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# Unpacking and Decoding the World of Animation

By CHRIS HAMPTON  
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BUFFALO — Printed as epigraph in many animator’s handbooks is the quotable Walt Disney: “Animation can explain whatever the mind of man can conceive.”



His words were prophetic, but could he have imagined that the world a half-century from his time would be so thoroughly animated? Or have predicted the proliferation of the form throughout digital art, new media art and Internet art? From storefront ads to text messaging apps, animation is the vernacular of the increasing number of screens that populate daily life.

Addressing this rapid and pervasive shift in visual culture in the last two decades, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery here has organized a broad survey examining the work of contemporary artists who use the techniques of animation — creating the illusion of movement through a quick succession of frames — the same breadth of technologies that gave life to Mickey Mouse as well as *Indominus Rex* of “Jurassic World.”

“Screen Play: Life in an Animated World,” through Sept. 13, presents 47 pieces spanning roughly a quarter-century by more than three dozen artists from around the world working

in a range of techniques, from hand-drawn cel animation and stop motion to three-dimensional video projection and video game design. Some of these artists illuminating animation's trajectory are experimenting with older traditions like Claymation ([Allison Schulnik](#), along with [Nathalie Djurberg](#) and [Hans Berg](#), who combine sculpture, animation and music), while others use animation to speak directly to the challenges of living in a digitally mediated world ([Ryan Trecartin](#), [Tabor Robak](#)).

The show totals 14 hours of watching (thankfully, the purchase of a single admission includes a free return visit).

The concept for "Screen Play" occurred quite naturally to Joe Lin-Hill, the museum's deputy director. "It came from my children, who love their iPads and the games they play on them," he said. Given the ever more personal relationship between people and their screen devices, Mr. Lin-Hill and his co-curators, Cathleen Chaffee and Holly E. Hughes, wanted to look closely at what fills those portals and how contemporary artists are responding to what they identify as a transformative time. "The speed is just so quick that really only artists can address the complexities of how fast it's changing," Ms. Chaffee said.

A recent study of children ages 5 to 16 across the United Kingdom by the research agency Childwise found that over the past 20 years — roughly the time covered by the exhibition — their average daily screen use had more than doubled, to 6 ½ hours. A 2014 survey by the market research organization Millward Brown found that across multiple devices, the typical adult global user consumes about seven hours of screen media each day. And wearable screens — watches and glasses — have entered the marketplace.

The curators make the point that animation is ubiquitous because it's so expressive. "It's become so natural to be in a movie, say, flying over an impossible landscape at a speed that no human has ever gone and see realistic-looking creatures that have never existed and will never exist but do exist in these alternative worlds," Mr. Lin-Hill said.

"Screen Play" unites a multiplying number of art practices. Yet even at its considerable length, the exhibition skips some of the groundbreaking ways animation has begun to mediate how people experience life every day: holography, interactive screen media and virtual-reality environments, to name a few.

Set in the grand 1905 Beaux-Arts Albright building, the opening galleries feature works that will at least feel familiar to visitors. The Belgian artist Peter Wächtler's "Untitled" is a hand-drawn animation featuring his own rat character that, aesthetically, looks not unlike Disney's classic films.

"Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris," created in 1989 by the South African artist William Kentridge, is the oldest work on view. Mr. Kentridge uses a stop-motion technique in which he erases and reworks a single charcoal drawing to produce movement. "The legacy of Kentridge is so much that of film," Ms. Chaffee said, "it's embedded in the way the work's been made." It represents an early landmark for animation in contemporary art. In one gallery, Ms. Schulnik's two claymation videos, "Forest" and "Mound," are projected large on the wall. She choreographs graceful ballets from a cast of grotesque sculpted creatures. Her fascination with animation, like Disney's, focuses on its boundlessness.

“The screen allows you a glimpse into another world,” she said in an email interview. “I love making a world from top to bottom. I can create an environment exactly how I want it to be, or at least as exact as my skills will allow.” The worlds on view here are dripping with life — a parade of shape-shifting monsters collapsing into and growing out of one another.

Commanding the center of the main pavilion, Harun Farocki’s [“Parallel I-IV,”](#) which Mr. Lin-Hill calls “the brain of the show,” is presented as a video installation on six hanging screens arranged in a circle. Through four segments, Mr. Farocki shows how, over a relatively short history, video game animation has evolved from symbolic representation, like the rudimentary depiction of trees in the 1980 computer game “Mystery House,” to the photographic realism of the present-day crop.

Other galleries examine how the rise of screen-based media has affected the way we interact with one another. For “Two Minutes Out of Time,” [Pierre Huyghe](#), along with his collaborator [Philippe Parreno](#), bought the copyright to an animated manga character [Anlee](#) — the sort of sprite who without Mr. Huyghe’s intervention would have been only a bit player in some animated fiction. Now, she stars in her own four-minute character portrait. She has developed an identity, a “character talking about its condition of being a character,” he said.

“RMB City,” by the Chinese multimedia artist Cao Fei, offers a tour of her titular wonderland, a hub for artistic experimentation frequented by users from all over the world in [Second Life](#), the online virtual world. Jon Rafman’s [“Codes of Honor,”](#) filmed partly in Second Life, considers obsolescence and nostalgia in the digital age, elevating the story of a professional gamer to that of a celebrated athlete or ancient warrior. “If your greatest memories are about having these intense experiences in front of a screen,” he said in a phone interview, “why can’t those be the important moments that define your identity as a human being?”

Luminous like a stained glass medallion, [Tabor Robak’s “A\\*”](#) — a 14-panel LED monitor installation — hangs on the front wall of the gallery. Like the North Star, it’s visible from most vantages. The work borrows from the imagery of iOS and Android games, the kind of amusements subway commuters might busy themselves playing on their smartphones: “Bust-a-Move,” “Breakout,” pachinko and “Luxor.” In an interview, Mr. Robak, 29, called the work a self-portrait, each game eliciting a certain emotion. He is of the first generation that grew up surrounded by screens.

“I think his mother’s milk must have been delivered through some sort of software platform,” Mr. Lin-Hill said. Mr. Robak understands himself in the language of screens.

“For me, screens are very precious objects,” he said. “It’s like a window, the world continues right into it. The screen disappears when you’re immersed. You forget that it’s there. That’s an important quality: You’re in it. They disappear. They give you everything you want.” Animation is the form that best reflects the present moment because it’s also capable of tremendous movement and speed, Mr. Robak said. “Screen Play” suggests that it is a tradition fusing with technologies that will continually drive it faster. Just as one frame cedes to the next, it’s a medium defined by reinvention.

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