

Jayne Pilling and Caroline spoke on 3 May 2025 for an article published in Blink Blank, automne/hiver 2025 numéro 12. This is a fuller version of their conversation.

INTRO

It may well be impossible for viewers today to realise the impact Caroline Leaf's films had when first shown, since their innovations in technique and storytelling have subsequently been absorbed into the language of contemporary art animation. Yet the films themselves, their aesthetic and emotional resonance, remain just as powerful today.

Using direct under-the-camera sand animation, her 1969 student film **Sand or Peter and the Wolf** got her invited to work at the National Film Board of Canada. Developing her technique to tell a traditional Inuit story, **The Owl who Married a Goose**, 1974, saw her pleasure in material tactility matched by audience delight in her artistry. Canadian author Mordecai Richler's stories, dispassionate, mordantly humorous accounts of a close Jewish family and community, were a springboard for **The Street**, 1976. Here Leaf turned to paint on glass, inventing a new way of transitioning between scenes and a method to keep her paint malleable.

Her take on Kafka, 1977's **The Metamorphosis of Mr Samsa**, has no dialogue, voice-over or interior monologue, but is considered one of the finest filmic adaptations of the psycho-horror story.

Decades before animated documentary and auto-fiction became quite mainstream, a collaboration with animator Veronika Soul resulted in **Interview**, 1979, an effervescent mixed-media experimental film in which the two filmmakers interrogate each other about their work, identities and creative processes.

After a decade exploring documentary, live-action and theatre, 1990 marked a breath taking return to animation with **Two Sisters**, an original story and more technical innovation, scratching onto 70mm film.

Her films received numerous honours and prizes, including an Oscar nomination, major international awards, **The Street** ranked second in the 1984 Animation Olympics, and in a 2010 international poll of peers and critics still in the Top 10 of 50 Best Animation Films... Yet, 35 years ago, at the top of her game, Leaf quit animation to become a painter. Here we discuss her work as both filmmaker and fine artist.

For more info, film links, resources, see carolineleaf.com

JP What did you study?

CL I started with English literature at Harvard but struggled as I'm not very academic. I didn't know what I wanted to do then suddenly discovered the architectural sciences major. Gropius and Corbusier had set up the programme there and it was very Bauhaus, very influenced by materials, so there wasn't meant to be any self-expression. Absolutely no fine arts training but we'd be told, for example, take toothpicks and see what kind of structure they make if you start with a module and then expand it.

In my last year, by chance and just for fun, I took an animation class taught by Derek Lamb from the NFB. Some films he showed us, like by Alexander Alexieiff and Jan Lenica excited me. I thought, this is a world I'd like to belong to. When he had asked Norman McLaren 'What should I do with these these bright Harvard kids who don't know how to draw?' Norman said 'just teach them how to make movement.' I couldn't draw but I could make things move. Most classmates were doing pixelation but then I discovered sand (it was only later that I learned about the Ansorges).

I had taken some fine arts classes at the university and they had paralysed me. I remember Seymour Slive talking about the perfect triangle of a particular Raphael Madonna and Child, and I could not understand why it was perfect...it paralysed me to put a pencil to paper and that's part of why sand attracted me. I didn't know anyone doing sand animation so there was no expectation of what it should be. That was enormously liberating. Also that you could just blow it away. It wasn't a piece of paper that your mark was fixed on.

My student film, *Sand or Peter and the Wolf* got a lot of attention from many Harvard important people. Rudolf Arnheim loved what he saw. When I graduated, the film wasn't finished and I took off to Europe. They sent me a plane ticket so I'd come back to finish it. Then Robert Gardner gave me a grant for the next year.

Did this attention surprise you?

I don't know that I was surprised. I listen to myself from those days and it seems like I was very self-assured. I did my thing and it was nice. Now that I do my thing and it's not noticed, I can appreciate the attention, but back then I didn't know that it could be any different.

Sand or Peter and the Wolf led to an invitation to join the NFB in Canada, where you made The Owl who Married a Goose. Looking back, how do you see that in relation to Peter and the Wolf?

