

An interview with Caroline Leaf in English

"It's about another kind of life"

An interview with Caroline Leaf conducted by Midhat "Ajan" Ajanovic_

Caroline Leaf, who is kind of a living legend among the world of animation, is not only one of the best animators but a person distinguished by her great human and artistic integrity. Her films are almost always an ample proof for the highest effort an artist put forth on his work in order to reach further in the exploration of her media's new potentiality as well as to get through to her personal world and discover it for herself and to her audience. Leaf is the animator that created several genuine animation masterpieces accomplished by different techniques one of which is so called sand animation; manipulation with shapes and forms made of sand littered over non-transparent glass illuminated from below. She also made films by gradually changing drawings in tempera on the piece of glass placed under camera or by drawing directly on the 70-mm film stripe. Each of those films is entirely her manufacture, an artistic and handicraft work in which she created literally all film frames.

Leaf started her career as an animator when she studied animation at Harvard where she made a student film *Sand or Peter and the Wolf* (1968) in sand animation. Despite the fact that she is not the first animator that used sand as the material for animation (before Leaf the same technique was used by Ernest and Gisèle Ansorge among others) but she was the first one to achieve visual composition of such an unimagined lyric quality by using that method. This applies especially to *The Owl who married a Goose* (1974), a film of marvellous sensibility based on Eskimo humorous fable. It was her *début* as an animator employed by Canadian state sponsored producer "National Film Board" after her move from native town Boston to Montreal in 1972. Her next film made for NFB *The Street* (1976) was an adaptation of a chapter from the novel written by

the famous Montreal based author Mordecai Richler, which plot revolves around nine year old boy who impatiently wait to death of his ill ground mother in order to get her room. This film definitely established Leaf as a one of the most creative and innovative animators of all time. All transitions from one scene to another are done without cutting but by using a direct transformation from one scene to the following one, perspectives and view points are constantly changeable and adaptable to the narrative process while sound track includes an authentic sound recorded on the spot in the same Montreal neighbourhood where story takes place. The mentioned and other qualities of this film made it kind of cult among animation lovers worldwide. The Street won several prizes including Grand Prix in Ottawa and Academy Award nomination and is Leaf's most successful film up to date. Two times, in Los Angeles 1984 and in Zagreb 2002, animation critics from all the world voted The Street as the second to best animated film ever made, next to Norstein's Tale of Tales.

The same technique from The Street is used in her next film The Metamorphosis of Mr Samsa (1977) inspired by the classical absurd story by Franz Kafka Metamorphosis on a man that is transformed into a cockroach. Together with her colleague Veronika Soul she made Interview in 1979, which is difficult to be defined because the film is a combination of different techniques, and genres, both animation and documentary are harmoniously composed in the 14 minutes long report from one day of two artists lives. Entre Deux Soeurs/ Two Sisters (1990), made for the French compartment of NFB is a exciting story about two sisters living on an almost uninhabited island; the first one occupies herself with chores as well as she makes all decisions for both of them while the younger sister is a gifted poetess who always resides at a dark room in order to hide her disfigured face. One day a man who is in love with her verses coming ashore producing a tectonic disorder in two sister's life. This extraordinary work, made by scratching emulsion

from film stripe and by colouring it with special colours, is probably the very top of the one of the most brilliant artistic opus in the history of animation.

More than deserved Caroline Leaf won Life Achievement Award in Zagreb 1996.

The world's animation first lady honoured with her attendance even "Animafest 2002" where following interview was conducted.

Q: Let's start with a very simple question: Where have you been and what have you been doing during the last eight years? I know nothing about your work and life since you got the life-achievement award in Zagreb 1996.

A: I haven't been animating. I have been painting a lot. I moved to London to be in a large English-speaking city where I could concentrate on painting.

Q: Do you have any ambitions to make a new animation?

A: I'm not ambitious with animation any more.

Q: What is the reason for it. Why did you turn to painting exclusively?

