

November/December 2001

Release Print

THE MAGAZINE OF FILM ARTS FOUNDATION

Enlivening Still Objects Within Tiny

Four Animators Talk about

Diversity and unpredictability: two things to cherish about the Film Arts Festival of Independent Cinema, and two things well-represented this year in the animation department. Danny Plotnick's *TOUR TIPS* is a PSA parody in the form of an animated cut-and-paste collage. Lena Podesta's hand-drawn *HORSEPLAY* features a little girl tormented by creatures

penned by her own two little hands. In her stop-motion short, *TUMBLEWEED TOWN*, Samara Halperin indulges her fondness for '70s toys and the sight of two cowboys in love ("It's a beautiful thing!"). *HATCHING BEAUTY*, by Amy Hicks, is a collage of stop-motion, live-action and found footage used to con-

How did you get into animation?

Danny Plotnick: Way back when, in the '80s, I actually tried to animate things on film, one frame at a time. That exercise ended with me shaking the whole table to make everything move while rapidly clicking off frames. When I started to see work being done in *After Effects*, I thought, maybe I'll try that and see if it makes my life easier. I took the digital desktop class at Film Arts, and *TOUR TIPS* came out of that class.

Lena Podesta: I think it started in preschool. I would sit for hours drawing and making up little stories. All my girls had triangles for skirts and I drew their legs at the very edge of the triangle, so that it looked like they were walking around spread-eagle. Later my little brother and I liked to do stop-motion with my parents' video camera. At UCLA I studied art and discovered that they have a really great graduate animation program, where I was able to create *HORSEPLAY*.

Samara Halperin: I got into animation because of toys. I have never stopped playing with toys. *TUMBLEWEED TOWN* is just a more public expression of my toy obsession.

Samara Halperin



Why do you like expressing yourselves with animation?

Danny: You can drastically alter traditional notions of continuity and time and space and send things over the top a little more readily in animation. I try to do a lot of that manipulation of time and space with my narrative films, so in a way, the animation is not that much of an extension.

Lena: I just get a really big kick out of seeing my drawings move. I could pencil-test characters all day long, just to see them come to life...maybe it's the mad scientist in me.

Lena Podesta



Samara: Before making *TUMBLEWEED TOWN*, all my films were live-action, 16mm sync-sound, and the opportunity to work in a completely controlled environment with perfect light all the time and plastic actors that don't need to be fed seemed very attractive. It felt very natural, like the way I created worlds and stories for my toys when I was a kid.

TUMBLEWEED TOWN



What techniques have you used? Which do you prefer and why?

Danny: After Effects was great. My film has over 100 layers of images. At any one time I'm affecting changes to six to ten elements, trying to hit particular audio cues. I can't imagine doing that the traditional way.

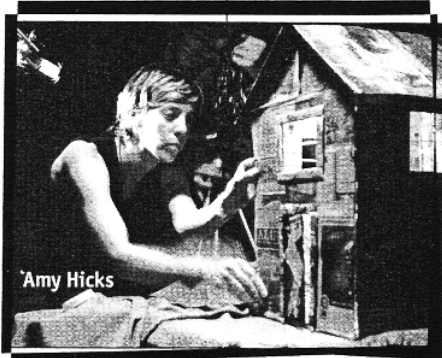
Danny Plotnick



Lena: *HORSEPLAY* is mostly pen and ink. Simple. The characters are on paper and the backgrounds are drawn on cels and laid over. This allowed me to concentrate on the character animation—the backgrounds are really simple and straightforward. I saved myself a lot of busywork by using pen and ink because I didn't have to paint any cels.

Samara: *TUMBLEWEED TOWN* is 16mm stop-motion animation. I mostly shot two frames at a time—although sometimes I got lazy and shot three frames: that's between eight and twelve re-positionings for every second of film. I shot exclusively with Kodak Vision Stocks—the 500 and the 800 [ASA] are amazing. I used rear-projected light for the backgrounds. That's why the blue sky looks so saturated and luminous.

Amy Hicks: Fascination with [photographer Eadweard] Muybridge, scientific imagery, the deconstruction of ideas, concepts, structures and movement made stop-motion compelling. I like the possibility of complete control over the look, color, composition and placement in every frame, yet, when I pull back to watch the results, I am still hit with a wonderful surprise. It's complete magic to me.



Amy Hicks

Amy: [With animation] you can add a twisted element of humor to an otherwise serious subject without cracking a joke. You simply place an object where you don't expect it to be, doing something you don't expect it to do, and that action calls the bizarre juxtaposition into question. Animation and stop-motion allow a fantastic way to explore the absurd.

Amy: I use 3-D stop-motion with people and objects. I like the involvement of the hand; it feels more real. I've always wanted to paint and sculpt, yet find my hands most comfortable on a camera.



HATCHING BEAUTY

Fantasy Worlds of Their Creation

Their Obsessions Interviews by Liz Canning

vey ideas about consumerism, working for a living, genetic engineering and the amount of control—or lack thereof—we have over what we consume.

