



Eleven in Motion

This programme is a personal and original response to the work of the Painters Eleven by talented and accomplished animation artists from across Canada. The animators have themselves researched and chosen from the Painters Eleven an artist with whom they feel a personal connection. Similar to experimental animation in Canada, which was once a highly regarded mode of expression before commercial animation usurped the stage, the Painters Eleven have largely fallen out of the public spotlight. Canadians are now much more accustomed to experiencing the Group of Seven as the ultimate product of Canadian visual arts culture. In commissioning short animated works that draw from, respond to or are inspired by seminal works created by the Painters Eleven, we hope to have revitalized knowledge of and interest in the Painters Eleven.

Much like the development of the Painters Eleven group, this project brings together a diverse array of accomplished artists, each with their own style and motivations. These artists are united by modern artistic sensibilities and their collective commitment to creating works of art that experiment with the animation medium, pushing the envelope of artistic expression.

ELEVEN IN MOTION: Abstract Expressions In Animation provides an opportunity to renew interest in our collective Canadian history and strengthen the understanding of animation as a viable and relevant form of art by showcasing the work of many talented Canadian animation artists.

- Madi Pillar

Eleven Animating Eleven Painting

By Chris Gehman

I.

Eleven in Motion is a fine program of films and videos made in homage to the Painters Eleven, whose importance in the history of Canadian painting is discussed elsewhere in this catalogue. The tone of the works is important to note: they are for the most part respectful but not fawning. They do not bow down to the god of painting, but point to the specific qualities of each painter and his or her work, and often reflect on some aspects of their lives.

Historically, the relationship between painting and the cinema has not always been so collegial. In an appreciation published many years after Jim Davis's death in 1974, the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage recalled a talk Davis gave at the New School for Social Research in the mid-1950s, around the time the Painters Eleven formed as a group:

The ground I have for him is the level of the stage of a small auditorium.... [T]his high-school-like stage with its regularly furled curtains backing Jim Davis' stately and preposterously tall stance as he said, laconically into a microphone, that all the traditional Arts had been rendered superfluous by Motion Picture Film, which incorporated the possibilities of each and every one of them into itself.ⁱ

It was a provocative position, and Brakhage and his friend Willard Maas were, at the time, offended. Underlying Davis's claim was his belief that the traditional arts of painting and sculpture (both of which he had practiced) were incapable of dealing with the dynamic reality of modern life because they produced only static objects. As Davis wrote:

Now, for the first time in history, an artist can express reality dynamically instead of statically. In the artist's increasing perception of the role of motion in nature and the universe (and man's life) future historians will discern our day's major contributions to the development of the visual arts.... [T]he artist who has abandoned the static concepts of the nineteenth century for the more inclusive space-time ones of today, must abandon oil painting for something more dynamic. What else is there but motion picture film?ⁱⁱ

Davis's assessment upends the usual art-world hierarchy, which consistently positions painting and sculpture as *the* heroic arts, and everything else as secondary or derivative. Yet it's undeniable that throughout the twentieth century many artists tended either to move towards filmmaking or to attempt to incorporate aspects of the moving image into their work. (For examples of the latter, think of the attempts to represent motion and dynamism in paintings and sculptures by Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Natalia Goncharova and Marcel Duchamp, or of the much later sequential film-strip-like paintings of Joyce Wieland.) Behind Davis's statements there already lay a decades-long tradition of filmmakers and film polemicists who repudiated the tendency of the conventional cinema to take up the theatre and the novel as models. As early as 1916, for example, a group of Italian Futurist artists issued a manifesto entitled "The Futurist Cinema," in which they laid claim to the idea of film as primarily a visual, rather than dramatic, art:

The Cinema is an autonomous art. The cinema must therefore never copy the stage. The cinema, being essentially visual, must above all fulfill the evolution of painting, detach itself from reality, from photography, from the graceful and solemn. It must become anti-graceful, deforming, impressionistic, synthetic, dynamic, free-wording.

ONE MUST FREE THE CINEMA AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM in order to make it the ideal instrument of a new art, immensely vaster and lighter than all the existing arts.ⁱⁱⁱ

This, as often as not, was the tenor of statements coming from those with an allegiance to film as an art, and specifically film as a new art. It is at the opposite pole from the blithering of commercial cinematographers who spout clichés about “painting with light,” hoping that some of the bourgeois adulation of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting from which they borrow their compositional ideas and lighting will be reflected on them. In texts such as these (and there are many others) we find, rather, the belief that this new medium constitutes a radical break with the past that demands a supersession of existing media and forms alike. Painting is no longer adequate to “fulfill” its own evolution – that job must now be taken over by film.

