



drawing by Sidney Goldsmith

The NFB's Studio A Portrait of the animator as a rising star

by Michael Dorland

The animated films of Norman McLaren, to the saying has it, are Canada's best-known export. But McLaren, at 68, is 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 Tessier 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 pinewood 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.

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"Here the flow of animation goes back 43 years; animation is the cornerstone of the Board's world-wide reputation. I see my job as developing to the fullest the talents we have in the studio and to tempt young animators from across the country in to join us, so that the next 43 years can be as positive as the last."

In the past decade, animation has become a career opportunity, of sorts. The Sheridan College of Art in Toronto now graduates about 45 animators a year; Emily Carr in Vancouver five or six; animation is taught as Concordia, York, The University of Alberta in Calgary, and also at Dalhousie in Halifax, though there still as part of fine arts.

This did not used to be the case: the McLaren and Sidney Goldsmiths of the Board became animators by accident; even the upcoming generation - whom MacDonald calls "the stars about to shine" - learned their art from the bottom-up, getting their start as copyist or painters doing the painstaking drudge work of filling in backgrounds.

Perhaps more in animation than in any other aspect of filmmaking (given its highly individualistic nature), certain almost Renaissance traditions of apprenticeship remain central to the vitality of the art form - and the studio is very conscious of its obligations towards the young animator.

So the impact of three years of budgetary cutbacks, with further cuts for at least two more years - compounded by the post-Applebert gloom that has settled like a fog through the entire Board - has been heart-rendingly felt at Studio A. It has meant the progressive disappearance of the up to 45 freelancers, those whom MacDonald refers to as "the extended family," who once supplemented the core group of 15 staff animators. "Oh, what the Board could do with a little more money," MacDonald sighs, in a moment of utopianism.

The reality, aggravated by the depressed economic climate, is that, outside the Board, animation remains a most precarious line of work. Five out of six graduates in animation are not working in their field. Apart from major private animation studios like Nelvana in Toronto, or a fistful of small studios in Montreal, subject to the boom-and-bust cycles of the film industry as a whole, the Board remains the only place in Canada where inspired, high-quality, and individualistic animation can be pursued.

In keeping with the Board's increased regionalization policies and as a liberating by-product in the rise of the number of sponsored films that are subcontracted out, the unit is progressively finding itself free to pursue what could turn out to be its 'natural' market. Animators have been going forth to conduct workshops running from six weeks to six months, doing animation work with the regional offices in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Halifax.

For June '83, the studio plans an apprenticeship program. "We want leading animators in Canada and internationally to come spend time here, we want to welcome animators from across Canada to share in the inspiration of working here," says MacDonald. "This is the National Film Board; I want those styles and attitudes reflected."

For its '83-'86 production plan, MacDonald and the animators of the unit have devised eight animation directions or "thrusts" - from the socially relevant "The Way We Live" series, through the continuously pioneering scientific animation of Colin Low and Sid Gold-

smith, to what MacDonald terms "the brilliant idea, for the film that comes along and demands to be done."

At this moment of generational turnover - and ironically to solicit precisely the outpouring of creative energy that the Applebaum-Hébert report found so lacking at the Board - the unit is throwing itself open to Canadian culture.

"Animation as an art form is a central part of Canadian culture," says MacDonald. "I'm looking for stories, I'm looking for scripts, I'm looking to commission works and original ideas."

At present the studio gets two or three script ideas a week from outside the Board. MacDonald would like to increase that input, though he cautions: "We're not looking for Flintstones-type animation."

With 15 animated films in production, 10 releases scheduled for this fiscal year, and eight films being investigated, or still at the research/script development phase, at least four senior animators will be free to direct other projects as of Spring '83, a fortunate - and rare - coincidence that MacDonald hopes to exploit fully, specifically in two of the planned eight thrusts of the production plan.

The first is called "Canadian Accents," for which the studio plans to send animators out on location, working on stories from Canada's folklore.

"This isn't Canadian literature, it's folk culture," MacDonald explains. "I want animators to go out and talk to local people, to sit out on a rock in Bonavista Bay and see what happens, and I want to bring people in from the regions."

The other series, called "Just For Kids," is aimed at children aged 6-12. So

far the unit has signed contracts with three publishers of popular Canadian children's books to produce animated films of best-selling stories. For example, Robert Munch's story "Blackberry Subway Jam," published by Anik Press, is presently being styled by the unit's Bob Doucet and Eunice Macauley (who have both won Oscars for their work in animation), and should be completed within six months. Five other films are planned in the series for the next three years, and the unit is also looking for story ideas for half-hour animation specials.

