulting film *Sand or Peter and the Wolf* (1969) won her a fellowship and the chance to work on a second film. In 1972 she moved to Montreal at the invitation of the National Film Board of Canada where she worked until 1991 producing primarily animated films but also live action and documentary shorts. At the NFBC she further developed her storytelling and animation techniques including using animated painting on glass. Her films have been seen all around the world at film and animation festivals where she has received numerous awards and prizes. She has also served as a jury member at festivals worldwide, given many hands-on workshops and taught at colleges and film schools including an 8-week course at the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane in 1994.

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Nag Vladermersky: You have used sand animation, etching directly onto film and painting on glass. Can you describe your animation techniques, from the germination of an idea to the finished product?

Caroline Leaf: Looking at my various animation techniques, I differentiate between those that are under-the-camera, and those that aren't. Usually animators make a series of drawings on paper or on the computer, say, and then film them to create a moving sequence. By contrast, working under-the-camera, one films as one draws, and one image is destroyed to create the next image. When a sequence has been filmed, there is nothing left except the film. There is no artwork to go back to if something doesn't work. I call this kind of animation a one-off performance. It takes nerve to do. The reward is a fresh, lively, unique and personal piece of animation. Often the material used to create the images, such as sand or paint, is visible, and an awareness of its inert qualities turned into motion in whatever shape my mind and eye decide forms an interesting part of the film appreciation. When I worked with beach sand, or wet paint on glass, those are under-the-camera techniques. Etching directly onto film was not an under the camera technique. One can always go back and add, subtract, alter the images. Still, it is a technique of immediacy.

My animation techniques developed over time as my needs for expression changed. I

began, by chance, to animate with beach sand on a light box, which created silhouette images of dark on light, or the reverse. This suited the kind of stories I was telling at the time – fables, the Inuit legend. In time, I refined and complicated the sand imagery by pressing the opaque sand into different densities and creating shadings. This suited my needs at a time when I was interested in adapting a Kafka story to animation. I could create atmosphere with the sand. Later, when I wanted to work in colour I came up with the idea of wet paint on glass, and found a medium to mix into watercolour paints that kept them from drying. When I etched the film emulsion, I was looking for a way to animate without a camera, wanting to explore the feeling of close connection to animated movement and under-the-camera performance. It happened that I had developed a story to tell that required imagery too complicated to etch in 35mm film, and so I used the larger format Imax 70mm. In fact, those 70mm images were refilmed onto 35mm. They were not more spontaneous than any other way of animating not under-the-camera.

NV: Your films are renowned for your emotional content and graphic style. How do different stories dictate the techniques you use?

CL: As I've said, the animation techniques I've used have developed out of needs for some new form of expression, maybe to add colour, maybe to make more detailed imagery. I don't think that there is a certain kind of story that requires a certain technique. Seems to me that any story can be told in any technique. It will look different, the adaptation may be different. There's not just one way to tell a story.

NV: In addition to animation you have made documentary films (*Kate and Anna McGarrigle* and *Interview*). What makes you choose live action or animation as a medium to work in?

CL: Well, here, obviously the story does make a difference. I have also directed some short dramas. When I made the documentary *Kate and Anna McGarrigle*, I was interested in the activity of making a live action film, and my subject was one that I could not imagine handling in animation. Even so, I put drawings into the documentary, as the director's comments on things that the McGarrigle sisters were saying. *Interview* was finally crafted more as an animated film than documentary.

NV: You've made films based on Inuit legends (*The Owl Who Married the Goose*)

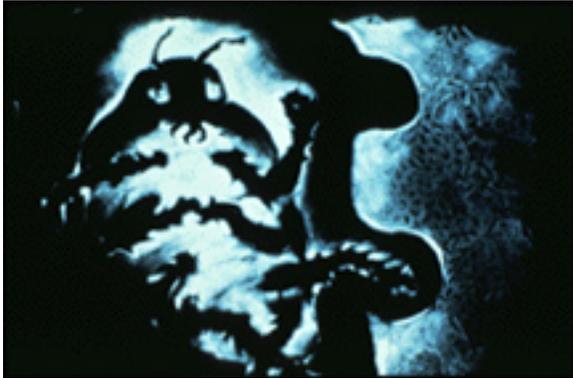
from which you recorded tapes amongst the Eskimo people. Can you describe this process and how you were received by the Inuits?



CL: I made *The Owl Who Married A Goose* back in the early 1970s, a time when there were no Inuit animators, and the National Film Board of Canada was benevolently trying to tell the stories of all Canadian peoples. I went twice to the Canadian arctic to make this film. I chose the story from a written text, and went to Holman Island to work with Nanogak, an Inuit artist who worked for me with cut-outs to suit my sand silhouette animation. While I was there I found out that the old women were great mimics of arctic animal sounds, because as girls they had accompanied their fathers on hunts, where making animal sounds brought the animals within range of the hunters. So, after animating the film in Montreal, I went back to the Arctic, to Broughton Island, with the soundless film and a list of sounds and sound effects I needed. Six old women sat around a microphone and made the sounds and laughed a lot. I got what I wanted, but it was puzzling, uncomfortable work. For example, after I screened the film, which is nine minutes long and involves the eggs of the owl and the goose hatching, one old lady got up and walked out, saying that what the film showed was not true, eggs take two weeks to hatch. I was never sure that I wasn't using the Inuit people. I knew that their stories were truth and history for them, and they didn't tamper with the storytelling or make personal changes. That is why the stories were remarkably the same across thousands of miles of the arctic. And I had had to change the story, to personalize the animals, to make it mine in order to be able to tell it.