A: It started a long time ago; even in my film 'Interview' (1989) I was complaining about being stuck in a dark room tied to an animation camera. Years of my life were passing in a dark room. You see, I couldn't imagine animating except under the camera. I probably spent longer at the Film Board than I should have because I had a very comfortable secure job: I was being paid to make the films I wanted to make. I was naive and overly confident back then that I could reach another larger audience with painting than with animation, and that I could work more quickly. And I'm attracted to very hands on mediums. I love oil paint. I took a year's leave from the Film Board to paint, to find out whether it was something I could do and stay interested in. I decided yes, and in 1992 I left the Film Board. It has taken me nearly

10 years of hard work to develop as a painter to a point where I see where I'm going with it. I can only do one thing at a time. I have had to concentrate on painting to the exclusion of all else.

Q: As far as I know you even started your career as an artist in the field of painting. You were studying visual art when you became interested in animation ...

A: No, I didn't study painting. I was studying at Harvard University, receiving an academic education. I was thinking about studying architecture and Harvard offered Bauhaus style design courses, which were very restricted in terms of self expression. This was in the 1960's. It was a time when there was a buzz about filmmaking as a form of personal expression. By chance I attended an animation class at Harvard and that was how I started animating.

Animation was a liberation for me.

Q: Tell me something about your background. I'm after the sources that made you an animator artist. When did you see the first animation that caught your attention and what film was it? When did you start to draw?

A: I never liked animation on Saturday morning tv or Disney animation features, which was the only animation available when I was growing up. In my little Harvard animation class I saw 'Night on Bald Mountain' by Alexieff and Claire Parker, and 'Rhinosceros' by Jan Lenica, and I remember clearly feeling for the first time that animation was something I would like to do too, and it could be art. I have been drawing since I was teenager. I liked animation because it tells stories and it moves. I remember the moment when my first animation was projected on the wall and I saw it move... it seemed to me like making life itself. I remember the first time I made one of my animated characters speak with lip sync; it was years later in 'The Street', and again I felt like I was creating something alive.

Q: According to some pieces of writing Derek Lamb saw your work and invited you to come to

Canada and work for the NFB. Was it really so simple?

A: Derek Lamb had worked at the Film Board and he was teaching the animation class I took in 1968 when I was a student at Harvard. Because he had strong connections with the Film Board, he brought animators and their films from Canada to Harvard and we became acquainted with the Board. Two years later when I had finished school and had freelanced for a while, I took my student film to Montreal to show to the Film Board and asked if they would give me a film to make. It seemed like the best place for an animator to work. They liked my student film, which was sand animation, and after a year or two waiting, I received an invitation to make a sand animation film based on an Inuit legend.

Q: Can you tell me something more about the class you took with Derek Lamb?

A: Derek was a very good teacher because he got us excited about film and making things move. The animation class was in a little dark room in the basement and there were simple 16mm cameras nailed to the walls on all sides. And Derek said: "The door is open, just come in and work whatever you want". I remember I was in the corner and I started working with sand quite soon and all kind of things were happening behind me in the room. I was left alone and everyone could see I was happy doing something that made me content.

Q: How did you feel being at the National Film Board? How much did you know about McLaren and other great animator-artists that worked there? How would you describe the atmosphere in the studio when you came there and started working?

A: It was 1972. The '60's and '70's were exciting years at the Board. After the struggle and loneliness of being an independent American animator, I felt very supported and protected at the Film Board. It turned out that I liked some animators and some of them I didn't like so much. I made friends with some of them and with some people I didn't have very much connection.

McLaren was old and ill at the time I came to the Film Board so I never experienced him as an active force in the studio.

Q: In my personal view what was done in the NFB during sixties, seventies and the beginning of the 1980s is a pinnacle in the history of animation. There has been much writing that tries to explain that phenomenon. What's your personal explanation for the great success of the NFB?

A: The Film Board is Canadian public funding for the arts. Those were years when the economy was expanding. The Film Board searched world wide for filmmakers to make films for Canada because they were looking for the best, and looking for something new. We felt appreciated as artists, and relatively free to bend the rules to make our films

Q: How did I start to use sand?

A: I started to animate with sand early on in the animation class at Harvard. I liked working under the camera, and beach sand was a solution to drawing under the camera.

Q: How much did you know about Canada when you arrived in Montreal?

A: I was American living in Boston, which is 320 miles south of Montreal and I didn't know a thing about Canada really. The first time I drove from Boston to Montreal I passed a sign for the 45th parallel and I knew then how huge Canada was, stretching from there to the North Pole, and yet I didn't know anything about it. I was surprised that there was a big city so far north.