So MacDonald urges young animators to get in touch with the studio: "If I see at least any potential, I'll ask some of the senior animators in with me. Sometimes all that is needed is encouragement. And we're very civil civil servants here; after all, it's the public that pays our salaries."

"Our *raison d'être* is what Canadians see on the screens - that's where the animators are putting their time, into films that will justify the Board."

"Canadians haven't seen enough NFB films; they just don't get on the CBC a lot. We're making those films for Canadians, and we want it known that what is going on at the animation studio is as deserving of attention now as it ever was in the past."

The new generation of animator

Some of the names are already internationally known: Ishu Patel, Sid Goldsmith, Eunice Macauley, Grant Munro, Caroline Leaf, and, of course, Norman McLaren. Others are names increasingly associated with the state of the art in animation; these are the rising stars at the Board's Studio A: Meilan Lam, Gayle

Thomas, John Weldon, George Geersten, Françoise Hartmann, Zina Heczko, Les Drew, Bob Doucet, and Gerald Budner. Cinema Canada spoke with a representative foursome who illustrate both the individuality and the interdependency of the contemporary animator.

Toronto-born Sid Goldsmith at 60, pipe-smoking and soft-spoken, is not exactly part of the new generation, though as the only senior animator who is also a producer he plays an important part in the transition taking place at Studio A. With some 90 films to his credit as animator, writer, director and producer, Goldsmith is best known for his work in the animation of scientific subjects, notably the 1960 animated half-hour *Universe*, still visually accurate after 20 years, and the 1974 *Satellites of the Sun*. NASA, the American space agency, has been a devoted client of Goldsmith's work which has been credited with inspiring films like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Goldsmith is currently completing *Starlife*, a 20-minute film on which he has worked alone for over a year, depicting the evolution of stars from their birth from interstellar gas to their death as burnt-out cinders. Here Goldsmith's animation technique involves multiple exposures superimposed with computer-controlled camera movement to create realistic images of three-dimensional space.

"There were no film courses in the late '40s when I came to the Board," Goldsmith recalls. "Film wasn't exactly uppermost in anyone's mind and the Board itself was virtually unknown. I came to the NFB, then in Ottawa, as a summer student, doing carpentry on sets. I met the animation staff, applied and started in the lighting department. I was interested in graphic design and calligraphy."

"I'm a painter; I've always painted. But easel painting has a completely different set of relationships from film; the former are static; in film the relationships are constantly changing and so make the illusion of 3-D possible."

"Space is the ideal realm to explore. In entertainment films, there are a lot of misleading and deliberately impressive effects to enhance the drama: the real image of space, because of the exploration of the inner solar system, has become more familiar. It's almost like treating the surface of the earth: in the solar system area space has become less mysterious."

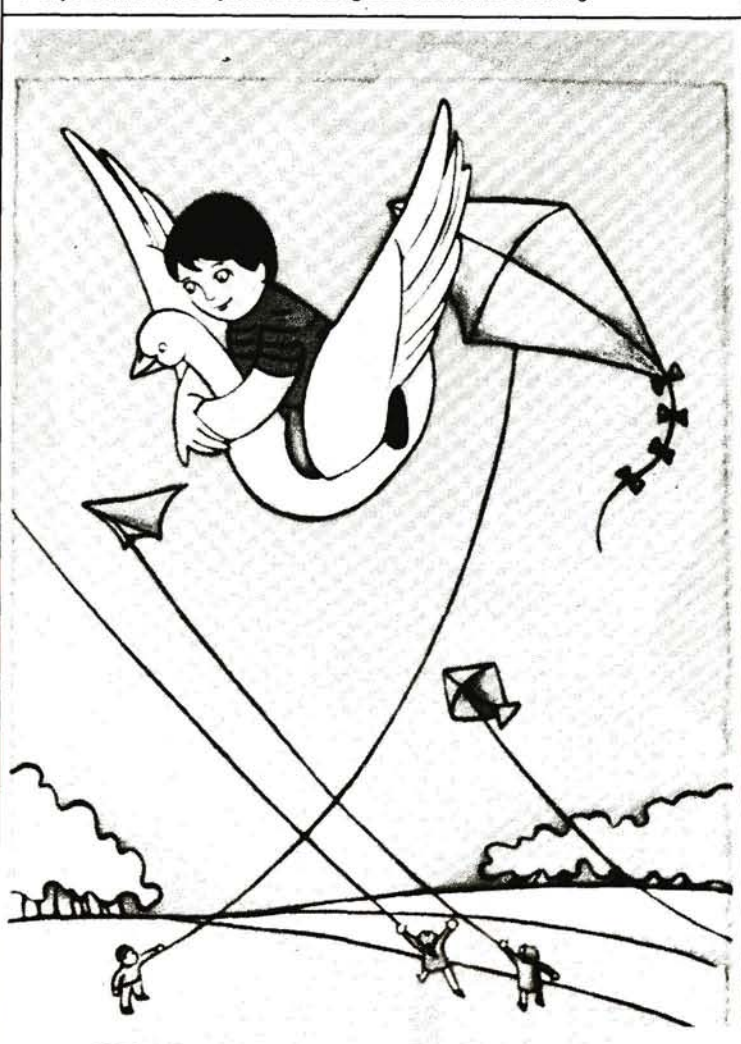
"But when we talk about stars light years away, we have only theoretical models to go by, it's still speculative. It's the last refuge of the animator, who has to go beyond what is known, for animation is the visualization of the invisible."

