Talk to me

Frances Drew

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September 1994
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Philosophy

“The image of the Goddess giving birth often is closer to what creativity is like for many people. When the Goddess creates something out of nothing, her creation comes out of her body, not her mind. When we create in this way, we may labor long to give birth to something, not being quite sure what we are birthing. The creation may seem to us not so much something we chose as something that has chosen us, and we may fear that the baby will be born dead or deformed. There are few certainties about it. And, once the process is under way, it takes on a life of its own. We stop it only at risk to our own life.

At the basis of life is eros, passion, sexual energy. Creation comes from opening up to that energy and allowing the natural processes of spontaneous creation to occur. To do that, we need to be courageously open. Sometimes, though, we get hit with genuine tragedies. To continue the metaphor, the new birth begins not with love, but with events that feel more like rape. While the pain and suffering involved is not invited or deserved - it simply may be the price we all pay for living in a world still at a very primitive level of development - even such catastrophies can be used by the psyche for growth, and hence eventually to bring us treasures - if we allow the resulting growth to take place.”

My original intent was to make a film that was rebellious and intense, mirroring the degree of emotional intensity I felt at the time. As my consciousness shifted this was reflected in the form and direction of the piece. I wanted powerful imagery to show a running dialogue in visual form dealing with the shadow archetype. The idea of multi-level observation - the action, and the energy or the issue prompting the

action, was something I was trying to convey, along with illustrating abandonment and rejection. In trying to understand and present certain types of behaviors, my research lead me to Jung and the workings of the anima/animus, male and female archetypes and shadows, the work of Dr. Clarissa Estes and the wild woman archetype, Carol S. Pearson's "The Hero Within," ideas of the hero's journey as a personal passage, dreamwork and universal images.

Bones have held a fascination for me for some time, and have been in and out of my work. For me they represent primality and the core of existence. When first trying to work from the subconscious I became enamored of bones, incorporating them into my installation pieces and carved wood constructions. The move toward the primitive in ideas, objects and images (bones, sticks, shells and suede) has grown since then.

The first batch of experiments done in the summer of '92 (hand painted series) had a series done with X-rays of legs. With these I was trying to pull images from the subconscious, to evoke emotion and hit on a gut level in the way Franz Kline's and Mark Rothko's works do. These bone/tribal images were to morph from 2-D to 3-D. I was unable to transfer the 2-D images into Topas. The transfer program Kermit was not operating properly at the time. The file transfered, taking more than 30 minutes, but could not be opened on the IBM when tested.

I had also wanted the film to be an installation piece with staggered motion projected on blank canvases - experimental and in some spots conceptual, consisting of fast images showing the tension of opposites, animated type, raw emotion and rebellious reactive thought in images,
leading to the off screen extension of space. Hardware limitations squelched the feasibility of a project of this magnitude.

I spent much time in meditation, grasping at the periphery of images and colors, trying to follow my intuition with ideas for sequences/images, and thinking of ways to apply them formally with the software and hardware available. Pulling work from such deep recesses became extracting, and took on a life and rhythm of its own. What is usually a joy (in terms of the creative process) became a struggle, a belabored birth because of the deep nature of the images and subject matter. Four paintings also grew out of the experiments and processes.

In retrospect, my own journey and passage for the duration of the piece has been a struggle (somewhat like dragging a pig to slaughter), so naturally the concretization and representation of those issues and conflicts also would be laborious.

The opening and closing sequences with the priestess and the bird came out of a dream. The dream was so strong and vivid that it stayed with me. It seemed like a good way to start the film - the viewer enters into another reality, sees the priestesses and bird. The bird fills the screen as it flies off, then the story starts as if seen by the bird/voyeur. When the story is over the bird comes back to the priestess’s hand. In writing about the dream when it happened -

“A circle of us - it’s hazy, some kind of spiritual teachings. The teachers are on the outside of the circle. The lesson involves a small bird. We each have one. We are to put our spirit in the bird, and then let the bird fly. I have my bird - hold it close to my chest
and feel a warmth and protectiveness over the animal. Melting into the bird, I cease to exist in my own form, and fly with the bird keeping my consciousness. There is great exaltation as the bird rises in the sky - the view - the soaring feeling. I'm flying, feeling the air rush by, the clouds, the scenery below - but at the same time it feels like I haven't left the circle of students. This was what we were supposed to do, but the teachers hadn't shown us how to do it yet."

