Outside In

Stop-motion makes art out of human touch.

BY SOPHIA NGUYEN

When he talks about stop-motion animation, Timothy Reckart ’09 gets onomatopoetic. Boingggg conveys the “nice, natural motion blur” of a claymation monster’s party-favor tongue grabbing its lunch. Brrrr evokes the rippling fingerprints left by animators on puppets’ Plasticine skin. These descriptions are efficiently vivid; the process itself is laborious. Move an object by a hair’s breadth, step away, hit the camera’s button. Repeat, frame by frame.

Though he used to try to keep characters in constant motion, Reckart has learned to structure his choreography around a few key poses, an approach that “has a lot more clarity” while saving time and effort. Animators are also resourceful in other ways, he reports: “A stop-motion studio is the type of place where people don’t throw away their water bottles, because we might be able to use them for something” (as he once hoarded empty pizza boxes for set-building material). But even as stop-motion rewards “crafty” practicality, the work is also emotional. It is, in his words, a form of “acting in slow motion,” breaking down an emotion...
Bruegel’s Art of Mass Appeal

to the beach, a woman walking her pet tortoise on a leash, a midget feeding wild boar in the woods, a boy balancing a paper castle on his head...Eventually, to have something to do, I started to paint with my father. This gave me time to wonder what bits of everyday life were the most paintable." Such bits were the very stuff of the secular “genre painting” that arose in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe—the origins of which are the subject of his Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life (Princeton, $65), on which he has been engaged for some 20 years. That youthful experience of painting appears to have informed Koerner’s appreciation of these artists, as well as his own powers of observation and description, as in this passage from chapter one:

To experience Bruegel’s paintings in the original, in the midst of life, is to be jostled by a crowd. Mass audiences obscure the aura of many famous masterpieces, turning them into sideshows in the carnival of cultural display. Bruegel, by contrast, makes crowds seem a cheerful extension of his art. Not only are his paintings packed with people—with revelers, with children, with entire armies of the living and the dead—these teeming masses behave like proper crowds. Some cluster in groups that act in unison, dancing, marching, feasting, fighting, building, and playing, while others stand a bit apart and observe the goings-on passively, as would an audience. And when people in Bruegel’s paintings play the role of spectator—when they peer curiously through windows and pour through doorways to glimpse some street theater performed outside; when they stare, confused, at the fallen Saul at his moment of conversion to the Apostle Paul; when they, grown-ups and children alike, on horseback and on foot, hurry toward Golgotha to reserve a good spot to witness Christ’s Crucifixion; and, most of all, when they turn from the diversions that have captured them in the picture to gape directly out at us gaping curiously back at them—their painted world gathers us, ourselves people in a crowd, into their inner fold. In Vienna, as in the museums in Berlin, New York, Madrid, Antwerp, and Detroit where the other major Bruegels hang, one can spot this artist’s paintings from far off simply by the large and lingering audience they inevitably draw. A supreme portraitist of crowd behavior, Bruegel cleverly reflects and stage-manages his own mass appeal. This is surprising. With his printed images—published in large editions and sold on the open market—he banked on a large viewership. But with his paintings, he addressed a select few. Only the most affluent burghers of the super-rich towns of Antwerp and Brussels could commission and behold the paintings we now admire.

"My father was a professional painter who painted everything from life," Thomas professor of history of art and architecture Joseph L. Koerner recalls. “[U]sually out of doors and featuring persons found on the spot and involved in odd activities: people in bathing suits waiting for a train...Eventually, to have something to do, I started to paint with my father. This gave me time to wonder what bits of everyday life were the most paintable." Such bits were the very stuff of the secular “genre painting” that arose in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe—the origins of which are the subject of his Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life (Princeton, $65), on which he has been engaged for some 20 years. That youthful experience of painting appears to have informed Koerner’s appreciation of these artists, as well as his own powers of observation and description, as in this passage from chapter one:

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"Live-action actors, I think, act from the inside out," he says. "They try to get to an emotional place and then let that emotional place dictate the details of what they do physically. It’s the reverse for animation, where we have to act from the outside in." When planning an action, he explains, "I think, ‘Well, how would I do it?’ That’s how you kind of distill it down to the gestures—you have to act it out yourself." Inevitably, the animator’s personal intuitions about bodily kinetics and behavior imprint on the character.