Americans don't know very much about Canada.

Q: Can you draw a parallel between living in Canada as an artist and being an artist in the States?

A: Canada is a huge country without many people and there is a strong feeling that artists need to be supported in order to develop a Canadian identity, and to counteract the overwhelming energy coming from the US south of the border. Canada isn't a naturally unified country. I was

supported all my working life by Canadian people, by the Canadian government.

Q: That's part of the NFB's founder John Grierson's philosophy on making movies that can help in promoting Canada to Canadians and to the world. How much did you know about that tradition in Canada's governmental film when you practically became a part of it?

A: I understood that there was an obligation to make films for the public since it was the Canadian taxpayer paying the bill. But, importantly, our films did not need to address a mass audience. They could be made for a small specialized audience.

Q: I have a kind of romanticised picture about, say, the 1970s in the Film Board. I can imagine a place in the world where the great artists from all part of the world are gathered, the place shaped by the idea of internationalism, new ideas in art and communicating between people... Am I naïve or was there something of this?

A: The Board was hiring people from all around the world like Kay Pindal, Zlatko Grgic, Ishu Patel, Paul Driessen... and me. There was an emphasis on Canadian content, but you're right, there was a lot of freedom as long as you were interesting and responsible about the content of your film. By content I don't mean a big message...sometimes style or a good feeling are the message, as in many of McLaren's abstract films.

Q: Did anybody ever tell you what to do? Something like: "You must have this in your film" or "You must put some particular idea in your film"...

A: No, not exactly. I needed to meet the need for Canadian content...which is why my first films were an Inuit legend and an adaptation of a Canadian short story. My film 'Interview' which really had no Canadian content, was part of a series of films made about directors in the animation studio. But 'Two Sisters' had no restrictions put on it at all.

Q: One of the international profiles that worked in the NFB was Alexandre Alexeieff whose

film you watched as a student. You met him in person when he had his workshop. Can you describe for me your feelings when you met him in person...

A: Yes, it was a big excitement to be part of his workshop. He was giving one of his large pin screens to the Film Board, and wanted to show the animators how to use it.

Q: I saw a documentary about that happening made by Norman McLaren. You were sitting there and you were trying to conquer pin-screen.

A: It wasn't easy for me to reach around behind the pinscreen to push the pins back out. Alexieiff worked his partner Claire Parker on the other side of the pin-screen.

Q: Am I right if I say that he influenced you. I don't mean directly but his way to try to find some new and different ways and approaches to telling stories, in visualising the screen, in innovating the technique...

A: I admired how this man who was an etcher/engraver illustrator jumped into the medium of film in the early days by inventing the pinscreen, a way to make engravings move. But I don't think that his films inspired me to discover sand or anything like that.

Q: What about Norman McLaren. How much was he present at the NFB at the time you started there? What impression of him did you get when you met him?

A: He was old and ill when I met him. I remember Norman wore bedroom slippers and shuffled through the miles of corridors at the Film Board with his head down. I thought he didn't want to see anybody or be disturbed. So I didn't really get to know him. But I know Norman liked me and he liked my films. There was one point when I needed a workspace and he cleared one his rooms for me to work in.

Q: Did he influence you?

A: I don't think so. Though his handdrawn films excited me. I always wanted to make a film as

foottappingly happy as his scratch films were. And the animated movement in those films is wonderfully economical...but not my style at all.

Q: During the time you work for the NFB many great films were produced under the same roof. It looks really striking how many great artists worked at the same building. Were you friends, did you keep company mutually?

A: What you find when animators or probably any group of people work together under one roof knowing that they might spend years working together closely, you find a delicacy about how they interact. That's because there are consequences if you get into trouble with each other. For example, people did not criticize each others work. I would naturally find some people more compatible than others and those were the people I chose to be with. There were films that I didn't like so I tried to be with people whose work I liked because I liked sharing ideas with them. But mostly actually I liked to be left alone.

Q: Anyway, you are an animator who spends a great part of your life in loneliness. You live alone quite a bit. How is it being alone so much time?

A: I'm not very socialable. You know some of the animators would share a social life together as well. But not me, I like to keep my work and life separate.