But looking back, it is clear that many of the most important “experimental” films were made by those who came to film *through* painting and other visual arts, among them, to name just a few: Emile Cohl (*Fantasmagorie*, 1908); Man Ray (*Retour à la Raison*, 1923); Fernand Léger (*Ballet Mécanique*, made with Dudley Murphy, 1924); Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie Diagonale*, 1925); Salvador Dalí (*Un Chien Andalou*, made with Luis Buñuel, 1929); Len Lye (*Free Radicals*, 1958); Andy Warhol (*Chelsea Girls*, 1966); Joyce Wieland (*Water Sark*, 1966); and Michael Snow (*Wavelength*, 1967). Some of these restless artists made only one film, or a few, but others went on to become filmmakers primarily. (Of course, former painters have also made significant contributions to the dramatic cinema, notable among them Robert Bresson and David Lynch.)

On the one hand, this pull towards filmmaking indicates that it offers the artist something unavailable, unattainable, in the “static arts.” On the other hand, it is equally clear that those coming to film from the traditional visual arts brought with them something lacking in most trained filmmakers: a sense of freedom with the medium, a capacity not only to imagine but to produce a kind of film radically different from that produced by the commercial movie industry, including the “art cinema.”^{iv} Why have people who were not trained as filmmakers, and who in many cases did not approach filmmaking as a profession, been so important in the history of film? Mainly because the medium was so rapidly commercialized and conventionalized, its mainstream manifestations resolutely allied to nineteenth-century models of the Realist drama and novel, with the result that the intervention of outsiders and non-professionals has often been required to refresh and renovate the practice of filmmaking. The relatively open field in which the visual artist operates has often allowed him or her to locate and develop those potentialities of cinema that were ignored, overlooked or actively suppressed by working filmmakers.

II.

It is an art-historical truism that the advent of photography ineluctably changed the status of painting. From one perspective, photography rendered painting “obsolete”: if what one sought in an image was primarily a realistic representation, photography could do the job as well or better in most respects, and cheaper and more consistently. (It took a long time to develop photographic colour, which from this realist perspective represented a

crucial lack.) European painting after the Renaissance worked diligently towards optically realistic representation, and achieved it – only to have this job taken over by a machine! Finding itself unemployed, however, painting also found itself free: freed from the need to produce a certain kind of realistic, illusionistic picture. The moment of its obsolescence was also the moment when it began to become most creative, and the nearly two centuries from Turner through Monet and Picasso to Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Bridget Riley, Gerhard Richter, Jean-Michel Basquiat et al. – which correspond closely to the period since the development of photography – were surely the most explosively creative and diverse in the history of the medium. This period saw painters develop a succession of radically new painting styles, including Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Op Art, and so on. The Painters Eleven played their part in that extraordinary ferment, bringing a decisively modern painterly sensibility to the conservative and provincial cultural milieu of English Canada.

But, as we have already seen, photography was not the only new medium to deliver a shock to the traditional arts, to shake the ground on which they stood. The development of moving image technologies, beginning with the optical toys of the nineteenth century – the thaumatrope, zoetrope, phenakistiscope and flipbook – and then of the cinema proper, as well as the invention of sound recording, together constituted a second shock, a second shift in status. These new media were not just mechanical media for the reproduction of images: more importantly, they were also capable of representing change over time, incorporating movement and dynamic change into their fundamental structures. One possible response to this shift was represented by the rejection of the older arts as pernicious influences on a new medium, by the Futurists, Dziga Vertov, Germaine Dulac, Jim Davis and many others. Another, more modest and less dramatic, response was to accept the continued importance of all the arts, but to acknowledge their new *position* in relation to the new media.

Today, film as a specific medium finds itself in a situation analogous to that of painting following the appearance of photography. It is increasingly seen as obsolete, as its traditional functions are supplanted by digital media. Techniques that could be achieved in film only through countless hours of painstaking craft labour are available in digital applications at the click of a mouse. Where film might once have been considered *the* universal, synthesizing medium, now it is the digital media that claim to absorb and contain everything that has come before. They are, supposedly, the universal solvent for representation, whether in language, sound or image, and the cinema has begun to dissolve into them, along with other forms of expression, representation, documentation, communication and entertainment.