"As the technology lets us go further and further, the imaginative individual also has to go further and beyond for images. For instance, computer-animated graphics is a tool that is liberating, in terms of manual work, but that makes it that much more of a challenge: it forces creativity."

"Looking back, the most striking change I've seen is in the use of animation for things other than humor. Thirty-five years ago all animation was for humorous purposes; it has matured into a different and wider range of human emotions. I think most filmgoers appreciate the range of animation available; its use in schools, for instance, in a wide variety of subjects."

"I find it hard to judge my own films. I don't have a favorite film but I'm very optimistic about *Starlife*. To me the satisfaction comes in seeing something

● Gayle Thomas' *The Boy and The Snowgoose*: 18 months of drawing



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 Gabriel Dante Rossetti painting. And the sketches on the walls of her Studio A cubicle, in styles reminiscent of Doré or Beardsley, 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 Potterton 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 apprenticing.

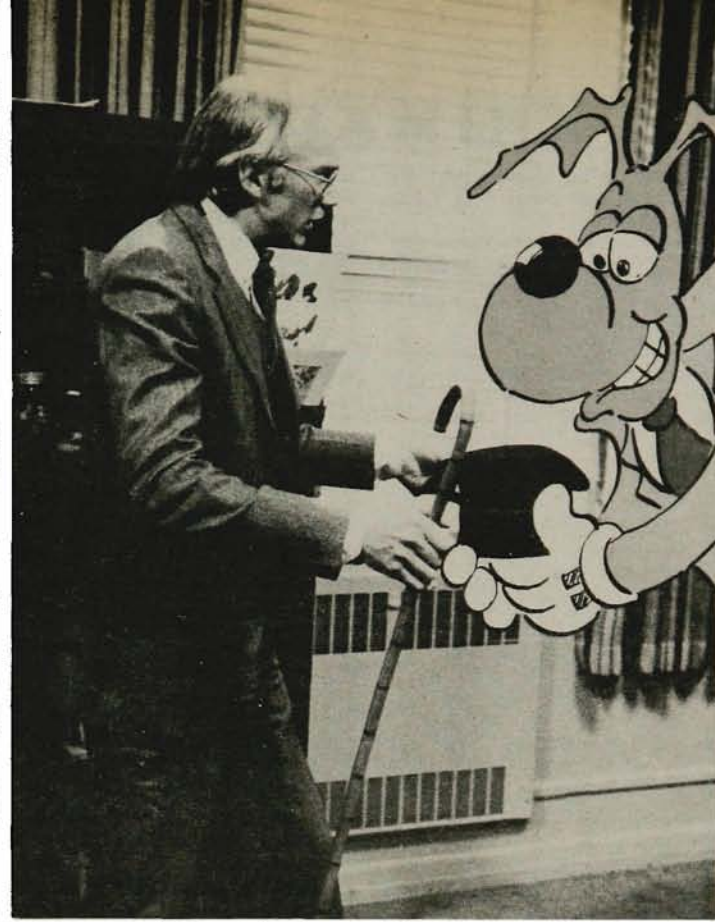
"I saw animation as a developing art form; it seemed like a very good area in which one could explore the arts; so many aspects - design, drawing, music, movement - were very challenging."

