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Toast

A Senior Thesis

Stop motion makes it possible to create a world from nothing, fashioned from nothing more than imagination, glue, and a lot of patience. Stop motion is a process of trial and error that requires a range of skills, and while it is a challenge, the end result has a sense of style and charm you cannot achieve with any other process. This is what drew me to stop motion -- I love how it encompasses different mediums and art forms. I designed and built sets, imagined characters, turned them into puppets, lit scenes, set up the photography, and finally was able to tell a story.

Everything in this world is constructed and therefore has to be considered and deliberate, nothing is accidental. On the one hand this deliberation allowed me to have control over every aspect, and on the other it limited what was possible because of time and resources. In the beginning I was inspired by movies like "Fantastic Mr. Fox" (See figure 1) and "Coraline" (See figure 2), and several short independent films like "Madame Tutli-Putli" (See figure 3). In these films everything is 3d and although stylized, is still realistic and life-like.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Despite not having much experience with stop motion I decided to write a short story (See appendix 1) and animate it in a similar manner to those movies that I drew my inspiration from. I started researching right away because I had no idea how these movies were made, from the creation of movable puppets and the building of sets, to the animation itself, and the video editing that would be necessary to turn my story into a movie. I was excited to learn these new skills and start creating the vision I had in my head.

I started with learning how to make puppets of my characters. These characters include a cute, sweet, five year old little girl, her young and practically perfect mother, and her smart and adoring father. As instructed by many a youtube video I began by building wire armatures and then sculpting my characters onto them using oil based clay



(See figure 4). After that I made molds of the clay sculptures using Ultra-Cal 30, an annoyingly hard to find plaster that's almost like a cement (See figure 5).

I then built new, more sophisticated armatures out of twisted wire and aluminum tubing around the areas I didn't want to bend and attached rare earth magnets to the feet which I planned to use to anchor the puppets down (big mistake) instead of bolts which then would have to be screwed down every step. I placed these new armatures in the molds and then created casts of the puppets out of foam latex, which is bendable but retains its shape and can be painted with latex paint (see figure 6).

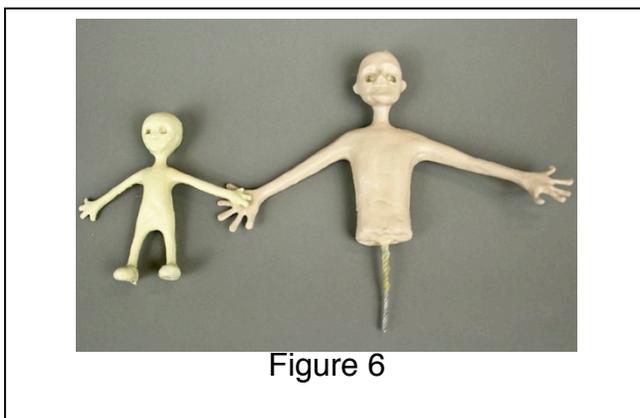


Figure 6

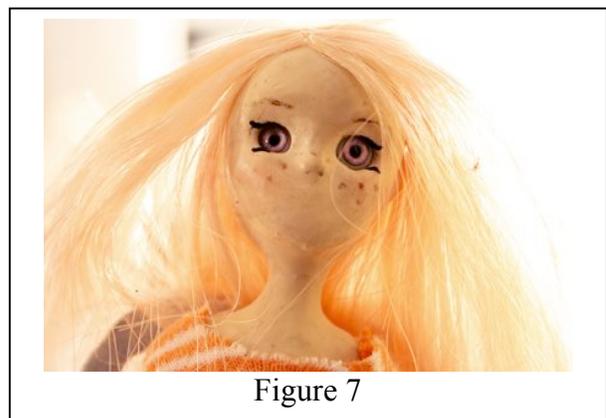


Figure 7

I bought glass eyes and fake hair to finish the puppets off (see figure 7), and planned to sew costumes for each character. I wanted to have 4 different sets, a bedroom, a



