

By working in sand and drawing on glass, a young animator walked away from the International Animated Film Festival in Ottawa with First Prize in the children's film category for *The Owl Who Married a Goose* and the Grand Prix for *The Street*. Ron Blumer went to meet this extraordinary girl.

# smiles in the sand

by Ronald H. Blumer



Geese landing and swimming away in *The Owl Who Married a Goose*

"I don't think most people could do it — even those who can draw beautifully and understand the basic values of composition. She uses motion in a way that is very different from other people. I consider her to be one of the most exceptional animators at the National Film Board in any medium." This is the opinion of one fellow animator and it is echoed over and over again by people in the industry generally too jaded to banter around words like "genius". She is spoken of by those who know her with almost reverential awe.

A hard worker even beyond the maniac zeal required of most animators, she has been known to sit hunched over her four-inch by six-inch plate of glass for six hours at a stretch and then go home and work on another project until late into the night. She concedes that it is hard on the eyes but talking to her, one gets very little sense of a Van Gogh-like driven artist. She exudes a great feeling of control and calm and if there is some wild beast lurking below the surface, it has eluded this interviewer. Nor does she behave very much like a resident genius. At the Canadian Film Awards last

year she won first prize in Animation for her film **The Owl Who Married a Goose**. Among all the other prepared speeches and false modesty common to such occasions, she ran up to the stage and snatched her prize, genuinely thrilled and embarrassed – like the little girl selected to give the flowers to the Queen.

Caroline Leaf fell into animation nine years ago when she took some courses with Derek Lamb at Harvard University's Carpenter Center. From the very beginning, she discarded the conventional pen and cells of the animator for the fascinating, fluid medium of sand in a light box. Whereas conventional animation is drawn frame by frame on cells or on paper to be retraced and then filmed, sand animation is produced in a very different way. A small square box with a one-inch layer of sand is lit from below and filmed from above. When a drawing is made in the sand, it shows up as white but by varying the thickness of the sand, all shades of grey are possible. At work, Caroline makes her marks on the surface with either her hands or a small tool, photographs two frames and then changes the configuration of the sand slightly and takes two more frames. It is a very quick and beautiful process to watch, deft and sure like some sort of three-dimensional weaving. Unlike conventional animation which must be drawn anew for each frame, sand animation is a question of displacing masses. The effect on the screen, as Caroline Leaf has mastered it, is a succession of fluidly changing metamorphosing figures, moving as if powered by the gentle fingers of the wind.

"I like to work under the camera because accidents happen. My work is planned, but not totally planned. While I am working I stick to my storyboard but go off in all sorts of little directions. You have to love all the little details because it's the details that keep you going. Very small things, – how a character moves across the screen, how she holds her hands. If I am not loving the actual image, I get very impatient."

"I am shy of machines. I don't use opticals or special effects. In my films the camera is completely static and I provide the movement in my drawings. Machines have messed me up too often and I don't have the same direct control over the final effect."

If you were to believe Caroline Leaf's assessment of herself, you would think that she has arrived at her impressive style merely as a result of her shortcomings. "I can't really draw," she says with great assurance, "never could. But it is interesting, not being able to draw and trying to find solutions around it. If, for example, I knew how to draw a hand with all the correct shadings and perspective, there would be no problem. But that hand would come out looking like a conventional hand. When I draw a hand, it really looks wierd." Anyone familiar with the demands of animation, particularly the brand of animation which she has chosen, might translate the above statement into "I was never very good at walking, so I became an Olympic marathon runner."

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of her work involves the transformations by which one thing becomes another thing. Again, a solution to a handicap. She transforms from one scene to another because she is utterly terrified of cutting. She feels she does not understand how to edit, how to connect two unrelated pictures and make them work. To get around this, she draws all the steps in between and makes one scene flow into the next. Another Olympic solution to a run-of-the-mill problem. "All those



Caroline Leaf at work

Photo: Wolf Koenig

large environment changes I like to do are simply a matter of getting a start point and an end point, working out the increments and then going at it, step by step in between. I love thinking of how to make transitions. The sand I use really lends itself to things changing. I think, in general, when you work under the camera with these messy materials they suggest things, they suggest transformations."

In **The Street**, Caroline Leaf departed from the sand in which she had already carved five films, and chose instead to work with ink on a small glass plate. This gave her the possibility of color, which she used sparingly, and also a finer control in the creation of her Hubley-like characters. "I photograph the drawing and then I draw over it and carefully erase the first drawing. It is hard and meticulous but also fun, like a craft. It is very peaceful work. After the initial planning, the execution is largely mechanical so I throw in little details just to keep me interested."

Working as she does under the camera does not leave any room for error. In cell animation, if you mess up a drawing, you throw it away and substitute another. Working under the camera, if you mess up an image, you have messed up the entire sequence and must start again from the beginning, frame by frame. What is required is the patience of a jeweller and the stamina of a channel swimmer. Leaf has these qualities and her fellow workers have commented on her ability to spread her energy over long periods of time. She has to. **The Street** is the result of one year and a half of dabbing and erasing paint from a small glass plate and **Metamorphosis**, another sand film based on Kafka, has been three years in the making. "When I'm working, I'm pretty disciplined because it becomes sort of routine – which is too bad. I'd really like my art and my performance to be instantaneous. It's funny, I have a lot of patience for animation but not for other things. When I do paintings, I do them very fast and would never dream of spending more than an hour on one of them."

