



2020-2021

Article

8-24-2021

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Timothy D. Eterno
Butler University

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Recommended Citation

Eterno, Timothy D. (2021) "Student Animation- Linking Brush and Soul," *The Mall*: Vol. 5 , Article 12.
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol5/iss1/12>

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Student Animation- Linking Brush and Soul

Timothy D. Eterno

Animation, from its conception, has painted a reflection of our world. Walt Disney's *Fantasia* portrays luscious accounts of flowers and wildlife in its Nutcracker Suite sequence; Chuck Jones' *The Cricket in Times Square* showcases the busy, anarchic hustle of New York City; more comical examples akin to *Tom and Jerry* take what we think we know about the primal relationships between cats and mice and exaggerate them to humorous effect.

While animated works most often paint what we see, what we hear, and what we observe, it's often that the most resonating animation goes through the complicated entanglement of human emotions in order to paint what we feel, and what's lurking beneath the surface of ourselves and society. Pixar's *Up* is perhaps best well-known for its intro sequence, characterizing the joy, whimsy, yet eventual loss of a romantic relationship and the burden that said loss carries. MTV's *Daria* observes the life of a teenage girl, and the emotional roller-coaster that is often associated with high school life. Warner Brothers' short film *Martian Through Georgia* utilizes a little alien traveling to Earth as a characterization of the systemic racial bias that plagued (and continues to plague) American society.

Emotions are an incredibly powerful, often invisible force. Animation, when handled with sensitivity and awareness, serves as an extension of the self. It can bring the soul to light in a distinct visual medium and universally resonate with people in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Enter: Emily Zullo, an independent animator, illustrator, and sophomore at the School of Visual Arts, New York. I had the pleasure of sitting down and talking with Emily about the interweaving of emotions and the soul, portrayed in the animated medium. Through her work, most bluntly, Emily aims to touch on themes of self, identity, and anxiety. Much of what is characterized in her projects stem from deeply personal experiences; she writes what she knows, what she has learned, and what she hopes to share with anyone in need of similar discovery.

Upon an idle glance, it's easy to note the nature and tranquil woodland scenery present in Emily's settings and backgrounds. Much of this is derived from her hometown, an isolated space about an hour north of NYC. "It's kind of like a closed-off community, it's a very tight-knit town; the kind where everyone sort of knows each other. I grew up in the woods, essentially."

Emily was born an only child, and as a result spent much of her time wandering the forests surrounding her home. Early on, she developed a fascination with a nearby secluded reservoir, one that served as a water supply to a neighboring city. "That place, since I was kid, has always been my comfort zone. I'll go there to write; I've recorded stuff there, a lot of my ideas

and paintings are of this place.” In many ways, it was an isolated spot that felt like her own; it was an escape from the echo chambers of an enclosed village. “Growing up in a small town, you don’t have a good idea of what your options are. I was confused a lot. [laughs] So when I was confused, I’d go to the woods. The woods were my comfort place.”

Emily cites many of the adults in her life as the people who inspired her to forge her own path. “I worked at a bookstore for three years, and my boss let me do art for the store, and she would lend me books, and she would tell me stories; I guess seeing someone else’s self-expression, even despite everything else they might have to deal with in life; it encouraged me.” Adults in Emily’s life were grounded, in a world where she and her peers were expectedly uncertain about their lives. This uncertainty caused, in a word, separation. “I ended up splitting off from a lot of my friends because they wanted to be a certain way, or they wanted me to be a certain way. I wanted to do different things; I had to figure out a lot on my own.”

Themes of isolated pondering and self-discovery, even among peers, crop up in much of Emily’s personal work. *The East River* is a 10-page comic concerning the story of a girl invited on a hike with friends through New York City. The girl, Lizbeth, feels closed off, inhibiting; she views herself as an annoyance on the rest of the group, disconnected in the presence of others. Trailing behind the rest, she slowly begins to take in her surroundings. The presence of the river and the sounds of other voices are strangely comforting, for reasons Lizbeth cannot describe. Guilt over this newfound emotion sets in, however: disconnect should not feel good. A girl from the group, noticing Lizbeth lost in thought, consoles her. “But if you’re enjoying all this – I say let yourself. Forgive yourself. None of this is easy – but I believe you’ll make it through.” (Zullo) Emily expressed to me that she has consistently had to grapple with the idea of vulnerability. “Last year, I just had a total mental collapse. I let all this stress bubble up; I had so many intrusive thoughts, and I wasn’t able to talk about it. A lot of the people I associated myself with were like ‘oh, she doesn’t have anything going on, she doesn’t have any problems.’ I wasn’t able to let myself be vulnerable and I’d pretend that everything was ok, even when there was a lot of stuff going on up there.” Utilizing the animated medium to express that mental intrusiveness is, as Emily described to me, a method that is not only constructive but infinitely more universal.

Most recently, Emily has been hard at work creating concepts for a world and a cast of characters that she hopes she will one day see develop into an animated series. *Colorado Bound* is the story of four high school friends, now having tread their separate paths after graduation, reuniting to embark on a road trip to the titular state. Although Feef, the optimistic, bubbly instigator of the excursion initially entices them in the promise of being able to legally smoke marijuana, the reality of the trip becomes clear; the characters

confront feelings of deep-seated emotional angst, skepticism, and compassion toward each other, and must learn to face their intermingling pasts in order to band together and grow.