After four animated clips, and four films on which she worked alone, Thomas is working on her fifth, an 8 1/2 minute animated film called *The Boy and the Snowgoose*, which she and co-animator Françoise Hartmann developed in consultation with Montreal school-kids.

"I don't care for things that are terribly cartoony," Thomas says. "*Snowgoose* is stylized on frosted cell, back-painted with paint shading in front, but I wouldn't call it a cartoon.

"Animation is a heavy commitment: it takes such a long time. It stays with you 24 hours a day and it's months of hard labor. You have to be patient, and it can be frustrating. It can be very boring, and sometimes I find myself pulling my hair."

The Boy and the Snowgoose will be Thomas' longest film so far: 12 drawings per second represent a total of 18 months' work.



● In John Weldon's *Real Inside*, prejudice gets a novel twist

"The satisfaction is to see it on screen. When you get to see your rushes it's very exciting. You get to see that what you've drawn actually moves, and you might work three or four weeks before seeing that."

Even so it doesn't always work out as planned. Most of *The Boy and the 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 Flute* 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 camera 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 scientific consultants 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; the climate was warm and 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 felt 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 15 million years ago; how should I behave?' I've been with this for two years, which is about average for a 10-minute film; luckily 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 in the U.S.

"Coming from a graphics background, we were probably a little slow in learning the physics of animation," says Geersten. "Inevitably we ended up working in different styles. It's fortunate that here we can pick a style and work in it. It's inspiring to see that variety; that we have that opportunity makes it much more interesting.

"I've seen quite a bit of change in animation: more emphasis on realism,



● Les Drew's safety-minded old lady goes camping



● George Geersten's *Early Man*: evolutionary etiquette

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though 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 world-wide. 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 that kind of circulation, then it's paid off. It's the same with early Disney - it's masterful and it's all there.

"The future of animation? Although it's a precarious industry, if you get enough product going it'll compete handily. If people see good animation, they'll want to see more."

The weekend before, John Weldon had burned out the printer of his Apple home computer, attempting to compute animate a new logo for NFB films.

"Some people around here don't like the computer at all. They say it's going to destroy the animator. I don't think so, but then I like computers," says Weldon, a long-haired, pleasantly-disheveled Montrealer whose cubicle, complete with tattered, spring-extruding armchair, has every comfort of a Bohemian garret.

Weldon is finishing the longest film he's directed, *Real Inside*, a 12-minute film which combines live action with animation. *Real Inside*, the story of cartoon character Buck Boom's attempt to get a straight job in the corporate

world through an unusual interview with a personnel director, is a film about prejudice.

"It was done out of a technical challenge," Weldon says, "how to get the cartoon moving objects around. All that was done by producer David Verrall lying on the floor behind the actor and pulling a lot of wires. The carpenters ripped the top off the actor's desk and replaced it with a new top with holes in 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 here 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 cartoons: it could have been newspapers, comic 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 Oscar; four 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; and 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, 15%, you lose something like 35% 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 has happened across the world. There's no money to make non-commercial animation. This has led, for instance, to the total disappearance of independent American animation. The world is suffering from reality overload.

"In terms of the future I hope that whatever their plans in Ottawa, they will have some recognition of that fact that Canada is very, very strong, a global

leader, in this area. I hope they'll see some value in continuing something we're famous for.

"Even so, we've just scraped through the last few festivals. Even if they decide the Board is not the way to go, I hope they have some mechanism that will maintain an art form that is not commercial. It would be tragic to lose something that makes other people feel good about Canada, that makes them not want to drop bombs on us."

Conclusion

As Jean-Pierre Tadros once wrote, the Film Board is better adapted to function in a socialist economy than it is in a capitalist one.

That remains true, even more so today in the wake of Applebert's artistic Reaganism which sees no economic role whatsoever for the Board. What then becomes of a fragile domain such as animation which is the fusion of industrial technologies of mechanical (or electronic) reproduction with a pre-capitalist tilling of the celluloid? Can that combination belatedly find a market 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?

The challenge of the next few years at Studio A, then, is one of Darwinian adaptation. As in George Geersten's *Early Man*, the Film 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 illustrious past to have been merely prehistoric sketches.

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