

of black pudding and pink ladies

Nancy Edell took time out from her work as artist and animator to talk with Brian Clancey about the themes in her films and their evolution.

by Brian Clancey

Nancy Edell has been acclaimed by some as being one of Canada's foremost animators. Although she scorns being called an animator, preferring to be considered an artist, her animated films have won her several prizes and a place at many festivals. In 1969 **Black Pudding** won prizes at the Amsterdam and Southampton festivals. She also won awards at the 1970 Oberhausen Film Festival and the 1972 Chicago festival.

Aside from her work in film she has drawings in the permanent collections of the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Victoria British Columbia Art Gallery. She has received two grants: one from the Canada Council to do a film she wasn't able to complete, and another from BBC to make **Lunch**. Both were in 1973.

Nancy Edell now lives in Winnipeg where she has been making short animated films for Sesame Street. Most recently, she did the camera work for a live documentary on a school for preschool children. The school was established on lines similar to those of Summerhill in England. This is the first time she hasn't worked in animation.

To date she has completed three films: **Black Pudding**, **Charley Company**, and **Lunch**.

After viewing your films one of the most obvious features is the sexual element. How do you see this in terms of your work now?

Edell: There's less and less and less sexual and violent imagery in the stuff I'm doing now but I suppose I used it to get out a lot of stuff that was, well, unfinished business of mine. I used to do a very boring kind of film and a very boring kind of etchings and paintings. I've decided to just start on drawings for awhile. I started doing some automatic drawings. Just letting the imagery come out. I feel I just started there. Sort of tapping this reservoir of sex and violence and that's okay now. That's the same sort of thing I was working on when I started making films. Films were just extensions of that whole process.

Where does the sexual imagery come from? Why?

Edell: I grew up in Nebraska in the 50s and I grew up with

Brian Clancey is a freelance writer from Winnipeg and past editor of **The Manitoban**.

all the rigid sex-role things. I was really into it! The whole bit! It's become real imagery in my films. Where you analyze garter belts, bras, and lip stick, and teasing your hair. I feel, in retrospect, that my drawings and my films are just kind of therapeutic. I've never been very verbal or intellectual about them, especially that first film. I just did it. Your first film is a really gut thing and I just spewed out everything I wanted to say. Now, when I look at it, it's embarrassing, because it's so crude. It's really raw stuff.

Do you think using your work for self-therapy is really fair to people seeing it?

Edell: The first two films were really just extensions of drawings. I didn't really imagine them for public use.

Would you describe your approach to sex in your films, thus far, as being sadistic?

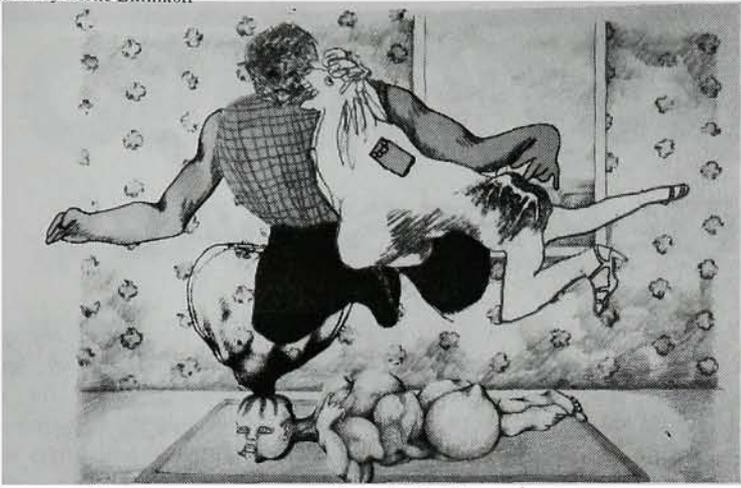
Edell: In a way. It all relates to my background and I can't dissociate it from my background. As I was growing up sex was a very violent thing, in my mind. Dirty jokes were my basic childhood reference to sex. Sex is dirty, that kind of stuff. Men grabbing at women and leering. I was just working this out.

Your first film, **Black Pudding**, is the most sexual. Was it a sort of analogy for civilized man, in your mind?

photo by Lorne Billinkoff



Nancy Edell with one of her drawings



A composite picture, representative of Edell's work.

Edell: On several different levels, yes. But, at that time I was into drawing. I'd do these big black and white in pen and ink drawings that were full of strange things. I like the idea of picking out one thing and calling the drawing by that name. If it had a double meaning that was fine. In the third scene, where the vacuum cleaner is chasing the food around, the food is coming out of this sphinx. So I was drawing all the food for that scene and I drew this little black pudding. There's something really strange about black pudding. It's a dark pudding made from flour, baking soda, eggs, and molasses. It's also another name for blood sausage or blood pudding. I'd never known about it until I moved to England, where I made the film. I was somehow impressed by black pudding. They wouldn't call it blood and guts pudding; they call it black pudding. At the time I didn't make any conscious effort to say that the sexual organs of a woman or the insides of a woman were black pudding. Women give birth to black pudding humanity. I didn't really have that in mind.