Q: Let's talk about your own films. In your early work you conceived sand animation, a very original and complicated technique of moulding figures in sand and then animating them directly under the camera.

A: I don't think it's complicated. It's very straight forward to work under the camera pushing around a pile of sand. The fact that sand has limitations, that you can't make the kind of images you can if you are drawing on paper...sand is black and white, and covers areas easily, and lines are the edges of areas of black or white. It is somewhere between drawing and object animation.

I didn't think I could draw but I wanted to and I looked for another way to make film so I thought of sand. Working under the camera takes a special kind of nerve, because you can't go back to make changes. It's like a performance in slow motion. You develop a system for remembering movement as you are making it, and you have to feel it intensely.

It helps to work quickly.

Q: Your first film made for the NFB *The Owl Who Married a Goose* was based on an Eskimo poem. I'm very interested in how you fulfil the process of transforming words into pictures. Did you choose that particular poem for your film?

A: *Owl Who Married a Goose* was based on an Inuit legend, not a poem. (They say Inuit not Eskimo these days...it's PC) The Film Board was making a series of animated films based on Inuit folk tales, linked by the owl who is a comic character in that culture. I chose the story.

When I adapt a story to film, I try to eliminate as much of the text as possible, and put it into visuals. In the case of this film, I decided not to use any dialogue or language at all except the beautiful sounding Inuit language. I designed the film to be understood by southern audiences without words.

Q: You made two sand animated films and then came *The Street*...

A: I made quite a few sand animated films before I started working on *The Street*. I made *The Street* when I became interested in working with colour and having more detail than it was possible to have in sand animation

Q: Both sand animation and paint-on-glass are ways of working directly under the camera. You draw and animate on a table placed under a camera. In your film *The Street* you invented changeable backgrounds as a way to go from scene to scene. On what level of your work did it come? Did you have that idea already in the story-board?

A: I didn't do a story board...

Q: Not at all?

A: I don't think so. I've never found any trace of a storyboard for The Street. I don't remember doing a story board.

Q: Did you have recorded sound?

A: Yes, I recorded the voices first and then I started animating. The voices were a guide for the timing of the animation. I remember I would animate for two weeks then unload the camera to see my rushes, the material I had just shot, and then I looked at it carefully and decided what to do next. The film started to grow organically. I didn't know about storyboards at that time. I never thought about storyboard.

Q: It's not a way of making animation one recommends to students to do...

A: No, it isn't.

Q: Didn't you learn about storyboard as a student?

A: No, I was sitting under the camera and I was working. Nobody bothered me with such things as storyboard. I didn't do a storyboard until my film Two Sisters. And I'm not sure it was a good idea because it wasn't efficient. I made a big storyboard. It covered a wall, and I led people through it and they seemed to understand. But after a year of animation following the storyboard, people couldn't understand what film was about. This was because the element of film time was not included in the storyboard. I think an animatic would have been useful but I didn't know about animatics then.

Q: It seems to me that working without storyboard can to some extent explain your working process...

A: You think that storyboard is necessary?

Q: That's what people say...

A: You think Yuri Norstein makes storyboard?

Q: Yes, I think so. He makes something one can call storyboard.

A: Maybe it was because I always worked alone under the camera. I didn't have a cameraman, I didn't have Francesca, Yuri's wife and the designer of his films. There was nobody I needed to explain things to. Storyboards make sense if you work with other people.

Q: How long did it take to make *The Street*?

A: It took two years from the very beginning to the very end, from the first tests to the mix at the end. Maybe it was a year of animating.

Q: Animating directly under camera is always a little confusing to me. Were you afraid that someone would come into your working room and spoil months of your work?

A: Working under the camera seems scary because it's working straight forward. You can't go back and change things. There's no point to testing movement. You do it once with intensity, feeling the movement, the best you can. It's a kind of performance, like animating puppets, only slower because you have to draw and redraw the images.

Q: Why did you adapt that particular story into an animated film?

A: Again, it was a Film Board decision to make a series of animated films using short stories by Canadian authors. That particular short story appealed me because I wanted to work with the people talking. The setting was the Montreal Jewish neighborhood where I was living at the time, and it felt nice to put my neighborhood into a film. I made the characters more likeable than Richler's are.

