

Art in America

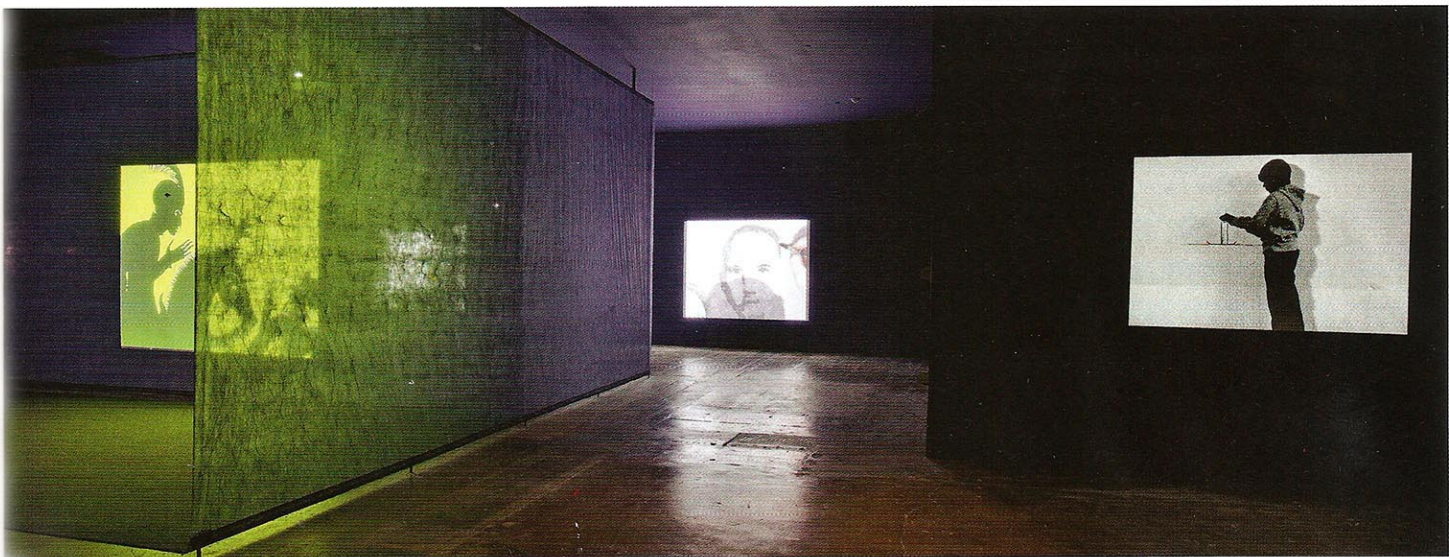
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

SANTA FE REPORT

EVERYTHING MOVES, ALL THE TIME

SITE Santa Fe's eighth biennial focuses on animation, offering insight into the medium's development and diversity.

BY LEAH OLLMAN



ANIMATION IS A LAWLESS realm, a domain of wonder and subversion. The law of gravity doesn't apply within its frames, nor do conventions of scale, logic or continuity. The same could be said of painting, drawing, collage and all sorts of print media, but because animation unfolds in time, its flaunting of the rules is all the more devious and delicious. Curators Daniel Belasco and Sarah Lewis avoided characterizing "The Dissolve," SITE Santa Fe's Eighth International Biennial, as an animation show, wanting, no doubt, to thwart reflexive associations with Disney, Pixar, or Spike & Mike, but also because that particular umbrella could hardly shelter the practices of all 27 artists in the show. Some, like Cindy Sherman, have made only a single animated film (*Doll Clothes*, 1975). George Griffin, who's been reinventing the field for decades (designating his early work

"anti-cartoons"), recalled in a roundtable discussion among the show's artists printed in the catalogue that he and his friends have argued about how to define animation since the '70s. "We never really satisfactorily answered that question. I think the concept of Frankenstein is more like it—make something spring to life that wasn't alive before, and that still works for me."¹

That works well enough for the biennial, too, which explores the age-old impulse to animate (think Pygmalion) more than it surveys a medium. The show traces this central idea largely through works from the past decade, but also dips into the '90s, '80s, and '70s, and even further back, to acknowledge animation's role in pioneering cinema at the turn of the 20th century.