*What do you think of the apparent success of **Black Pudding**?*

Edell: It's just kind of a freak because it's unusual. Not too many people have done that kind of thing. It's the imagery people like. I was pleased about that. I was pleased about shocking people.

*What motivated your next film, **Charley Company**?*

Edell: Anti-war sentiment. I was on my own and I wanted to make a cheap little film because that's all I could afford. I could've done anything but I wanted to make some kind of statement. I didn't want to be quite so self-indulgent and somehow I liked the idea of one continuous track shot. So I decided to do that and ended up with the gimmick of the soldiers walking up Uncle Sam's ass. I don't know if anybody read that. That was sort of a personal joke. And then I had the idea of a civilian army and I just started drawing characters. The characters were all from my stock of sexual-sadistic characters. I just drew them and that's how they came out.

Again there's the strong sexual imagery, particularly the hermaphrodite. How does this relate?

Edell: I don't know how any of that sexuality relates to Viet Nam. They're just some images that keep coming to mind and I still find them very interesting. Hermaphrodites and siamese twins. John Barth once wrote about siamese twins that aren't joined like siamese twins, you know, spine to spine. They're joined in an impossible way, navel to back. So you have a double person and one person is the leader and the other is the hanger-on. The strong one is always pulling tricks on the hanger-on and it's sort of interesting. Things with dual aspects.

*Your next film, **Lunch**, is all about food and is where you experiment with cell animation.*

Edell: The other two were cut-outs which I used because you can get a lot of detail into the drawings. You didn't have to reproduce the drawing. In cut-out animation you take each

character; each character is a little picture figure with moving parts, which you move as you film. With cells you have to reproduce each drawing instead of just moving it. You have a different drawing every two frames instead of just moving parts. But, you can get more fluid movement. The emphasis is less on detail of the drawing and more on detail of the movement. In **Lunch** I really got into starting with that pink woman and having a good time just changing her into other people.

*Where did the idea for **Lunch** come from?*

Edell: It was a job I did. A producer at the BBC submitted this idea about waiters and the difference between the atmosphere of the dining room and the atmosphere of the kitchen. I changed it into my own idea. I had to because he was a strong union man and wouldn't impose anything on the workers so he told the guys in the kitchen in the hotel where we were doing the tape recording that the microphone was there. So, of course, they didn't say anything pithy. They were being really good for the microphones. So there was no contrast. So, I just took it and got off on the food and the cell animation.

With that perspective it makes the film more interesting, but, as you say, it doesn't come across like it was supposed to.

Edell: It's always hard. If you think of the difference between what you have to start with and the desired finished product. You don't really know how well it's going to translate. There wasn't very much to start with on the soundtrack I was given. It's hard for me to see what it really looks like. I should think people would say, "Why was this film made? It seems like a very strange film to make." I'm always interested in that aspect. Why someone bothers to make a certain film. I say that a lot about animated films because so many of them are very insignificant. Animators seem to be really interested in the craft of animation, so often there's no content at all and it's all just tricks.

The film you were making on the Canada Council grant is supposed to be a very introspective, nice film. How does this relate to the rest of your work?

Edell: I had a drawing that was in nine parts. It was very detailed. It was an experiment for drawing. It was very personal. It was about a pink girl, a pink baby, and a pink adolescent. I decided I would animate but I've been wanting to make a very detailed animated film. What I'd really like would be to design a film. To make characters with someone else planning the story and not having to do all that work myself because there's just too much work! That's what I started out to do on my own even though I knew I couldn't make as detailed a film. So now I have these three very detailed scenes that don't fit together very well. I suspect I'll get back to them but I'm not really sure what to do with it. I want to see a film that's very surreal. An animated film that's not cute. **Yellow Submarine** was neat but it was too slick and too cute. I'd like to see a very corporeal animated film. Maybe an hour long film that creates a real world. More real than this is because you really feel like you're there. Deep colours and sense of space that have creatures being so real and so fantastic.

So you want to make a film that is quite long and detailed?

Edell: Well, I'm not going to because I can't make it. I can never make the kind of film that I want to see. It's just too much unless I somehow get together with some other people... someone really strong on story and someone really strong on sound. If there was a lot of money available from somewhere I could get a lot of people to do the work. Until that time I just wouldn't attempt it. Not on my own. My other films are so vague. The whole thing is carried just by imagery. I'd like to get more into story but it would have to be a very special story. I don't know what to say about my films. It's very hard to talk about them. I've never been able to talk about them. I don't know what to say that says anything about them, really. □