

Stacey Steers / Film production notes

Edge of Alchemy

2017 | 19:00 | 35mm to 4K

Edge of Alchemy is the third film in a trilogy examining the psychological terrain of women's inner worlds. In this handmade film, constructed from over 6000 collages, the actors Mary Pickford and Janet Gaynor are lifted from early silent features and recast into a surreal epic. Music by Lech Jankowski.

Steers' labor-intensive project took five years to complete. The construction process is intuitive and organic: she selects motion sequences from early cinematic sources, prints the frames, and re-contextualizes the action, allowing the 'story' assembled from appropriated images to evolve. She inserts her actors into newly imagined collage environments built by hand from fragments of 19th century engravings and illustrations and then photographed with 35mm film stock.

"Animation is a very expressive medium. I moved away from drawing because I found the particular expressive quality of my style too confining, and I was interested in working with a more neutral image, something less directly my own. I'm very interested in process and how it resonates through any project. The physical process of creating my animation—cutting found images, placing one beneath another, or cutting into something to bring an earlier layer to the surface—mimics how we process experience and form memories. I find creating my films psychologically liberating, and the process has made my work more personal, surprising, and intimate. The technique also carries a kind of hyper-intensity resulting from the flickering of all the image elements. The field of the film becomes energized. In animation, we refer to that as "breathing," which implies that the images have their life force in some sense.

Over time, one of the things I have learned working in this way is that there is a charge to the displacement of the actors that occurs when I remove them from the original frame or bring unanticipated objects into a pre-existing space in a film. The Surrealists talk about this same idea and use it as a strategy. Like them, my working process is intuitive and allows the unconscious and nonrational to play a role. I unite elements with no obvious shared context and create an atmosphere where their alignment feels somehow natural and poetically sound. When I first started using these images of early silent film actors, it never really occurred to me exactly how expressive they could be.

I was attracted to them and the emotional immediacy in the images, but the discoveries I make about what I can focus on and utilize when working with them, have continued to surprise me. I am naturally attracted to more ambiguous moments because those interest me, and I'm drawn to actors who like to add psychological complexity to their performances. My collage technique allows me to linger over fleeting expressions and extend them to emphasize a state of interiority central to my work. I'm curious about the nature of longing, how it provokes and

mediates experience, and how we create meaning from our experiences. In the case of *Edge of Alchemy*, there is also a sense of the complexity of the world pushing against the desires of the protagonist. She has the power to create but not control her creation, which I think we all experience. Leonora Carrington said that for an artist, the task of one eye is to look through a telescope, the other to look through the microscope. I tried to remember that as I made this film.”

Night Hunter

2011 | 16:00 | 35mm color

In this meticulously crafted film, the second of the trilogy, the actress Lillian Gish is seamlessly appropriated from silent-era cinema and cast into a mysterious, powerful role. *Night Hunter* summons a disquieting dreamscape drawn from allegory, myth, and archetype to evoke the uncanny and reflect the creative process.

Images from four silent-era films featuring Gish are combined with fragments of 18th and 19th century illustrations to create complex, timeless images for the more than 4,500 collages. Transitions, both biological and metaphorical, are central themes. In some instances, Gish is cut out of specific scenes and reconfigured in collage environments, while in others, collage materials are applied directly to printed film frames. The subsequent fluidity of the character becomes a critical element in the texture of the film. *Night Hunter* was shot on an Oxberry animation stand using a Mitchell 35mm camera. There are approximately eight distinct, handmade collages for each second of screen time. The film took over four years to complete. Music and sound were added in post-production by Larry Polansky.

Phantom Canyon

2006 | 10:00 | 35mm to HD | Black and white

Phantom Canyon is the first in a trilogy that examines the psychological terrain of women’s inner worlds in this metaphoric reckoning with a defining journey taken long ago. The film is composed of over 4000 6- x 8-inch collages. These were constructed from photocopied elements of 18th and 19th century engravings, primarily Dover clip art, combined with figures from Eadweard Muybridge’s *Human and Animal Locomotion*, first published in 1887.

The Muybridge figures were collaged to create the movements necessary for the film’s narrative flow. The bodies of some with the heads of others, the arms of one on the torso of another, etc. The *Phantom Canyon* collages were then shot on an Oxberry animation stand using a 35mm Mitchell camera. There were texture layers added using transparencies.

The film took over four years to complete. Music and sound design were added in post-production by Bruce Odland.

Totem

1999 | 11:00 | 35mm | Color

Totem reflects on the formative experience of living as a young adult for several years in remote areas of Latin America. The images for *Totem* were hand drawn with ink on paper. Each image is 6-x 8 inches. The majority were painted with watercolor and gouache by the artist Anne Connell. These images were shot in sequence on a 35mm Oxberry animation stand. A texture loop of back-lit tissue paper was added to the film in post-production. The music track is by the sound artist Bruce Odland.

Watunna

1989 | 24:00 | 16mm | Color

Watunna reflects on the formative experience of living for several years in remote areas of Latin America as a young adult. The images were hand drawn with ink on oatmeal paper. Most images are 6 x 8 inches. The paper was backlit as the images were photographed sequentially with a 16mm Kodak Cine Special camera. The film is narrated by the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage. The music and sound design are by the sound artist Bruce Odland.