I always felt with my filmmaking that I was moving ahead step by step and something was new and different with each film.

Peter and the Wolf was loosely based on the Prokofiev story and I would animate a little scene and then it would go back into a pile of sand and then another sequence would come out of a pile of sand and go back into the pile of sand. A lot of wandering in and out of the story. With *The Owl who Married a Goose* I was dealing with a story that was true to the Inuit people, so I was much more interested in keeping to the story, not wandering like I did with *Peter and the Wolf*. Also, in *Peter and the Wolf*, everything moves back and forth, left to right, like it's happening on a theatre stage. With the Owl and Goose, my big 'aha!' moment was when the owl flew up to follow the goose and I had to make him fly away and suddenly I saw the white background of the light table as infinite space. That was a breakthrough for me because suddenly I was going into 3D space. That was a big change.

JP: The way that you use white: it can be the lake, it can be snow, it can be the sky.

That sense of 3D space, you almost feel you're rolling around in it, which reminded me of a similar feeling I had watching a sequence in Night on a Bare Mountain, when the woman revolves 360 degrees.

CL: I find this really interesting...because that's the exact moment in Alexieiff's film where I'm like, wow! I didn't make a movement exactly like that in the Owl Who Married A Goose. So if you've picked up a feeling of something similar, that's amazing to me.

On the position of women at the NFB....

CL It took me a long time to realise the status of women at the Film Board. Then the Toronto Star newspaper came to interview me after the Oscar nomination. At that time I was a freelancer and I wanted to be on staff because staff were treated better. I decided to say that I'd checked with our union and found that animation was the lowest paid profession at the Film Board and women are at the bottom of that, and I'm at the bottom of the bottom.

Did you get any feedback from that comment?

Yeah. They put me on staff. I've never been manipulative like that before or after!

Being at the NFB was almost like a civil service job in terms of a regular salary and job security....

My staff position was good for them and good for me, because I gained by having an institution that gave me freedom and did the promotion work for my films, paid me a salary, and they got the kinds of films they wanted, kind of niche, relating to Canadian culture, specific audience kinds of films with a clear narrative. I never wanted to be wildly experimental. I wanted to be understood, so they got what they needed.

You have said that all the time that you were animating, you also drew, and you called it a kind of daily diary. But earlier you said that you weren't able to draw.

I started to draw in the Montreal years. I did a lot of drawings from memory... people, interactions or things that had caught my eye during the day. Animating is so slow, the reward for finishing it ... seeing it move... takes ages. Whereas I got an immediate rush when I could finish a drawing quickly.

The Street – where you started using paint - had one French film critic thrilled and amazed at the way you used animation to obtain the equivalent effects of a range of live-action camera techniques and shots...which one of your interviewers calls a changeable background.

I know that I animated cross dissolves, trying to move from one space to another without making a cut because I was scared to stop the shot and start another because I didn't know how editing works. I usually describe these things as morphs to get from one place to another without being too noticeable. It's not the point to be noticing the morph.

You just want to move the viewer along to where you want to take the story.

I wanted to work with colour but coloured sand proved to be cumbersome. I realised I needed colour to be malleable like sand, so I should work with paint. Because I tend to chew my fingers when I'm working, I wanted something non-toxic, so I didn't want to work with oils which would smell bad in a small hot room.. I like gouache because it's opaque and has intense colours.

At that time, cel animation was being done at the NFB. I saw the cel painters put a medium called Colorflex into their paint so that it wouldn't crack off the cels when they were bent. I borrowed some Colorflex. When cel painting stopped as computer animation came in, and I couldn't buy it anymore, I figured that it was probably glycerine, since that's what it tasted like. That's how I got into mixing glycerine into gouache paint to keep it from drying.

Your films, unusually for the time, hardly used music at all. Why?

First of all, I was making characters move, and I didn't want their movements to be forced into the steady beat that music would force them into. I wanted movements to flow in a natural way, as I was feeling them.