The “death of film” – meaning the specific technology of photochemical filmmaking and film projection – has been proclaimed over and over again for at least thirty years now. Yet like painting before it, it remains strangely alive, even lively. As the painters discovered before them, filmmakers may learn to see in the *practical* obsolescence of their medium a kind of liberation. I think that this is partly what lies behind important recent work by filmmakers such as David Gatten, Phil Solomon, Cecile Fontaine and others, including artists included in this program. In any case, the past couple of decades have seen the creation of many extraordinary works in film, as well as in the broader practice of the moving image, in video and digital media. The painter and the filmmaker alike now find themselves marginalized according to the historiography of technological progress, but it may turn out to be a happy marginalization in many respects. This is why the present historical moment seems so congenial to a project like “Eleven in Motion.” Although the commission may have been motivated by a desire to remind us again of a somewhat neglected group of Canadian artists, and to offer a productive challenge to eleven active Canadian animators, for me the

project has another subtext, which has to do with the meeting on a certain historical ground of two crucial but theoretically “obsolete” media.

III.

The range of work included in *Eleven in Motion* echoes the diversity of artistic styles represented by the Painters Eleven, who apart from a general commitment to abstraction did not hew to a specific style or approach (unlike, say, *Les Automatistes*, a more theoretically and politically coherent Montréal group of painters formed in the early 1940s). The positions of these filmmakers vis-à-vis the intertwined histories of technology, medium and aesthetic that I have briefly sketched above are also diverse. Like the Painters Eleven, whose years of birth ranged from 1886 to 1926, these filmmakers span at least a couple of generations, and many working methods. Some (e.g. Steve Woloshen, Richard Reeves) work directly on film, without the intervention of a camera, and have frequently worked with abstract forms. Others, including Ellen Besen, Lisa Morse and Félix Dufour-Laperrière, combine live-action film, video or photography with animation. Several, among them Patrick Jenkins, Pasquale LaMontagna, Rick Raxlen and Craig Marshall, are shooting, combining and editing their images digitally. Younger artists today are often most comfortable working synthetically between media: Elise Simard, for example, shoots much of her animation on 35mm film, but uses digital tools to layer and composite this material. With its proliferation of different recording and post-production media, aspect ratios and exhibition formats, this program typifies the present moment in moving-image media history, one in which numerous media and combinations of media, as well as different formats, frame sizes and shapes and production/post-production systems are in play at the same time.

None of which, of course, tells us much about the movies themselves. Patrick Jenkins, in *Inner View*, attempts to get *inside* the paintings of Kazuo Nakamura (1926-2002), reanimating their development from blank canvas to finished work. Digital post-production tools allow Jenkins to treat foreground and background elements from a single painting as separate layers, which can be given movement in distinct planes. It also permits him to select sections of particular works, juxtapose them with others, and so on. It is in a sense the most literal treatment of the work of one of the Painters Eleven included here – Jenkins was the only participant to have known his subject and his subject’s paintings very well prior to the commission – but is also quite free in the way it moves through and recombines their elements. Pasquale LaMontagna’s *William’s Creatures* also makes direct reference to the artist’s work – in this case, a single painting by William Ronald (1926-1998). Taking on the literal role of *animator*, LaMontagna gives life to the forms from Ronald’s painting, transforming elements of a static composition into elastic, squiggling abstract life-forms reminiscent of fish, sperm or leeches.

Other works evoke the artists and their work in more abstract or oblique ways. In *Old Ink*, Rick Raxlen makes reference to the work of Harold Town (1924-1990) by taking forms and marks from Town’s work out of context, redrawing them in Raxlen’s own familiar style, then repeating and resequencing them. Richard Reeves’s *Yarwood Trail* does something unusual for animation: the compositions are static, so there is little “movement” as such. Rather, the change in each section comes from the shifting textures and densities of the inks and paints applied to the film surface, and from the inescapable jiggling of shapes registered by hand on each film frame. Natural forms such as microscopic cellular structures, plant roots or fungi are evoked here, perhaps because Reeves was interested in Walter Yarwood’s (1917-1996) habit of walking and observing, as well as in his sculptures.