NV: You've also used literary sources as a starting point for your films (Mordecai Richler's *The Street* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis of Mr Samsa*). Can you

talk about the process of adapting literature to screen-based work, and in particular animation?



CL: When you make an adaptation of a work of art from one medium to another, you must think of the original work of art as inspiration and a guide. Different mediums have different rules of storytelling. The biggest difference is the kind of information words carry, and the kind of information images carry. I didn't know these things when I started to adapt Mordecai Richler's story *The Street* to animation. At first I recorded a dramatized reading of the entire story, with the idea that in this way I would be true to the work of literature. The images would illustrate the text. I quickly found that it was dead as a piece of film when I duplicated the information in soundtrack and picture. I found it became lively film when I dropped as much of the text as possible, putting the storytelling into images. For moments the soundtrack and picture come together with the same information, but then they veer apart and have an oblique relationship. I made *The Metamorphosis of Mr Samsa* at the same time that I made *The Street*, but because I did not have access to the English translation of Kafka's story, because it was still protected by copyright, I had other problems, but not one of duplicating text and imagery. Kafka's storytelling is intensely interior and psychological, and at that time in my life I didn't know a film language to adapt it to. I stuck to a barebones narrative and a strong sense of atmosphere.

NV: Can you comment on the National Film Board of Canada as producers and funders of your work? How did you manage the relationship?

CL: The National Film Board is a Canadian government film production house. I was paid by Canadian taxpayers to make my films. I think we both did very well from the arrangement. Film Board films are known and respected worldwide, more than most

Canadians realize. At home it is not a particularly noticed institution except in film circles. In return I had security, peace of mind, the freedom to make the films I wanted to make. It was quite ideal for me, because the films I wanted to make were pretty much the films that the Film Board wanted made. Because of the public funding, there was a conservative style and often a moral or didactic message in the films that were made at the Film Board. Nothing was too way out. Importantly, the Film Board films were not made for a general public. They were made for small specialized audiences...people interested in the arts, school kids, people interested in labour relations, etc. Maybe you had to watch what you said and how you said it, but there was a lot of leeway to specialize.

NV: I was lucky enough to be present at one of your animation workshops in France last year, which was very much a hands-on event. Is it important for you to de-mystify the creative process? What feedback do you get from animation students when you travel the world?

CL: I do not like at all when people remark how much work goes into making an animation film. It is a fact, but it isn't what gives value to a film. Of course, I like to demystify by showing what I can about my technique and way of working. I can make practical things easier for a new filmmaker who wants to work in the same technique. I'm continually surprised that my films still move people. They don't seem to get dated, at least I don't think so. Despite changes in technology so that filmmaking is more accessible to more people, and with kids growing up with more and more moving images in their lives, I find that students still need help with the same things... storytelling, image making, communicating, and trusting their own creativity.

NV: You have also served as a jury member at many animation festivals around the world. How do you see the animation scene at the turn of this new century?

CL: I see more and more animation everywhere. There are video games, websites, and many feature films incorporate animation special effects. In some ways, animation is moving closer to live action. The boundary between the two gets fuzzy. This is mass media animation. Funding for what I call art animation seems to be drying up. Unless art animation is supported, the people who express ideas and feelings creatively will not have a chance. There are plenty of technicians around but it takes more than technical

know-how to say something interesting.

NV: Do you incorporate any use of the computer into your animation? (And if not do you have any plans to?)

CL: I have never found computers interesting or easy to work with for my own animation. I like to get my hands into materials. Nowadays, when my work does involve a computer, it normally takes place within a team environment, where someone else is doing the computer-related part.

NV: You're living in London at the moment. How is the filmmaking climate in the UK? And what are you working on now?

CL: I am not very active as an animator in London. So this question is hard for me to say anything useful about. I've mostly been in my studio painting. I'm presently working on some animation that comes to me through Acme Filmworks in Los Angeles.

Caroline Leaf Filmography

- 1969 *Sand or Peter and the Wolf* (Animation)
- 1971/2 Two clips for children's TV (Animation)
- 1972 *Orfeo* (Animation)
- 1972 *How Beaver stole fire* (Animation)
- 1974 *The owl who married a goose* (Animation)
- 1979 *Interview* (Animation)
- 1981 *Kate and Anna McGarrigle* (Documentary)
- 1981 *The right to refuse* (Live action – co-writer/co-producer)
- 1982 *An equal opportunity* (Live action)
- 1983 *Pies* (Animation – producer)
- 1985 *The owl and the pussycat* (Live action and animation)
- 1986 *The fox and the tiger* (Live action and animation)
- 1986 *A dog's tale* (Live action and animation)
- 1990 *Two sisters* (Animation)
- 1991 *I Met a Man* (Animation)
- 1992 *Bell Partout* (Animation)
- 1994 *Fleay's Fauna Centre* (Animation)

- 1995 *Brain Battle* (Animation)
- 1995 *Radio Rock Détente* (Animation commercial)
- 1996 *Drapeau Canada* (Animation commercial)
- 1998 *Absolut Leaf* (Animation commercial)
- 2001 *Odysseus & the Olive Tree* (Animation)