And music often tells you how to think about a shot you're looking at. I didn't want that kind of extra narrative forced on the viewer. And then as I animated, acting out and being the character, I imagined sound effects in that space. So when it came to making the soundtrack, I was very specific about the sound effects I wanted. Those were the reasons I didn't use music.

Where I did use it, like at the end of Interview, it's diegetic. It's a party and we see musicians making music in the room. It wasn't music imposed from outside the scene. The first music that I had in a film was by Judith Gruber-Stitzer for **Two Sisters**. I don't remember that I actually said what I wanted but she's sensitive and she created long chords that were musical but didn't force you to see the animation in any particular way. I thought it was perfectly suited.

Whilst making The Street during the day, at night Leaf was working on the Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa: at my expression of amazement at being able to do both, she simply comments: I just wanted to do it, and I had more energy then!

Making Mr. Samsa, I felt that I was moving ahead with my sand animation. I was starting to make textures with the sand. I was daring to draw people. It felt like a departure to me. I was trying to create a certain atmosphere, so I went to Prague and poked around. It was the only time I'd researched anything for my films. I had a Czech friend who put me in touch with her father and I'd go see him each morning and he would tell me to go check out another place that Kafka haunted. My friend's parents' apartment had heavy drapes and dark furniture. I didn't do any sketching, but I got a feeling for the place.

Why that particular Kafka story?

Well... sand and metamorphosis, it's sort of a cliché idea, isn't it? I started working

on it because after Peter and the Wolf my favourite design teacher at Harvard Albert Alcalay said, 'Oh, you have to do Metamorphosis!' I liked Kafka a lot and really enjoyed his parables. But that particular story rang a bell because I always felt that I was ugly and people didn't know the real me. And here **was** a person caught in a monster body. I think we judge people by how they look, a theme I also worked with in **Two Sisters**.

There's no dialogue because at that time the English translation wasn't in the public domain, and I didn't have the psychological artistic wherewithal to do all the interior dialogues anyway.

But the story reads, doesn't it?

Interview seems to usher in a 10-year period in which you experiment with all kinds of other things: documentary, writing scripts for live action films, the Master and Margarita adaptation that you wanted to do. You also did some theatre designs for some films which have kind of theatre-type characters as puppets.

Interview seems in advance of its time: you actually say 'I feel that people don't really see me', because nowadays it's a very commonly used expression.... But the film is also an animated documentary way before animated documentaries and auto-fiction became relatively mainstream

It also feels closer to New York indie experimental filmmaking, the George Griffin era, than an NFB type film.

I suppose that's partly Veronica being involved, because she was more cutting edge than I was. And by then at the Film Board, I was pretty much free to do what I wanted to do. I think it is like George Griffin's work a bit, because there's a lot of frame by frame cutting. And maybe it has something to do with how we structured and worked on the film. We interviewed each other, often in terrible noisy locations, and then had to cut the recorded sound down and re-record it because the sound quality was so bad. Then we divvied up the pieces to animate, who liked what best, and didn't really communicate any more until it was time to put things together.

There are still photographs, photographs with bits of paint on them, animation over live action. Much of the film intercuts between each of you, with different modes, and styles, the technique is changing all the time. Sometimes you're both being giggly and other times it's more like 'meaning of life' conversations. So there's an enormous amount of variety. And then that final party scene feels more like a dramatised scene. It's almost carnival-like, with the assuming of masks, which reflects the whole issue of identity. Your identity as people, as creative artists.

Part of our pleasure in making the film was that Veronica chose her dress, and I gave myself a different body. Our heads were photographs of ourselves. We could look like who we wanted to look like, not who we were.

What was the NFB's reaction to a film so different than what you had done previously?

The truth is, it didn't get distributed. No one got behind showing it. It hardly got seen

unless I was at a festival and showing it myself.

But I get more reactions from people about that film than my other films at screenings.

Now, thanks to Julie Roy (until recently a major producer at the NFB) it's streaming on the NFB website.

Why the documentary on the McGarrigle sisters?