“I think from the get-go I had an idea for the personalities of these characters,” explained Emily. Kit [a punk-rock cat] is a bit of a stone wall, Leo [a studious, indie-loving dog] is a bit pretentious, Max [a free-spirited, bird-admiring cat] is very chill, and Feef is a little bit excitable and a little bit rowdy. I wanted to create characters that were reflections of each other, that bounced off one another to create compelling stories.”

The bridge that Emily attempts to cross is not one well-trodden. It’s hard to know when something works, or what exactly will resonate with an audience. Emily skips the extraneous and draws reflections from her own sense of self. “Across a lot of my works, I’ve gotten this overwhelming response, of people saying: ‘I’m going through this right now, and it gives me hope.’ It strikes a chord with me, and I ended up realizing that I love making work that I wish I could have consumed and understood, to help me know what was going on in *my* head. My whole goal in my life right now is to make things to help other people understand what’s going on, and to give people a little bit of reassurance that things are going to be ok.”

Creative media and animation are industries that are inherently self-reflective. Campy westerns starring a fish as the county sheriff, edgy vampire dramas, and a looming apocalypse countered by the exploits of a teenage girl and her pet cat, abstract concepts, but nonetheless important. For as significant as it is to touch on realistic themes of deep self-consciousness through characters that we feel could live in our very neighborhood, so too does the mind paint itself through ideas that are far and away from the worlds we know.

I recently had the chance to explore the colorful worlds of Adela Putra, an independent animator, artist, and senior at Sheridan College in Ontario, Canada. Amidst all the western trout shootouts, zombie-bashing, and blood-curdling romance, Adela is a creator that wants to tell stories that give people a change in perspective, to whisk them away to a reality that’s fun, fresh, and captivating.

“When I was applying to college, I knew I wanted to do art; I just didn’t know specifically what that meant. I chose animation because it combined my love of storytelling and my love for art.”

That artistic passion, like Emily’s, sprouted early. While many adopt art as a child as a means of escape, or self-exploration, Adela’s came from a bit of an, as she would admit, indulging, origin. “It felt good to put something out, and have people acknowledge it and be like, ‘Hey! You’re pretty good at that!’ I think I used to just enjoy a lot of that attention, at first.”

Eventually, however, Adela’s motivations shifted from appraisal to personal enjoyment. Starting and throughout middle school, she developed

her skills and found herself in a position to want to pursue artwork as a serious career. From there, she fought the uphill battle to convince her parents to let her enroll in a fine arts high school, and eventually, to Sheridan.

“My dad’s a businessman. (*laughs*) So of course he was concerned about the financial side of things; ‘what’s the market for animation?’ But I told him that those things like pay would come; that it’s what I enjoy doing. I think he gave in eventually.”

Adela and Emily share commonality in the notion that life experiences inevitably find a way to influence artwork. The unconsciousness of art is a special thing, Adela expressed to me, as any one piece serves as a snapshot of your life; the kind of person you were, your outlook on the world, the positions you found yourself in. “And obviously, when you had an emo phase in high school, that seeps through as well. (*laughs*)”

Adela’s work is self-described wacky. Above all else, she emphasizes her focus on fun; not taking things too seriously. Her portfolio is littered with doodles, sketches, animations, and concepts of all kinds, spreading across a cavalcade of worlds, genres, and character types. Take for the instance, the hammily titled “*Something Fishy*,” a 55-second vignette set in the old west. We pan across a sleepy desert town, tumbleweeds tumbling by and the occasional wanted poster fluttering in the wind. We come to a stop in front of a self-assertive fish sheriff, standing on two legs, smoking a cigarette, and leaning against a seahorse. The latter gazes lazily over a tabloid. All is quiet until a gun-toting, mustachioed stranger rides into town, a large sack of dollar bills on his person; a thief threatens the peace! The fish sheriff, visibly alarmed, leaps to attention, stamps his cigarette, and looks to the seahorse in anticipation. The sheriff’s noble steed, unaware of present danger, continues to leaf through his magazine. Sheriff, angered, shouts “giddyap!” No response. The fish pushes against the horse with all his will; after a concentrated effort, the sheriff, exhausted, sulks off on foot.

“People always have their eccentricities,” Adela described. “The way they talk with each other, the way they move, the way they react. Projects like *Something Fishy* really gave me the chance to explore those realistic qualities and apply them to very unrealistic characters. Like, how would a fish justify his position as country sheriff? What sets him above other fish? Is he self-confident? Does he hold himself with pride and sophistication, or does he trip over himself a bit? How would he express himself in times of danger or stress? Stuff like that.”

There is a difficulty in maintaining balance between creating work for others and creating works for yourself. Ultimately, Adela strives to feel confident in her own ventures; to not let pride or opinion sway from what she feels at heart. “I want people to know what they like. I want people to see my work and know that it’s okay to express what they like, to not be afraid to get a little personal with your art in whatever that means for you. When

someone looks at art, you'll always see a little bit of the artist in it; embrace that! Pour your heart into it.”

Animation and illustration are some of humankind's most intrinsically resonating inventions. Whether through the exploits of a clique on a road trip, a woefully mismatched western duo, or a heart-to-heart on the East River, it became clear to me throughout my time with Emily and Adela: the potential for the brush to tell a story, to reflect the individual, to provide an escape, to elicit emotion, to heal; it's universal. If there exists a utensil, a canvas, and something to say, the visual force of animation will continue to inspire.

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