

STACEY STEERS ~ production notes

Edge of Alchemy 2017, 19:00, 35mm to 4K, stereo

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 6,000 collages, the actors Mary Pickford and Janet Gaynor are seamlessly appropriated from their early silent features and cast into a surreal epic with an upending of the Frankenstein story. Music by Lech Jankowski (Brothers Quay).

“I think *Edge of Alchemy* is the epitome of Stacey Steers' unique vision of collaged re-examination animations, an uncanny way to carry on in the great tradition of surrealist cinema. Max Ernst would refer to Lautréamont's sewing machine and umbrella to define the structure of the surrealist painting as 'a linking of two realities that by all appearances have nothing to link them, in a setting that by all appearances does not fit them'. I would add, and making it all feel so seamlessly inevitable and inexplicably right...the 'feeling of form', as Suzanne K. Langer might have put it...” (Phil Solomon)

Edge of Alchemy was completed with generous support from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the Creative Capital Foundation.

Production notes:

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 over time. 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 and 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. There is something about 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 - that mimics for me the way we process experience and form memories. I find creating my films in the way I currently do psychologically liberating and the process has actually made my work more personal, surprising and intimate. The technique itself also carries a kind of hyper-intensity that is a result of 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 own life force in some sense.

Over time, one of 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 for the unconscious and non-rational to play a role. I unite elements with no obvious shared context and try to create an atmosphere where their alignment feels somehow natural and poetically sound. I think 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 to an emotional immediacy in the images, but the discoveries I make about what I can focus on and utilize when I’m 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 liked to add psychological complexity to their performances. My collage technique makes it possible for me to linger over very fleeting expressions and extend them in a way that emphasizes a state of interiority that is central to my work. I’m curious about the nature of longing and 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 to control her creation, something I think we all experience. Leonora Carrington said that for an artist, the task of one eye is to look through telescope, the other to look through the microscope. I tried to remember that as I made this film.”



Night Hunter 2011, 15:30, 35mm color, stereo sound

In this meticulously crafted film, the actress Lillian Gish is seamlessly appropriated from silent-era cinema and plunged into a new and haunting role. *Night Hunter* summons a disquieting dreamscape, drawn from allegory, myth and archetype to create an evocation of the uncanny and a reflection on the creative process. Music and sound were added in post production by Larry Polansky.

Images from four silent-era films featuring the actress Lillian Gish are combined with fragments of 18th and 19th century illustrations to create complex, timeless images for the more than 4500 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 collage materials are applied directly to printed film frames in others. The subsequent fluidity of 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 by Larry Polansky.



Phantom Canyon 2006, 10:00, 35mm, B&W, stereo sound

Phantom Canyon is an exploration of memories and a personal reflection on a pivotal journey taken years ago. The film metaphorically circumnavigates this experience and is a surreal meditation on the filmmaker's own process of interpretation. Music and sound design by Bruce Odland.

Phantom Canyon is composed of over 4000 6X8" collages. These were constructed from Xeroxed elements of 18th and 19th century engravings (primarily Dover clip art) combined with the figures from Eadweard Muybridge's *Human and Animal Locomotion*, first published in 1887. The Muybridge figures were themselves collaged to create the movements necessary for the narrative flow of the film. 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 4 years to complete. Music and sound design were added in post production by Bruce Odland.



Totem: 1999 11:00 35mm, color, sound

Unfolding like a dream might, Totem explores our evolving relationship to the animal world. Music and sound by Bruce Odland.



Watunna: 1990 24:00 16mm, color, sound

In this handmade film, the creation cycle mythology from the Yekuana Indians of the Orinoco region of Venezuela provides a transparent look at the poetic process by which human beings construct meaning from their experience. Narrated by Stan Brakhage. Music and sound by Bruce Odland.

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