Apart from their music, what attracted me was that they gained freedom by being marginal. They chose not to be mainstream. I feel I made the same choices.

After that ten year gap, what brought you back to animation?

For years I wanted to make a film based on the Russian novelist Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which I was now writing as a feature script. I drove around Alberta when I got money to research locations. And then I realised... the McGarrigle documentary had been difficult because there was a huge crew and I was uncomfortable telling people what to do. It really came home to me that I didn't want to direct actors.

So Two Sisters comes out of the Master and Margarita project?

It sort of evolved over 10 years. After Alberta, I was pretty clear it had to be animation. I changed the story because I wanted it to be about two women. I kept the idea of the stranger coming into their lives who turns things upside down. And I wanted to make it small and happen in one time and place, unlike the novel which is epic, all over the place geographically and with a cast of thousands. I had to think about what I really cared about in the novel, to shrink it down to a 10 minute film. I realised you needed to have empathy and sympathy for the jailer sister to keep the story psychologically interesting. That made me think she was actually weak inside, which made her behave like that. I had a writer help with the dialogue, but I did feel at the end, I'd succeeded in making a film using my own story.

And that was as much as I needed to do, because that's when I decided to leave animating.

Looking back, apart from the technical, what do you consider your innovations to be?

I think it was unusual for that kind of direct animation to get out in the world as much as it did, given the commercial mainstream at the time. The films are mainly traditional storytelling but made with materials that show and affect how the film story comes across.

One thing I did that I hadn't seen other people do came out of a need to extend time in order to convey an emotion, which one critic has called 'thick time'. I extended a movement not just by slowing it down but by doing it twice. I think I did this because I worked on a small field and because the incidental movements of the finger manipulated material, the sand or paint, were active, meaning that I could not make very tiny smooth incremental frame by frame changes in the animated main movement.

Thick time happens in *Metamorphosis of Mr Samsa* when the beetle is startled and scurries under his bed. He falls under the bed twice, but as an animator I could control where your eye looks, and I made it look like one movement. It also happens in *Two Sisters*, when Viola is stunned by the presence of the visitor and falls back onto her sofa. She falls in two waves, though it looks like one movement.

Caroline, include the sequences I prepared for Christina's book.

A job-for-life, international recognition, creative freedom...why give all that up?

Well, it was radical, giving up that security is the only daring thing I've done in my life. I didn't have any other ideas of where to go with animation. I didn't want to just tell another story. And I was restless with animation.

You describe your filmmaker self as a storyteller, but your paintings are notably NON-narrative.

I've become interested in abstraction and ambiguity. I remember the moment my painting started to go abstract. I was making a still life. I put a lemon on a table by a window where the buildings across the street were visible. Suddenly I realised what was exciting to me was the space.

The American artist R.B.Kitaj talked about the edges of shapes telling you where you are in space, what the edge says to you about what's in front and what's behind. I thought, that is true. And really exciting. I was starting to play with the space. I think that goes back to the Harvard-Bauhaus-Gropius style exercises I did in visual design. They were all about making a 3D effect on a 2D surface.

That's one way I connect my abstract paintings to my animation films. But now I feel incapable of doing anything figurative. In my I-pad drawings, or portraits of friends, I draw what I see because I'm observing closely. But somehow it's separate from the paintings which are abstract

My paintings take a long time to make though my mark making is quite quick. It looks like it was done quickly but it can take a long time to settle on one image. I'm relieved to not be telling stories, but the abstract paintings aren't doodles, they have a compositional integrity, and they have to read spatially in all the parts, so that's where I have to work hard. I paint them on the floor, moving around them. If I get stuck, I make a big random stroke, then see where I'm at with it.

Painting really is a back and forth dialogue, more than the animation was.

After such success and positive feedback for the films, how do you deal with the art world being very different?

Well, I think it's my best self working here in this studio, and I like that. I never had to distribute my films, never had to sell myself. I like animators, and I'm not sure I like the art world, I don't know how to get into it. But I'm not sure I'm going to spend time figuring it out, I'd rather get on with the work.