The animated films of Norman McLaren, one might say, are Canada's best-known export. But McLaren, at 68, is still putting the finishing touches to Narcissus, a 22-minute film which will most likely be his last. In recognition of a lifetime contribution to animation, McLaren was awarded the Quebec government's prestigious Prix Albert-Beausoleil in December last year.

At the National Film Board of Canada's animation studio A, the post-McLaren generation, a creative core of some 15 animators aged between 35-45, stand ready to continue the tradition that has made Canada a global leader in the field of the animated film. Under the direction of recently-appointed executive producer Doug MacDonald, the animation unit wagers on the next three years, gambling on a future that presents as inspiring a challenge as it is over-clouded with uncertainty.

Organizing the transition
The atmosphere is monastic; long, silent corridors of tiny cubicles. In each an animator hunched over a slanted animation table; some wear white cotton gloves so as not to leave paint-marks or fingerprints on the celluloid. There is little conversation; only the distant whirring of animation cameras. The sudden liveliness of the voice of an animated character reminds you that this is a place where the unreal becomes real, where colored beads come alive, where cartoons interact with human beings, where 20 million years ago is today, and deepest space is but an arm's reach away. This is Studio A, the animation unit of the National Film Board, the cornerstone of the Board's world-wide reputation.

Executive producer Doug MacDonald's office possesses the same ambient sparseness—two pine wood tables with matching straight-backed chairs, that contrast agreeably with the rooftop rows of solar reflectors visible from the window. Here metallic high tech and the rumpled clothing of the artist exist in peaceful cohabitation; before the computer-controlled animation camera, the artist stands in grubby tennis shoes.

"Animation," says MacDonald, a tall, blue-eyed Manitoban, who has been the studio's executive producer since June '82, after seven years as head of the multi-media education studio G, "is extremely labor-intensive. A one-minute animated film can take up to three months to make; a ten-minute film three years."
"Here the flow of animation goes back 43 years; animation is the cornerstone of the Board's worldwide reputation. I see my job as developing the full talent we have in the studio and to tempt young animators from across the country to join us, so that in the next 43 years we can be as positive as the last."

In the past decade, animation has become a career opportunity, of sorts. The Firm Board; I want those leading animators in Canada and inter-

43 years; animation is the cornerstone of the Board's world-wide reputation. I want animators to go out and talk to...
you've imagined and worked towards with manual skills and having it confirm the mental image you had. If you can carry that realization from shot to shot, then you've got an impressive film.

"I think the computer will continue to relieve the animator of drudgery, but I don't think anything is going to change very drastically in animation. The subject matter is already broad enough. It's the imagination of the artist that counts, and it will always be able to keep pace with the abstract development of thought."

Gayle Thomas reminds one of a Gaetan Dante Rosselli painting. And the sketches on the walls of her Studio A cubicle, in styles reminiscent of Dore or Beardy, further add to the evocation of 19th century art.

Born and raised in Montreal ("That sounds awfully boring next to the people here who have come from all over the world," she says), Thomas graduated with a fine arts degree from Sir George Williams (before it became Concordia), began working in animation for Poterton Productions, and has been at the Board for 12 years.

"I took no film courses, and I had no film background other than a love for Norman McLaren's films," says Thomas. "I just wanted to make animation films, and that's one of the great things about this place; a lot of the people who came here at that time learned through apprenticeship.

"I saw animation as a developing art form; it seemed like a very good area in which one could explore the arts: so many aspects--design, drawing, music, movement--were very challenging."

After four animated clips, and four films on which she worked alone, Thomas is working on her fifth, an 18/2 minute animated film called The Boy and the Snowgoose, which she and co-animator Francois Hartmann developed in consultation with Montreal school-kids.

"I don't care for things that are terribly cartoony," Thomas says. "Snowgoose is painted in monochromatic shading, except for a central dream sequence shot in full color."

"Because there were so many drawings and the lines were too far apart, the sequences came out twice as long as planned," says Thomas.

Thomas' earlier films--Snow, The Magic Plate and A Sufi Tale--were monochrome. Her more ambitious use of color in Snowgoose has revealed a challenge she would like to pursue further:

"I'd like to experiment under the computer somewhat more, exploring color," says Thomas. "And here is the place where I can do this.

For over two years now, George Geersten has lived in the past--about 20 million years in the past. Geersten has almost completed Early Man, a 10-minute animated adventure story about the origins of man.

"I had been reading up on anthropology for years," says Danish-born Geersten, "and I thought it might be possible to do something on that in animation, so I made up a storyboard. The Museum of Man in Ottawa thought it was a very marketable item. Eventually we got a program going within the Board, with outside scientists to make sure the details would be accurate. But the challenge here is not so much the scientific side, but to make it come alive to make the characters believable."

For the style of Early Man, Geersten says he was influenced by the scenes in Kubrick's 2001 where the apes discover the use of animal jaw-bones as weapons.