The bird sequence worked well as an intro and ending, and had a surrealistic quality that set the tone for the rest of the animation.

I had chosen copyrighted music, and went about trying to illustrate the lyrics. I later decided I didn't want the constraints inherent with copyrighted music, and that the animation could stand on its own without the lyrics - they were a good jumping off point, but as time progressed, were no longer as important. I wanted to give the suggestions and visual clues to outward and inward intensity, guide the viewer and let them create their own narrative.
Technical

Originally I wanted black and white footage tinted with subtle color. I shot b&w Polaroid slide film, b&w infrared and b&w T Max. The Polaroid slide film was flimsy (the emulsion scratched off easily), and the film itself was thin, curly and tore easily, although it did yield a wide dynamic range. The b&w infrared was shot at 1/125, f.11-16 for the outdoor shots, and the internal light meter was used for the backlite X-ray shots. The ISO was set at 100. Total darkness was required for loading and unloading the film into the camera. A 25A red filter was used. The outdoor shots weren't that exciting, but the X-ray shots were closer to what I was looking for, which was a primitive, abstract, archetypical visual language. The original X-rays (knee, chest and legs) were made into high contrast negatives and positives using Kodak Page-Tec line film 2589. This is an extremely high contrast orthochromatic film recommended for newspaper camera line applications. It has a dimensionally stable 0.004 inch (0.10mm) Estar base compatible with other Kodak materials processed in Kodak Ultratec chemicals. From the negatives and positives, I made contact prints. The line film gave more contrast and visability while on the light table than the original X-ray film.

Using T Max 400, I then shot the chest x-rays on the light table while moving a crystal in front of the lens and had a smoke cartridge burning in front of the image. I then took the contact sheets from both X-ray
series, shot them with the line film (making negatives and positives), cut them into strips and layered them to make interesting abstractions, then shot them again on the line camera. With the abstractions I made photocopies and blew them up 200% on a graphic zoomer (a graphic arts photocopier with reduction and enlargening capabilities from 40%-200%), and hand colored the sequences with concentrated water colors and pencil crayons. The film acetate strips were hand painted and put into slide mounts. These were arranged in three slide trays, projected while using a dissolve unit and videotaped. I also bleached 35mm color negatives of landscape shots, painted them with the water colors and put them in slide mounts. Some of these were scanned, sized and brought into Director (zoomed landscape in intro and landscape shots throughout piece). The Synchromatic transparent water colors (for use on photos, negatives and emulsion films) worked well. The Radiant concentrated water color cracked leaving interesting patterns on the slides. The projected results were intense, rich with transmitted color and the imagery was biomorphic and dream like. Some were reduced to pure form and color. This type of visual language was what I was trying to achieve.

I then recruited some colleagues for the figure shots, using T Max 100 and 400. The 100 speed shots were underexposed; the 400 worked better. Lenses from an old 8mm movie camera (f:1.8 telephoto, and f:1.8 wide angle) were held over the camera lens as some of the figure shots
were done. This produced a circular shape in the frame and the larger image within the circle. From these contact sheets I also made negatives, positives and photocopies.

Using a Canon still video camera I then shot three disks of images (artwork with crystals, lenses and a page magnifier in front of the camera lens). The dots, shells and sea ferns in the intro were hand painted photocopies of sea life and plants that were shot with the still video camera. The images were transferred on an analogue to digital converter, brought into Photoshop, rotated to make a series and then the color was adjusted. These were then brought into Painter (a program from Fractal Design that simulates traditional drawing media) for further manipulation before animating in Director. I also did more x-ray shots on the light table while moving a page magnifier in front of the lens, trying to achieve staggered motion to animate. These shots resonated and gave a glowing effect when viewed on the monitor, and were the most successful of the still video experiments.