Q: That was the film in which you introduced a really great innovation in the animation aesthetic - a permanently changeable background, which enables cutting with no cut, a new kind of

montage. Did it come from your way to tell the story or did it come from your way of drawing, of making pictures?

A: The changeable background came from my fear of making a cut. I didn't know about editing. Those smeary smudgey materials I worked with, sand and wet paint, suggested transformations to move to new space.

Q: Your next film was Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa after the famous story by Franz Kafka...

A: Not next. I made that film at the same time I made The Street.

Q: You made two films at the same time?

A: I started Mr. Samsa before I moved up to Canada. Having finished The Owl Who Married a Goose I got a contract from the Film Board to do The Street. I had a 16mm camera of my own at home which I set up. At night I worked on Mr. Samsa, and The Street was my daytime job.

Q: I'm impressed.

A: I had quite lot more of energy then than I have now. But those two films are rather similar in approach and expression.

Q: You are one of animators that are intrigued by Franz Kafka. I guess that this time it was you and not somebody else who chose that Kafka story to be animated?

A: Yes. I started it with a grant from the American Film Institute. Since I was working at the NFB when I actually finished the film, and I had just won an Oscar nomination for the Street, the Film Board agreed to help me with the sound and post production. It became an NFB production.

Q: How did you manage to make two different films? I mean there are some similarities between them but much more differences. Tell me something about both similarities and differences between those two films as well as how did you manage to be "double personalities".

A: The films are quite similar in their visual designs, the design of the figures. They are both

about families and take place in family homes. Both films were shot under the camera and developed organically, without a storyboard. Both are adaptations of works of literature. For the Kafka, I was not able to obtain the rights to the English translation, so I did not use language. The voice sounds were added after the animation. The voices for The Street were a guide for the animation.

Q: Now you became very famous... In 1976 you were nominated for an Academy Award; you won several important prizes at different festivals. You became a young and promising animator artist from the world's biggest studio for artistic animation. How did it feel to be a celebrity, was it big change in your life?

A: No. It did not come back to the Film Board. Film Board management would like everyone to be equal. Nobody should be special. It wasn't reflected in my salary. Animation was considered lower status than documentary and fiction filmmaking. Film Board gave me a lot of opportunities in some ways but it wasn't a generous place in other ways.

Q: What happened next? What did you do during following years?

A: Every five years or so I took a year away from animation. I think I did some theater set designs for friends in Montreal. Then I got a Canada Council grant to make a short film with actors in costumes and huge sets that I drew, because the Film Board would not give me a budget to make this live action experiment. I was trying to make films that looked like animation but were live action. I made Interview, an animated documentary. I spent 10 years script writing, and making a couple of very short live-action films. I didn't do animation again until Two Sisters.

Q: This is my favourite piece of work made by Caroline Leaf and one of five or at the most ten animated films I personally consider the greatest ever made.

A: Thank you. Can you say why?

Q: Would you like me to explain my feelings about that movie?

A: It would be interesting.

Q: Above all I like the story and some genuine female feelings in it, if I can put it that way, that radiate out from the screen. It is one of the most female films that I've ever seen. Here I use the word "female" as an attribute. One can feel female strength in it, which is a kind of strength that is quite unknown to us who are of the opposite sex. Moreover I like the characters, especially that woman poet. I even think that you manage to say a lot about men through the only male character who comes to the island captivated by the beauty of her poetry... Can you tell me something about how you started working on this story. By the way, Two sisters is your first and by now your only film based on your own story.

A: It took ten years to write the story. It was begun during the years when I was scriptwriting. I developed a script for an hour-long live action film which I realised I didn't want to direct. I found directing very stressful because I'm not someone who can quickly make decisions. I cut that script down to an animated size. Originally, I wanted to adapt Bulgakov's novel The Master and Margarita and the ideas changed and changed but seeds of that novel are still in my film. One of the characters was a man who comes to a place...

Q: ...out of the blue.

A: Yes, out of the blue, then he creates a change and moves on. In Bulgakov that character was the devil.

Q: I don't see him as a devil. He made the disfigured writer feel like a woman in a way. She felt like a woman after his visit because he was able to admire what is indeed female in her; the poetry she wrote. That's why I think he cannot be a devil because there is something indeed

human in him.