"It was interesting to learn that there were different evolutionary types co-existing at the same time. Fifteen million years ago was a very prolific time; there was an abundance of animals. Suddenly there was a drought, the animals died off, and man had to learn to adapt, to learn to manipulate tools, to do things that made up for his vulnerability."

"The whole point of the film is to take an everyday look at 10 million years ago, to get a feeling for the creatures, keeping the scientific side out of sight."

"You're never 100% satisfied with what you've done, though you learn a lot while you're doing it. In the time-frame, Early Man is going to work out relatively well."

There are a lot of drawings--half as many again as normal because in the last half we're constantly talking about groups of people, animals and birds. I feel it was worth making it come alive; it'll go further with that vitality."

"I've enjoyed working on it, imagining questions like: Here I am at the edge of the forest, there are 15 million years ago; but should I behave? I've been with this for two years, which is about average for a 10-minute film; all I've had a lot of help with the background coloring."

A graphic artist who learned his trade in Toronto, Geersten came to Montreal just before Expo '67.

"I started doing contracts for the NFB, and slid into doing more and more work. For my generation, there was no training for animators, and no one considered animation as a career. So we came into it through contract-work.

"I'm a month away from having finished Early Man: I've got to do a sound-track of primate sounds. We plan to study monkey and ape sounds; and we'll get people who can reproduce these things, we have people here, actor groups, who can do any kind of sound."

Geersten's film work has mainly involved public service messages. But one of his films, Prisons, provides a good example of the possibilities MacDonald sees for sending animators out on location.

For Prisons Geersten received permission to visit the intimidating 1860-built federal penitentiary in New Brunswick.

"It wasn't easy to get in; they couldn't understand why anyone would want to go there and draw. The film got an enthusiastic reception in schools across Canada, as well as in Germany and the U.S.

"Coming from a graphics background, we were probably a little slow in learning the physics of animation," says Geersten. "But hopefully we ended up working in different styles. It's frustrating sometimes, here we can pick a style and work in it. It's inspiring to see that variety: that we can do any kind of science and make it much more interesting.

"I've seen quite a bit of change in animation: more emphasis on realism,
through at the same time there's been a return to the Disney-type cartoon. The computer still hasn't taken off yet, though in the next 15 years, it will become more and more important.

"The universal problem in animation is the cost, mainly labor costs. A 90-minute animated film can cost $7-10 million — that's thousands of hours of work by hundreds of people. "Our records show animation films get a lot of viewing; they do circulate worldwide. Some of our early films are still as popular now as 20 years ago: they're always in demand. If you spend a lot of time with a project and if you get it for the wires. We had wires running overhead, off-camera and under the desk. We tried to mix all the cuts together so that no one could see the wires. And if we've done it well, it will all be invisible. I think this is going to be one of the more successful mixes of cartoon and real action.

"Buck Boom was chosen to be like the traditional 30s-40s animal cartoon. We never get to do dogs and cats around here: in the NFB for some reason there's a great tendency just to do little men. There was no special reason for doing Buck that way, other than that cartoons have been a great concern of mine since childhood and I'm very steeped in them. "I've been here for 12 years: I came looking for a job, and I started out as a painter-tracer in animation. Before that I worked in an insurance company. In 1969 I did a comic book that I used to sell on the street for 50 cents: I'm told it's worth $30 today. I wanted to do cartoon strips, anything: I was interested in comedy. Having the comic book — and I'd done a little animation — got me in the door."

Since then Weldon has co-directed film clips for the metric commission; co-directed with Yossi Abolafia, the logo for the Ottawa animated film festival; directed Log Driver's Waltz, a three-minute Canadian vignette that was released theatrically in 35mm; co-directed Special Delivery for which Weldon and Eunice Macauley won an Annies; and has directed half-hour sponsored films mixing live action and animation; and other films that he couldn't recall. For Weldon the future of animation in Canada is a matter of serious doubt. "The industry has been contracting; maybe in a couple of months all this will be shut down. The changes started three years ago with the first cutbacks. It was pretty devastating in terms of the product. It meant less freelancers, it meant that a couple of people who were going to get hired weren't. We went from a high level of activity to empty corridors; people started fighting with each other. It was so unified a few years ago: now there's hostility.

"In a place like this, if you cut back, say, 5%, you lose something like 5% in spillover. The most vulnerable people are often the ones that disappear. There are people working for private industry today who are doing less valuable work than they could have done here.

"Four, five years ago we had a good peasant economy going here. And what has happened here is that the people who are working are people who have some mechanism that will support it, as MacDonald would hope, or will the form be obliged to rearrange itself in ways that have yet to be discovered?"

"In the next few years the challenge of the next few years at Studio A, then, is one of Darwinian adaptation. As in George Geersten's Early Man, the Films Board animator now has to learn to make up for his vulnerability. But if Sid Goldsmith is right about the infinite creativity of the artist, it is still possible that the future of Film Board animation may yet reveal its now illusory past to have been merely prehistoric sketches."

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