Figure 8

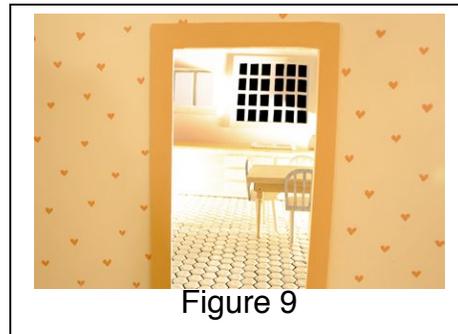


Figure 9



Figure 10

kitchen, a cemetery, and an orphanage. I began to build these sets out of plywood and then started to make the assets for the sets like the furniture and accessories (see figure 8, 9 and 10). When it came to the details is where things began to fall apart. I began to work on finishing the puppets but the hair didn't attach the way I had planned and the tiny costumes were too difficult to sew onto the characters with the amount of time I had. Also the magnets weren't strong enough to anchor the puppets in place and the armatures came loose in some of the joints. The sets didn't look how I had imagined, due to the materials I was using and the time restraints, I just couldn't get the details right, and the elements that make stop motion great were becoming too difficult for me to pull off. As more and more things went wrong it became increasingly evident that my original plan wasn't going to work out.

As upsetting as this was, second semester had already begun and I had to move on if I wanted to finish. As I started to look for a solution and new ideas and came across Jamie Caliri's work including the United Airlines commercial "Heart" (see figure 11) and the title sequence for "United States of Tara" (see figure 12) that uses cut out paper to create sets and puppets that are a combination of 2-D and 3-D.



Figure 11



Figure 12

I had to start over completely in order to keep the style and look consistent, so I began to rebuild the bedroom and then moved on to the other sets. I made floors and walls out of foam board, cut out windows and doors, painted the walls and drew flooring, tile and molding. I built and created miniature furniture, appliances and accessories, some of which were 3-d counters, tables and beds, and some 2-d appliances and accessories (See figures 13, 14, 15 and 16).



Figure 13

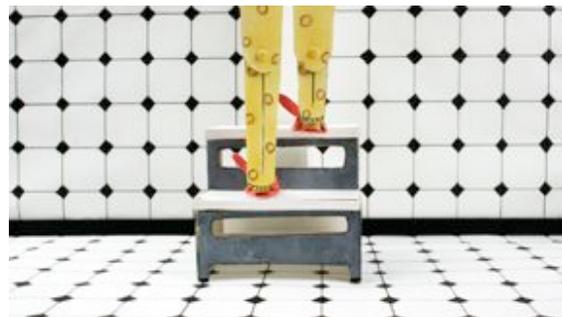


Figure 14

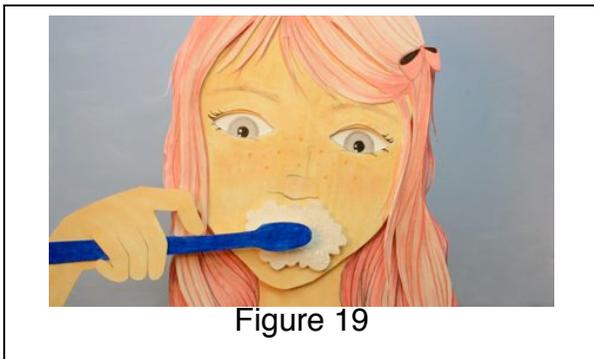


Figure 15



Figure 16

I discovered as I worked that I didn't need to make complete sets, I just had to plan my shots and build what would show. I realized time was running short and my story wouldn't be completed if I wanted to keep the quality high so I had to make another difficult decision and cut out the majority of it. Using only "Part 1" of my original story, I turned it into a shocking short tragedy I titled *Toast*. I also had to re-imagine how I would tell the story in order to get the effect and mood I wanted. Instead of focusing on important key scenes that would have taken the viewer straight through my original story, I had to build up the feeling and pace of the shortened version with a compilation of scenes showing the little girls daily routine before the grand and shocking finale. This edited story allowed me to cut out the cemetery and orphanage sets and instead I added a bathroom scene including a larger version of the sink and the little girls face for close ups (See figures 19, 20, 21 and 22).



In order to make the animation easier I broke up the story and scenes into short clips I could animate one at a time. I made paper dolls for the characters with brackets as the joints to allow for movement. Almost every scene and angle required a new doll to be created, but the medium of paper allowed this to be possible and not too time intensive, also I had complete control of the characters faces, outfits etc. I put together a storyboard of the scenes and used those images to create an animatic in After Effects to help figure out the timing and to pick a song that would fit with the animation. Tchaikovsky's "Reverie Du Soir" ended up being a perfect fit because of its delicate yet melancholy sound at the beginning and the build up to a more intense powerful sound during the climax of story.