To date, all of her films have been based on well-known literary works. Her first film was **Peter and the Wolf** and also made films based on Indian and Eskimo legends. She

Ronald H. Blumer is currently an instructor in cinema at Vanier College in Montreal. Prior to this he taught at Marianopolis College and was a teaching assistant at McGill University and Boston University. Concurrent with teaching, he has also been working on a series of films on aging.

seems to use stories as starting points, basic ideas to be visualized. "For **The Street**, I was given the vague assignment of doing any story in Canadian literature. I chose Richler because I had a picture in my mind of the technique I wanted to use and Richler fit into it. Also, I like the energy in his writing; it sort of bounces. It was easier for me to visualize than some of those great Prairie sagas."

"At first I was sort of intimidated by the words. They held me back. I felt much better after I had boiled down the story. When I used less of the words, the images were liberated to flow at their own rate. In a conversation between two people, for example, I found it much more interesting to let the conversation go on in the soundtrack

and focus on something else. In this way the picture could take over and do the explaining."

Her reliance on literature is ironic because her style and technique make her films border on pure visual form – anything but literary. The words and the stories on which she has based all her films seem to be yet another self-constructed wall, another set of limitations which she must challenge with her art. Or perhaps they are themes chosen for self-amusement while, month after month, she patiently works out her film. "I don't just want to tell a story with my films. The works on which I base my films must have enough meat in them to keep my interest during the time I have to spend on each film... image meat, meaning meat." □

## The Street

From a book by Mordecai Richler, **Direction, design & animation:** Caroline Leaf, **Sound editing:** Gloria Demers, **Producer:** Guy Glover, **Executive Producer:** Wolf Koenig, **Voices:** Mort Ransen, Sarah Dwight, John Hood, Vera Leitman, & Howard Ryshpan, **Color,** 10 minutes, **Produced** by the National Film Board of Canada, 1976.

**The Street** has about as much in common with your run-of-the mill animation film as Mickey Mouse has with Mona Lisa. It is something very special, a film that acts on you like a direct plug into your unconscious – the waking equivalent of a dream. Its creator, Caroline Leaf, has evolved an unusual technique which uses a fluid medium, in this case ink on glass, to produce an ever-merging, blending, transmogrifying series of images – a sharp fuzziness which is the very stuff of memory.

The film is based on a small section of Mordecai Richler's novel, *The Street*. The street in this case is, what else, St. Urbain Street and the characters are the same Duddy Kravitz gang with much the same goings-on. The novel is, in fact, a set of short stories and the subject of this film is the very memorable one of the dying grandmother in the back room. The film is narrated in the first person by a nine-year-old boy who alternates fear, disgust and childlike wonderment at the curious behavior of the adults around him. The story as told in the book is filled with the biting references to time and ethnicity which have made Richler famous.

The film takes a different tack, choosing to drop this literary attachment to time and place. In fact the story and words, powerful and evocative as they are, become completely upstaged by the images which unfold before your eyes like some sort of moving miracle. Caroline Leaf's technique is to work with her fluid medium under the camera, drawing, smearing, erasing and redrawing, and filming the progression, frame by meticulous frame. What results is something very different from the static, two-dimensional feel of even the best cell animation. The visual information comes at us not in distinct, separate bits, but rather as a flowing whole. The individual drawings in fact are wholly unremarkable, if anything crude and childlike. The interest and beauty of her technique lie in the movement, in the spaces between the frames.

Because of the fluidity of her technique, she is the master of what is known in animation as the transformation, a technique in which a dog becomes a window becomes a car becomes a mouth. What is curious, and at



News of grandmother's death gets passed along in **The Street**

the same time wonderful, is that this transfixing technique is harnessed, not to an abstract ballet of moving shapes and lines but to the straightforward job of telling a story. **The Street**, with its dramatic voices and swirling pictures, becomes a strange amalgam of different sensations, not unified but thoroughly engrossing. The visualization of the story is imaginative, ever-changing and always surprising, in its total subjectivity. In live action, it would be the equivalent of a hand-held camera with a wide-angle lens. But the distorting lens of these drawings is the mind of a young child freshly experiencing the bizarre reality around him. It is said that when we remember a scene from our past, we form an image of this scene from a position we never could have been in. We see an aerial view of a childhood park or a building from across a street we have never crossed. Caroline Leaf does the same time warp in the film both in terms of the angle from which we are seeing things and also in terms of the irrational fixing on a tiny detail, just the sort of moment that would stick in our minds and give the memory dimensionality.

**The Street** ends up being a film which must be experienced. In its brief ten minutes, it makes you dissatisfied with the plodding reality of conventional drama. It is the visual equivalent of stream-of-consciousness, jumping as it does from a house to a glance to a detail to the washing blowing in the wind across the alleyway. It is more than a good translation from one medium into another, for Caroline Leaf has succeeded in touching our collective unconscious, in reproducing the St. Urbain Street of our mind.

**Ronald H. Blumer**