A: I don't see Bulgakov's devil as a devil either, in any traditional Christian sense. He turns the status quo upside down for the better. I used this devil character who is a catalyst for change to tell a story about a kind of sick symbiotic relationship of power between two sisters.

Q: They depend on each other, they cannot be separated... Are there two types of women that you see dominating the world - creative women but not strong enough and the strong, powerful woman who controls things?

A: At first I did think the two sisters were those two kinds of women. Of course I took the side of the creative woman. But that's black and white, and for a story that's boring. Then I discovered that the big powerful woman who controls things is in fact a very weak person; she needs to feel needed in order to feel lovable. She manipulates her sister to make herself indispensable both as a protection against the world and a connection to the world for her sister's poetry. Both women are sympathetic_

Q: What about the artist sister? She produces beautiful things, she is almost always alone while she works, and people love what she makes. Is there anything autobiographical in her?

A: I think that the writer character shares something in common with the beetle in Kafka's story. She and Gregor Samsa are not, on the inside, who they appear to be on the outside. She is deformed and people are shocked to see her. Gregor Samsa is a human being trapped in a disgusting insect body. Neither can communicate their sensitivities to others because their brutal looks get in the way. I think that's a dreadful injustice. It's a general human condition to take people for their looks. Of course, Gregor Samsa and my writer are extreme examples.

Q: Was that feeling of dreadfulness the real reason why you chose to draw directly on the film strip, the method that Norman McLaren had liked very much, though he drew very simple

geometrical forms while you drew human characters. I've almost never seen any animated film, which possesses such an atmosphere of fluidity and feelings of uncertainty...

A: Well, I was restless with the dark room. When I came back to animation after 10 years, I wanted to work differently. I wanted to eliminate anything between me and the film..I wanted to eliminate the camera. I admired McLaren's films drawn directly on the film emulsion of 35mm film. But that kind of fast spontaneous drawing couldn't work with my complicated story and characters. I couldn't work as small as McLaren did. I was forced to animate on the cumbersome but wonderfully large frames of Imax 70mm. As I explored scratching in the film emulsion and the resulting imagery of black and white, I was writing the story. Symbolic imagery of light and dark became part of the story.

Q: Why didn't you make it just in an ordinary technique, like a classic cell animated cartoon? I mean you have a straight forward narration, characters are easy to identify with, and you have clear situations. Why wouldn't the story work just as a "normal" animated film?

A: Yes someone else could have told the same story in another technique, and it would have had other qualities. The medium is the message, as some other Canadian once famously said.

Q: Is that your last film. I mean will it remain the last film by Caroline Leaf?

A: Nobody knows.

Q: It seems to me that, besides crime literature, animation is the only art form with no male dominancy. Moreover, women are not only equal to men but they are sometimes dominant, so that animation is a kind of a "female-medium". Do you have any idea; any explanation of why so many women choose animation as their medium to express themselves?

A: I can imagine that there are as many women practicing in all the arts as there are men, but the means of distribution are still, today, more closed for women. Museums buy and hang many

more paintings by men than by women for example. It's more difficult for women artists to be seen and that means that fewer women are artists. It's a circle. When I was entering animation it was at the moment when animation was becoming a medium for personal expression...cameras were cheaper, film stock was available on 16mm and even 8 mm, people were making films at home. There were schools for animation. I could take a course, anybody could take a course; it was open equally to women and men. There was nothing about it that men could do any better than women. Now I imagine that that might be changing because animation is more and more used in the internet, in games, in hightech expensive special effects. These are big money ventures and men dominate them in the same way they used to dominate animation when it was made only in the big WarnerBrothers and Disney studios, or the studios of Eastern Europe.

Q: I'm not sure if I agree but OK. What about your time then? How did women animators manage to break into the society constructed by men?

A: We were working alone outside of the big systems. I think that women when they work alone can much more easily express themselves in the way you noticed in Two sisters, to create as you say some kind of female feeling. "Warner Brothers" stories seem to me to be stories with male energy.

Q: In what way male energy?

A: You can feel a male energy, there is much more action then reaction, a linear sense of humour and so on.

Q: You mean that male energy is fully opposite to female energy?

A: Kind of.