Once the sets were built and the dolls made I was able to start shooting. I set up the sets in my bedroom using natural light soft boxes and a regular tungsten bulb to light them as well as a pair of dollhouse bulbs for the lights next to the bathroom mirror. I shot the scenes using Dragon Stop Motion software on my computer connected to a still digital XLR camera. Once the image sequence was captured I entered it into After Effects and did the post-production editing. Both of these programs were new to me but I learned as I went. While they were useful and made the process much easier, I didn't want to use them when it wasn't necessary. I used the programs to put together the image sequences, edit timing, color correct, etc. but didn't want to do too much that would take away from the stop motion look. I like that you can tell that it isn't perfect animation, it has the character I wanted to achieve through the process.

In the end what I ended up with wasn't what I had imagined at the beginning and the process was a huge learning experience but I'm glad it became what it did. I spent a lot of time reworking the story and it's a project that I can continue to work on and grow into the full story. What I created is precious and special because it was a challenge and developed with me as I learned. Each shot was a piece in itself, composed of dozens and dozens of photos each taken with care. Even though it was a piece of my original idea, it stood alone bringing the viewer into the film drawing emotions and reactions. The story became a reflection of the process really -- it started out sweet, fun, and seemingly predictable but when it all went to hell is really when it all came together.

Appendix 1- Original Full Story Summary

Part One

One fine day in early spring a little girl was turning five years old. She wakes up in her bedroom, brushes her teeth and goes into the kitchen for breakfast. Her parents gave her a small stuffed octopus for her birthday with an accompanying card "Happy Birthday! We love you!" it reads. Everything was exactly as it should be, that is until a freak electrical surge from the toaster electrocutes her mother and shoots out a burnt piece of toast severing the head of her father. Both parents die right before her eyes.

Part Two

The little girl cries through her parent's double funeral. The gravesite is barren and frozen moor like hill. She throws her octopus stuffed animal into her mother's grave as the wind blows through her hair.

The girl wakes up in an orphanage leaving the viewer unsure if that was all a dream or reality. She sits on her bed, all the other beds empty. She is allll alone. Closing her eyes as tight as she can a tear slip out as she wishes for her parents and her old life.

Time passes and you see the seasons change out the window. She sits next to the window looking at her birthday card as the sun goes down. It's been a year since her parent's death and she is another year older, filled to the brim with sadness she curls up to sleep in her hard orphanage bed.

Before she drifts off completely, she is startled by a noise and sits up, now in her old room. The silhouette of a figure stands at the end of her bed casting a shadow over her. The little girl sits up as the figure at the end of her bed moves closer to her. The girl isn't scared; she only looks at the shadowed figure with curiosity. Looking into its face, the girl realizes in amazement it's her electrocuted mother. The mother glances to the window seat and the girl follows her gaze to the severed head of her father smiling with his tear-smudged face. Her mother hands her daughter her octopus stuffed animal kisses her forehead before turning to leave. All at once the little girl grabs a dagger conveniently located on her bedside table, points it at her heart, and kills herself. Her mother runs back and looks down at her daughter's dead body in despair. The blood oozes out staining her pajamas with the shape of a heart and she rises up as a zombie/angel, melancholy but happy the family walks/flies off together into the dawn.

The sun rises in the orphanage casting a ray of light a puddle of blood and guts with the little girls octopus sitting in it.

The End

Works Cited

Coraline. Dir. Henry Selick. Screenplay by Henry Selick. By Neil Gaiman. Prod. Henry Selick, Claire Jennings, Michael Zoumas, Bill Mechanic, and Mary Sandell. Perf. Dakota Fanning, Teri Hatcher, John Hodgman, and Robert Bailey Jr. Focus Features, 2009.

Fantastic Mr. Fox. Dir. Wes Anderson. Screenplay by Wes Anderson. By Roald Dahl. Perf. George Clooney, Meryl Streep, Jason Schwartzman and Bill Murray. 20th Century Fox., 2009.

"*Heart*" United Airlines. Advertisement. Television. Dir. Jamie Caliri. Prod. Mark Medernach. Duck Studios, 2008.

Madame Tutli-Putli. By Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski. Dir. Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski. Perf. Laurie Maher. National Film Board of Canada, 2007.

"*U.S. of Tara*" Title Sequence. Television. Dir. Jamie Caliri. Prod. Mark Medernach. Duck Studios, 2009.