If the exhibition's structure feels familiar, like that of a conventional theme show, its physical form is fresh and seductive. Translucent scrims (made of spun polypropylene but resembling fibrous rice paper) in deep olive and cobalt articulate the space, transforming what is essentially a mini-multiplex of

Left to right, Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1926; Oscar Muñoz's *Re/trato*, 2003; and Robin Rhode's *Kid Candle*, 2009, all video projections. Photo Eric Swanson. All photos this article in "The Dissolve" at SITE Santa Fe.

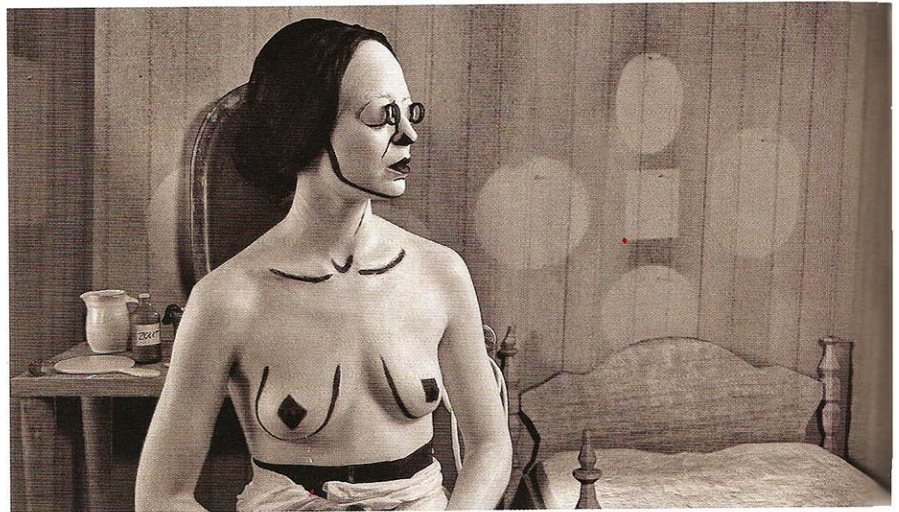
screens into a textured, sensual environment. The installation's comfortable feel helps compensate for the show's implicit challenge: to see everything just once (pieces ranged from one minute to one hour) requires roughly five hours. David Adjaye's exhibition design offers a mix of viewing conditions, ranging from personal screens with headphones to group-friendly, home-theater-sized projections served by overhead speakers. The price of such variety and openness, however, is slight sound bleed throughout.

The show is dynamic by default: everything moves, all the time. This intense visuality is blissfully uninterrupted by labels or wall texts; visitors receive a pamphlet with a map identifying the works. Both generous and demanding, "The Dissolve" serves as something of a jolt to viewers inured to the fundamental

AN ADVENTURE TO EXPERIENCE, "THE DISSOLVE" FOLLOWS A THREAD THAT LINKS DIGITAL AND MANUAL, PRESENT AND PAST. THE SHOW ABOUNDS IN WIT AND POIGNANCY.

magic of moving pictures. While much of the work involves digital manipulation of one sort or another, all of the artists share a commitment to the hand, infusing movement and change into drawn, painted or sculpted imagery. This emphasis on the hand directs attention to the material nature of a medium already widely prized for its narrative potential.

BELASCO AND LEWIS, who came to the job after helping Robert Storr to organize SITE's fifth biennial in 2004-05, narrowed their focus to representational imagery,² assembling artists from the U.S., South Africa, Japan, Iran, France, Germany, Austria, Colombia, the Netherlands and Italy. (Six of them—Maria Lassnig, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, Raymond Pettibon, Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker—are veterans of Storr's show.) Closely related territory has been



explored in several other exhibitions in recent years,³ and Belasco and Lewis don't contribute much to the scholarly dialogue, but the gathering of so much work grounded in the fundamentals of storytelling and markmaking is refreshing, nourishing, even reassuring.

Inventive, hybridized form is a com-

mon denominator throughout. Nearly everything holds some visual intrigue, even if several works amount to little more than exercises in style—Thomas Demand's staged, stop-motion recreation of the look and sound of rain (2008), for instance, or Laleh Khorramian's evolving hallucinatory montage loosely themed around water (2010). Voice, the storyteller's primary instrument, matters at least as much as visuals in many of the most memorable pieces. Brent Green tells the tale of *Paulina Hollers* (2006) with the same raw urgency that motivates his desperate, tortured characters. Mary Reid Kelley's *You Make Me Iliad* (2010) strikes a marvelously odd tone, fusing the formality of ancient recitative poetry with spunky,