What leads a grown adult to spend obscene amounts of time enlivening still objects within tiny fantasy worlds of her creation? What drives

someone to become the lovably geeky, perfectionist control freak otherwise known as an animator? What does it mean to make a film one frame at a time? Though their films couldn't be more different, these four directors do agree about some things.

What's this film about—the one in the Film Arts Festival—and how did you come to make it?

Danny: I went on tour with the rock band Loud Family for a month as their road manager. I decided to turn some of those classic tour moments into short animations, approaching them like public service films for traveling artists.



Can you describe the process of making your film?

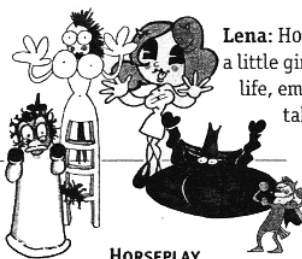
Danny: I liked the fact that I was using After Effects but most of what I scanned into the computer was 20–40 years old. Old postcards, images from old *Life* magazines, as well as current junk from sausage catalogues. I made it at home. It was fun to work without having to deal with people.

Can you tell us about any upcoming or developing projects?

Danny: I've got two more animations scripted out: **BEWARE THE LURE OF FREE PORNO MOVIES** and **NEVER GO TO WASHINGTON D.C., OR WHY THIS COUNTRY IS SO FUCKED UP**. I'm also working on a feature script called **INFERNAL WHITES**.



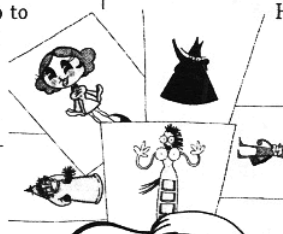
TOUR TIPS



HORSEPLAY

Lena: **HORSEPLAY** is about how a little girl's drawings come to life, emotionally torture her, take over her space and eventually turn her into a drawing. It's meant to light-heartedly question the creative process.

Lena: It was about five months of nothing but drawing, drawing, drawing. I slept zero to four hours a night during that time. I lived off vending machine coffee, Cheetos and cigarettes. I remember looking down at my hand a couple of times, and it was turning purple and going numb. By the time I got to the actual filming I was completely delirious. It was the best time of my entire life!



Lena: When I was in the height of production for **HORSEPLAY** I swore to myself that I would never make another animated film. But the day after I finished filming, I was aching to start a new project. I would like to make a film using this song that my dad used to sing to me.

Samara: **TUMBLEWEED TOWN** is a love story inspired by the beautiful gay cowboys I used to see twirling each other around the dance floors in Austin, Texas. My sister bought me a cowboy and a cowgirl [toy figures], and I loved the cowboy. He has great sideburns and boot-cut plastic slacks—so I called the store and bought them out, at only 50 cents a set, so the cowboy could have other cowboy friends to two-step with.



Samara: The best part was the shopping—having a reason to buy the great stuff I find at the flea market but can't rationalize having. I also loved making the sets and props. **TUMBLEWEED TOWN** itself was made with posterboard, balsa wood, a glue gun, some very patient friends and about 50 pounds of sand. It took me more than two years to make an eight and one-half-minute film.



Samara: I am storyboarding a sequel to **TUMBLEWEED TOWN** called **CONEY ISLAND COWBOY**. I also will be directing my first feature in the next year, the live-action narrative **PUNK SUNDAY**. It's the story of a newly punk, gay, Jewish 14-year-old girl and her first year hanging out in the Lower East Side hardcore scene of New York, 1984.



Cowboys in love in **TUMBLEWEED TOWN**

Amy: I saw ovum donation ads in the papers and thought being a donor might be an option. The thought that I might be entering a market and "selling" a part of myself made me pause. In **HATCHING BEAUTY**, Eve wants the American Dream—a beautiful home, a beautiful child, and material comforts. She sees an ovum donation ad and calls to apply. Eve enters a world governed by commerce



and learns she is as much for sale as the products she produces at work.

Amy: I wrote a script which initially was a more classically structured narrative, but I didn't feel ready to start shooting a feature and decided to break down the story into essential elements and symbols that would be easily recognized. Like using a plastic chicken to represent where our food comes from. I think stop-motion has a brilliant way of making you think in simple terms—breaking down a more complex scene into only what is important to convey.

With stop-motion anything is possible. When we couldn't figure out how to get the tomato to emerge from the doll's stomach, we would just remind each other that this was stop-motion, and all you need to do is stop the camera and move. Funtak became our best friend. It only has to hold something for the click of a frame!

Amy: I'm working on a series of shorts about consumption. In one, **THE COMPOSTING COMPUTER AND OTHER INVENTIONS**, the "recycled" computers seep into our food system and consumers literally begin consuming their purchases. Sales go up. I'd love to get corporate sponsorship. Know of any? □

*Liz Canning learned how to animate at a Film Arts seminar in 1993. You may have caught some of her stop-motion technique in last year's Film Arts Festival trailer, or in her short, **HANDMIRROR/BRUSH SET INCLUDED**. Look for more animation in her upcoming feature, **ORPHAN OF THE AIRWAVES**.*

Catch these and other great works, animated and otherwise, at Film Arts Festival of Independent Cinema (Nov. 8–11). For details, visit www.filmarts.org.