Stop-motion performance is a collaborative art, splitting the work three ways: the artist designs the character’s look; the actor gives it a voice; the animator manipulates the puppet. Ironically, though, stop-motion first appealed to Reckart as a solitary pursuit. In college, animation let him make movies in a room by himself; stop-motion let him do that despite not knowing how to draw. “I had a kind of cold-blooded calculation about it,” he admits, readily. A lot of his classmates wanted to make movies, but few wanted careers in stop-motion—“which is miserable drudgery for most people”—so he pursued the path where he had “comparative advantage.”

That led to film school in London, where classmates in music composition, set design, and other departments comprised a ready-made crew for Reckart’s final thesis. The 10-minute Head over Heels concerns an old couple who have opposite perspectives: the husband walks on the floor, the wife on the ceiling. This metaphor—made literal—could have been cutesy. But stop-motion, with all its deliberate detail, makes the story feel homely and lived-in. Mundane tasks like frying eggs or tying shoelaces become oddly poignant.

The short’s Oscar nomination in 2013 offered Reckart, then struggling in New York, a ticket to Los Angeles and sunnier professional climes: “The volume of work is so much greater, it’s like night and day.” His first gig was Anomalisa, which explored loneliness using silicone puppets.
Montage

Then came more cheerful assignments: the madcap sitcom Community and a children’s program, Tumble Leaf. Other projects were a crowd-founded video game and a music video for a band from his hometown, Tucson—small, handcrafted passion projects.

But Reckart always dreamed of working big. Raised on crowd-pleasers like Jurassic Park and Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, he aspired to enter the studio system and make the kind of movie that opens wide. He got his chance when Sony Pictures Animations recruited him to direct a computer-animated Nativity story about a donkey. “Animals in animation will never go away,” observes Reckart. “Because animation’s expensive and time-consuming, if you’re going to make a movie in animation, oftentimes your question is, ‘Why are you using animation to tell this?’ Because the animals talk. That’s a very clean, clear, obvious answer.” They’re also broadly relatable, he adds: “The nice thing about animals is that they represent this middle ground between adults and children.”

The Star will come out in November 2017, and beyond that horizon, Reckart seems open to anything. He expresses interest in television, or working in live action. Compared to stop-motion, the latter is gratifyingly quick. His live action short (which is premiering at the 2016 Austin Film Festival in October) took two days to shoot, he marvels: “You can spend two days on one shot in animation.” The trade-off is control. “In animation they use this word, ‘iteration,’” he explains. “You can have a character design, and get another draft, and get another draft, and keep sending notes, and perfecting it, until you get the perfect thing. And in live action, it’s like, ‘Uh, here’s what we’ve got. Do you want the red one or the blue one? If you wanted a purple one, too bad. We’ve got red and blue.’” Fitting, then, that Grand Opening follows a married couple on their restaurant’s lackluster first day—a fable, says Reckart, about making the best of imperfect circumstances. Or, perhaps, about labors of love.

Reckart animated a surreal scene starring the stop-motion character Ice Cube Head for the final season of Community (above), and the fateful hallway encounter (top) in Anomalisa. That film’s puppets (right)—including 18 versions of protagonist Michael and six of his love interest, Lisa (center)—were made with a 3-D printer.

Lines of Friendship

Poet Jean Valentine on her career and literary companions

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

HAVE YOU EVER been to AWP?” Jean Valentine ’56, RI ’68, asks, almost out of the blue. “Oh, it’s wonderful!” This comes toward the end of an interview about the peaks and valleys of a literary career. Hers encompasses 13 books of poetry—the first, Dream Barker, won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1965; the most recent, Shirt in Heaven, appeared in 2015 to delighted reviews—and numerous awards, as well as 30 years of teaching. But at the end of the hour, the 82-year-old poet hits upon the happy subject of the annual conference and book fair for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, an event that draws more than 12,000 participants. “You go there,” she says, “and you have a sense of being ‘among,’ of being in a nation of hope.”

Valentine knows the hunger for literary companions. “To have someone, fellow writers, encouraging you, understanding you, that can be like air to breathe,” she says. As a young woman aspiring to poetry in the early 1950s, she had few models. From childhood onward, there were important teachers: Radcliffe office hours with poet and professor W. A. L. and another Harvard professor, Edwin Honig, gave her “permission,” she says, to write from her dreams, which became an abiding, defining characteristic of her poetry. But when it came to women mentors, the landscape was sparse. Radcliffe and Harvard classrooms had gone coed only a decade before she...