In *Playtime*, Steven Woloshen seems to unlock the energy that went into the paintings of Jock MacDonald (1897-1960). The film combines Woloshen's characteristic kinetic abstract animation with brief clips or frames of found film. In Woloshen's film it is spirit and energy, more than specific forms, summoned up in homage to the painter. Oscar Cahén (1916-1956) sadly died quite young in a car crash. In *Traffic Flow II*, Nick Fox-Gieg seems to refer at once to Cahén's work, frequently characterized by curvilinear forms and bright colours, and to his untimely death: the swooshing, shifting abstractions are reminiscent of out-of-focus traffic and street lights, while the soundtrack borrows from the conventions of the horror film to create an atmosphere of menace. Félix Dufour-Laperrière's *Strips* contains what is perhaps the program's most oblique gesture in its homage to the work of Jack Bush (1909-1977). In this film, a black-and-white found film of a stripper from the 1950s or 60s is divided into vertical strips, from which the original film is printed in discontinuous sections. The surface of the film is also covered in abstract blobs that interrupt the continuity of the motion. These interventions create a situation in which the division of the material across a grid and the rapidly shifting abstractions across the film surface compete with the charged erotic imagery of the original material, trying to create some kind of balance between representation and abstraction.

Several of the films and videos make more direct and explicit reference to the artist's life or image. Ellen Besen's *Stroke*, for example, focuses on the twin professions of Tom Hodgson (1924-2006) – painter and competitive canoeist – and brings language into play. It revolves around the verbal link between the stroking action of painting and the stroking action of paddling, introducing fragments of biographical information through animated snippets of text on narrow scrolls, video images of a paddle dipping into the water, and the Toronto ferry on its way to Centre Island, where Hodgson lived. Craig Marshall's irreverent *The End is the Beginning* also introduces the use of language, and suggests that certain artworks of Ray Mead (1921-1998) contain echoes of his wartime experiences of the bombing of London, where Mead was studying art during WWII. The skeletal burned-out frameworks of bombed-out buildings and the optical distortions of intense heat are combined with cartoon figures fleeing the danger, and an insistent voice repeating "Be calm, don't panic... Paint a picture."

The delicate, layered and tenuous *As Above So Below*, by contrast, works with images alone to evoke the work and life of Alexandra Luke (1901-1967). In this work Elise Simard combines drawings, photographs, and textured surfaces in an ever-shifting image like a laminate of elusive memories. Of all the films, only Lisa Morse's *The Importance of Hortense* gives a central place to an image of the artist herself – in this case, Hortense Gordon (1886-1961). Gordon was the eldest of the Painters Eleven – born just one year after the Lumière Brothers' famous première of their Cinématographe projections in Paris – and was the earliest to explore abstraction in painting, as early as 1930. Morse begins with a reproduction of a black-and-white photograph of Gordon looking directly into the camera, a painting partially visible on the wall behind her, and then animates a process of continuous overpainting, adding colour to the image and abstracting it. As the camera cuts in to smaller details of the image while the paint is applied stroke by stroke, abstract compositions are created from fragments of this representational image, making use of a classic cinematic method for abstraction: the extreme close-up. The paint covers, transforms, and, in the last few seconds of the film, uncovers Gordon's image again, so that the painter appears to look out at us from across the decades, momentarily brought back to life by the marriage of cinema and painting.

ⁱ Stan Brakhage. "Time ... on dit." In *Jim Davis: The Flow of Energy*. Robert Haller, ed. (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1992), p. 23-24. Originally published in *Musicworks* magazine, Winter 1991.

ⁱⁱ Jim Davis. "The Only Dynamic Art." In *Jim Davis: The Flow of Energy*. Robert Haller, ed. (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1992), p. 31-32. Originally published in *Films In Review*, December 1953.

ⁱⁱⁱ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settemelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla & Remo Chiti. "The Futurist Cinema" (1916). Cited in Malcolm LeGrice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), p. 10-12.

^{iv} In this respect, the situation today is completely different from that of the early to late 20th century. Whereas in the past film has been repeatedly revived and redirected by interventions from people who came to it from older, more established art forms, today's visual-artists-turned-filmmakers have generally brought little or nothing new to the cinema at the level of fundamental innovation in form, style or cinematic "language." Instead, they have tended to adopt the production methods, forms and structures of the commercial cinema, and made changes primarily in terms of the settings and frameworks in which the material is presented – in the gallery rather than the theatre, on multiple screens, etc. I am thinking here of artists such as Shirin Neshat, Matthew Barney, Rodney Graham, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, et al. There are, of course, also examples of celebrity artists who go on to make more-or-less ordinary movies, e.g. Julian Schnabel, Steve McQueen.

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