The still video images were acquired through the A to D convertor, opened in Photoshop, resized to 640x480 pixels per inch at 72 dots per inch. Then the hue and color balance were adjusted (exaggerated to get more color on the image). These were saved as PICT files in order to move them easily between Photoshop, Painter and Director. Then the images were opened in Painter where I ran filters, manipulated and organized the sequencing. I opened a new file in Director, set the palette
to NTSC, and then imported the images.

The background in the priestess and the bird sequence was a raw scan. The scanner top was left open and a duped copy of an X-ray was moved over the scanner bed as the red, green and blue passes were made. This produced an 18MB image the size of the scanner bed. I found an interesting area, cropped, enlarged and composited the waves, and the figures, which were previously scanned b&w stills. The finished image was the background. The birds were hand drawn, colored and scanned. The background white of the paper had to be selected and cleared (in Director) but this still left white ghosting around the birds. Painting the edges did not match (images were 24 bit, painting 8 bit). Each bird had to be painted around the edges with a medium sized brush set on transparent to cover the ghosting. The ghosting came back when the birds were scaled down, so each bird in each size had to be a separate cast member and had to be painted around the edges. I had tried using the pen tool in Photoshop to make a path, copy the bird and put it in a new file, but it still had the ghosting when imported. Cleaning the background in Director and painting the edges was quicker.

The blue circle (chart) to black circle was hand drawn paper cels (shift and trace) that were painted and scanned.

I had shot T Max 100 and 400 with a sequence camera but was not happy with the resulting images. The exposure could not be set (disposable camera), the 400 film worked best, but the images were not
what I wanted. I also used a panoramic camera, and composited one image to make the walkway zoom to center sequence.

I had shot video footage with bright gels, and exaggerated shadows to illustrate the conflict between the figures. When edited into the animation, the transition from video to animation was too drastic and did not work well. I decided to rework these areas which timed out to be 90 seconds. I took the video footage and shot stills from the television screen. I shot three rolls of b&w infrared film. The first roll of film at speed 80, shutter speeds 1/15, 1/30; roll 2 at film speed 50, shutter speed 1/15, 1/30 and roll 3 at film speed 100, shutter speed 1/15, 1/30. The third roll I rewound to the beginning and double exposed it. From these contact sheets I made halftones and negative shots. I then took the halftones, negatives and positives and made photocopies at 200%. These were then organized into sequences and hand painted using Dr. Martin's concentrated water colors, pencil crayons and make up pencils. These were scanned, sized, brought into Director and animated.
Re-Edit

While editing the new animated segments with the previous work, another shift occurred. The new segments were grouped and taped sequentially to make editing easier. Even though I was having a musical score written, I wanted to follow the original format as closely as possible. Once I started editing, however, the order of some sequences changed, and the rest of the editing was done intuitively. Much of the animation in the first cut, and many reworked sequences didn't make it into the final edit. I wanted the most dynamic images. Parts of animations ended up in spots that I hadn't thought of before. I had an excess of footage and a piece with a running time of 5 minutes. The original concept is still prevalent. The freedom of editing without the music and lyrics changed the order and pacing, and allowed me to come up with more solutions.
Reworking Credits

The first set of credits was too small, and didn't have enough contrast. I had access to an Amiga (Commodore Amiga 2000 with 3MB of RAM, and a 16 color palette when set on hi-res) at Public Access Channel 5, and decided to fix the credits there. I wanted to lay the text over my image files (Mac format PICT files), so I had to convert the files to .IFF, and the disk had to be IBM format (low density). The Amiga has its own version of DOS, so in opening the file a DOS to DOS conversion program had to be used (D 2 D). After converting and saving the image to the hard drive, I opened the image in DPaint (an Amiga paint program), in screen format chose Hi Res (736x482), 16 colors, HAM (hold and modify), overscan set at Max and palette at NTSC. I had to adjust the image (original was 24 bit) because of posterization, and recomposited some areas. When satisfied with both the headslate and tailslate images, I went on to make the text.