irreverent humor. One of the biennial's two commissioned works (the second, by Bill T. Jones and Openended Group, is discussed below), the 7-minute video is set during World War I and takes its visual cues from early German cinema and Dada theater. Live action sequences are interspersed with stop-motion animation. The live footage alone offers the illusion of three dimensions: the characters' faces are painted a flat, pale gray, their features outlined in black, and their eyes cupped to appear as blankly open, black dashes. The narrator (played by the artist), a young German officer in occupied Belgium, is composing an epic, à la Homer, but finds his story lacking in female presence: "One must consider, when writing fiction, the literati's Heroine addiction." He interviews a local prostitute (also Reid Kelley), who describes herself as "a Whore for Metaphor" and astounds the naive chronicler with her eloquence and ambition. History, as usual, is being written by the victor, but then rewritten

by Reid Kelley with a darkly comic sensibility, generous in punning wordplay and winking anachronisms.

Maria Lassnig Kantate (1992) also amuses with its disjunctive tone, at once bitter and sweet. Lassnig appears live, singing the story of her life, while the traumas, pains, frustrations and delights she describes play out in cartoonish form beside her. Moving through a multitude of costumes, she shape-shifts between matron, moll and macho as her folksy, sing-song oratorio describes the tempestuous household of her childhood, the teasing by her peers, the infidelity of her mates. All the while, she relates, the “large talent” she was endowed with (in place of beauty, which presumably would have made her life easier) carried her along. Hilarious and heartfelt, *Kantate* is an anthem to personal endurance and, ultimately, an ode to art’s redemptive power.

PARODY FINDS FERTILE ground among artists who subvert animation’s familiar, mainstream idioms. Robert Pruitt takes on the comic superhero in his scath-

ingly funny vignettes of the travails of *Black Stuntman (Volumes 1 and 2)*, 2004. In simple, hand-drawn pencil sketches, Pruitt stages brief episodes in which the hero’s actions or ambitions are thwarted, undermined or otherwise cancelled out by his status as an African-American in a predominantly white culture. The theme song and Pruitt’s voice-over skewer classic racial stereotypes. Each short segment issues a pungent burst of satiric humor.

Federico Solmi borrows the format of animated, first-person video games in his *Douche Bag City* (2010), a set of short sequences presented on 15 small, ornately framed screens, hung salon-style. An agitated, blood-spattered world ruled by corruption and greed, Solmi’s urban dystopia is as violent visually as it is criminally. The player/watcher assumes the role

of ruthless corporate scammer Dick Richman (“product of a vicious system”), who must fight for his life in this hell-on-earth. Martha Colburn’s *Myth Labs* (2008), too, injects a dose of chaos and confusion into American complacency. A worthy heir to Hannah Höch, Colburn cuts, paints and pastes together a rapid-fire history lesson starring Native Americans, pilgrims, founding fathers,



Right, two stills from Federico Solmi’s *Douche Bag City*, 2010. 15 video animations with custom-made frames. Courtesy LMAK Projects, New York; ADN Gallery, Barcelona; and Jerome Zodo Contemporary, Milan.

Above right, Christine Rebet: *The Black Cabinet*, 2007, two-channel installation, 35mm film transferred to DVD, approx. 3 minutes. Courtesy Galerie Kamel Menour, Paris.

Opposite top, two stills from Mary Reid Kelley’s *You Make Me Iliad*, 2010, HD video, approx. 7¼ minutes.

Opposite bottom, Martha Colburn: *Myth Labs*, 2008, 16mm film transferred to DVD, approx. 7¾ minutes. Courtesy James Conan Gallery, New York.



Jesus, Moses and a cast of thousands. She interweaves her critique of the country’s “discovery” story with references to its pervasive drug culture. Everyone lights up in this not-quite-civilized wilderness encompassing past and present.

Offsetting these pokes at the socio-cultural status quo are a handful of more soft-spoken works. Joshua Mosley combines puppetry, delicate watercolors and a score rich in strings to tell the story of stunted love between a man who spends his days polishing a monument to the past and a woman working in the high-tech field of fiber optics. In Avish Khebrehzadeh’s *Edgar* (2010), lyrical narrative fragments are projected onto a stage in the artist’s painting of an ornate, empty theater. Christine Rebet’s *The Black Cabinet* (2007), a two-channel installation, is bathed in an ennui that even the hand grenades tossed into one scene cannot shatter. Paul Chan’s *4th Light* (2006) is the meditative heart of the show, a silent, 14-minute procession of silhouetted bodies falling downward, with telephone booths, hammers, basketball hoops and cardboard boxes floating slowly upward. Projected above eye level, the piece suggests the view from a high window, its frame a net ensnaring unearthly visions, fears and deadly realities.

