

MOUND: Moving Stop-Motion from Allison Schulnik

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LA-based artist **Allison Schulnik** spent about eight months on her latest heart-rending stop-motion opus, which clocks in at just under four and a half minutes long. That math doesn't seem so terribly out of proportion when considering the opening sequence alone: 100 clay figures were each altered for each frame, shooting at 24 frames per second. Do that math. Schulnik patiently crafted the piece with lighting and framing assistance from cinematographer Helder K. Sun, though she readily owns up to being a complete control freak when it came to creating, producing, directing, animating, fabricating, choreographing, editing and soundtracking. The product of her obsession, MOUND, might be named for the mound of writhing, melty-eyed, animate clay lumps that bring to life her "Funeral Party" and "Performance" paintings with poignantly human interactions. See MOUND as part of Schulnik's solo show by the same name at Manhattan's ZieherSmith gallery through December 17th.

This looks like an outrageously time-consuming process. Discuss.

I started by working out some kind of rough ideas and thoughts of what I wanted it to be. Then I made an animatic. Next I began building a little over 100 puppets, costumes, sets, etcetera, followed by many months in my little black box animating their world. I guess I was in the hard-core zone of working on nothing else but the film for I'd say about 7 to 8 months.

How many hours went into making a single sequence?

Different sequences took different amounts of time. In the big opening shot where I animated all 100 or so puppets by myself all at once, I would only complete sometimes two frames in an entire work day. I spent about a whole month on that shot, which ended up being 13 seconds or so (with loops). Other shots with one to two characters might only take a day.

Seems like you would need psychic powers to anticipate the affects of changing so many things — little clay eyes and hands and faces and feet — for every shot.

Yes, you have to change every character in the shot for every frame. So, for the big shot with 100 puppets, I moved 100 puppets before I shot the frame. I usually have an idea of how they'll move. Sometimes I go straight ahead, and sometimes I know in advance how I want them.

What was the first stop-motion animation you ever made?

I started out with hand-drawn animation, cut-outs, pixelation of actors... The first real stop-motion film I made was at CalArts in 1999, called "Vedma" — a dramatic, medieval tale about an evil queen and her court jester. He performs for her, she forces him to kill himself, and then he explodes, and his gooey innards cover her entire giant castle and it magically morphs into something less evil, maybe.

Do you prefer working in video over drawing or sculpture?

No, I love/hate them all the same. They all feed each other, and are necessary for the other to exist. I couldn't do only one thing ever. I need the cycle. I have a short attention span.

Do your dreams influence your artistic output, or does your influence come more from the external?

I guess it comes from different places — daydreams, nightmares, imagined realities, farcical theatrics, once-loved discarded relics, people I know and love or hate, music, cartoons, books, images, paintings, cinema, dance, theater, trash, food, water, beer, dirt.

Tell me about the Scott Walker song in MOUND. What brought you to choose that piece of music?

I've been obsessed with Scott Walker for years. I listen to songs and want to create movement to them, because of my background in dance, I guess. I thought that song (like pretty much all of his songs) would make beautiful movement. I basically shot the whole piece with that song in my mind, hoping he would approve of it. I sent him the piece through his current label and he graciously gave me his full approval. I knew I couldn't have used the music if he didn't like it.

Background in dance? Elaborate.

I went to CalArts to study Experimental Animation. It seemed like this perfect union of painting and dance, which it is. I performed dance before that until I got stage fright — it's my first love. I hope to do choreography one day with living, breathing dancers. I have so much trust in clay, it moves exactly how I want it to, but I definitely have some ideas for some dance pieces simmering in my brain.

What do you do with the figures when the video is complete? Do they get preserved? Or have they served their purpose?

I keep what I can. Most of the time the figures do not survive the process, and their little bodies are smeared and smashed when the curtain closes. But I definitely keep all that remains. I have most of the 100 puppets from MOUND chilling out in my studio. Still frozen in time in my little black shooting cave, cheering me on for the next round.

What does the next round involve, presently?

I just completed paintings and the film for my show ZieherSmith. I am making a costume for my band Barfth that involves hot dogs, and I think I am going to try and plant a pineapple.