Both Oscar Muñoz and Berni Searle evoke the erosion of memory with figurative imagery that evaporates or decomposes. Time itself is the animator here, the engine of both creative and destructive transformation. William Kentridge, esthetic godfather to so much in "The Dissolve," is represented by *History of the Main Complaint* (1996). As in his other "drawings for projection," the exquisite mutation of forms—an X-ray, a cat, a telephone—achieved

Fleischer Studios produced its "Out of the Inkwell" series, represented here by "Big Chief" *Ko-Ko* (1924), a short episode dense with visual puns and clever back-and-forth action between the real and the represented.

The negotiation of this divide is ripe for physical humor. Kentridge manages it satisfyingly in a series of film sketches (not shown in the Biennial) in homage to Georges Méliès, the turn-of-the-20th-century inventor of stop-motion special

of the 1870s and '80s dissected movement into its constituent parts, which could then be sequenced to simulate the natural flow of motion. Griffin's hand-cranked, wall-mounted viewer animates still images of running figures. A Muybridge photograph in the center of the circle serves as sun to a panoply of orbiting characters—a sketchy linear human, a red cartoonish blob, a spoked wheel with feet.

Each artist in the show is represented by a single work, allowing the inclusion of those not known for their ventures into animation, such as Sherman or Dziga Vertov, but also meaning that scant attention is given to seminal figures like Robert Breer, whose experiments date back to the 1940s. He is represented here by a work from 1986. SITE Santa Fe's commission of Bill T. Jones and Openended Group to produce a stereoscopic version of an existing, digitally recorded dance piece feels tangential, squeezed unaccountably through the eye of the curatorial needle.

In spite of both thin spots and some flab, "The Dissolve" is an adventure to experience. The show follows a fascinating thread linking digital and manual, present and past; it abounds in wit and poignancy. Griffin articulates best what artists like himself are up to: "a kind of cathartic wrestling match with the 19th Century, whose pre-cinema toys and gadgets have always inspired animators, and with practices like painting, quick sketch scribbling, stop motion cinematography."⁴ Such "concrete animation," as he called it, does indeed feel real and vital. ○



Joshua Mosley: *A Vue*, 2004, video animation, 7 ½ minutes. Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago.

through stop-motion animation attests to the continuity between the personal and political, between internal and external histories. The storylines in Jacco Olivier's *Almost* (2009) and Ezra Johnson's *What Visions Burn* (2006) are thinner, but both pieces are compelling as narratives of their own painterly becoming.

FROM THE START, animators were tickled by the tricks of their trade and incorporated that self-reflexive delight into their work. In *The Enchanted Drawing* (1900), made by the Edison Manufacturing Company during animation's first decade (and, like the other historical works in the show, screened among more recent pieces), a quick-sketch artist draws a man's head, a wine bottle and a goblet. The drawn face registers dismay as the artist is seen plucking the bottle and glass from the page and pouring himself a drink. In the 1½-minute skit, a static image comes to life, enabling two- and three-dimensional characters to interact with one another. A generation later,

effects. Robin Rhode does the same in his slight *Kid Candle* (2009), in which a boy puts a match to a candle drawn on the wall beside him, and blows on the flickering flame. Such quotations, references and echoes across time crop up throughout the show. Hiraki Sawa's 3-minute video *Airliner* (2003) mimics the effects of that old hand-held animating device, the flipbook. Kara Walker's pair of shadow-puppet narratives (2009) are shown near *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), Lotte Reiniger's lovely stop-motion, shadow-puppet interpretation of *The Arabian Nights*, regarded as the oldest surviving feature-length animated film.

George Griffin's 2007 digital remake of his 1976 *Viewmaster* pays whimsical tribute to one of the key originators of motion picture technology, Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographic studies

¹ George Griffin in "Artists' Roundtable Discussion," *The Dissolve*, SITE Santa Fe, 2010, p. 165. ² "The Abstract Dissolve," a separate, one-day showcase of abstract moving-image work, was held during the biennial's opening weekend. ³ The Drawing Center, New York, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, held animation exhibitions in 2006, as did Parasol Unit in London in 2007, and the San Diego Museum of Art in 2008. ⁴ From his "Concrete Animation" lecture delivered at the 2007 Pervasive Animation Symposium at Tate Modern. An abstract is available on the artist's website, www.geogrif.com.

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