TV Text is a titling program that uses outline fonts, making it possible to customize sizes without the jagged edges. I chose Ransome Note for the main names and Arctic for the rest of the copy. Arctic was set on italic, with a 2 pixel drop shadow, condensed 4 times, and Ransome Note set with a cast shadow. Each line of copy was created and saved as an object. After all the type was made and saved, I opened DPaint and opened my slate image. The text object was loaded under brush, and came in attached to the mouse arrow. Under colors, brush, remap colors was the next step. Positioning the type was done by clicking
on the left mouse button. Keyboard letter "b" released the mouse. After positioning all the type for one slate, the image was saved. After all the slate images were made and saved, I ran a cable with BNC connectors from the genlock output (on the back of the Amiga CPU) to the video input on the 3/4" record deck at the editing station. The dub switch on the record deck was set on line. I then opened a file on the Amiga and recorded it on 3/4" tape. When all the slates were recorded, they were then edited (insert edit) into the film.

I had a soundtrack made by a 20th century composer from Rochester. The music was on an audio cassette tape. I patched the audio cassette player into the 3/4" video record deck, set edit at insert, audio, and played the tape.
Closing Statements

In reviewing the process, I realized that I had never worked on a project of such magnitude for such a length of time before this. All the major paintings I had done took no longer than a year. One effect of being in the animation program and working on this project has been a shift in my perception. My artwork and paintings had been more vertical, but now are more horizontal, and sized in the 4:3 aspect ratio.

I was also plagued with severe allergies for the duration of the thesis. Only now, as I come to the close of this work, am I finally feeling some relief after proper treatment. When looking at the work, I'm amazed that is completed, remembering the physical and emotional obstacles.

In closing, the film is a metaphor for relationships, (beginning/conflict/ending - to another beginning), life cycles of birth, death and rebirth (either psychological or physical) and the paradigm of dramatic structure (setup/confrontation/resolution). Being in my own cycle, this film had to be made, and made the way I made it (in terms of visuals, style of communication and at my own pace).

As we externally reflect and manifest what is internal, this piece reflected my internal concerns, questions and issues. Hopefully others will find the message as important as I do.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

1) Intro - landscapes move in from edges of frame and become one. Zoom to center.

2) Zoom in, center horizon point. Dissolve to...

3) Priestesses with birds in palms, smoke. Center bird flies upward...

4) Travels through time & space. Swoosh pan of painting keyed over.

5) Rotate 3/4 zoom to center. Dissolve to...

6) Rotate 3/4 zoom to center. Dissolve to...

7) Rotate 3/4 zoom to center. Dissolve to...

8) Zoom to right.
9) 3-D pieces move in from edges

10) to form desert

11) Figure walks through frame.

12) Top scroll moves from right to left. Electronic images in background

13) Hand beckons to figure in scroll

14) Scroll moves right to left, crystal abstractions move in frame

15) 

16)
33) Chart moves in from left & morphs to...
34) Symbolic chart dissolve to...
35) Figure shot with circle.
36) Hands move in unison from right to left.
37) Hands move in unison from left to right. Background zooms back to...
38) Same top position as horizontal scroll.
39) Scroll moves from right to left. Figures cut to...
40) Next shot of figures.
52) Zoom out

53) Rotate 3
Zoom
1 Her cut
trans. swash
pans of painting

54) Rotate 3
Zoom,
Dissolve to...

55) Rotate 3
Zoom,
Dissolve to...

56) Shot of premises.
Bird flies back
& lands in
her palm.

59) Landscapes out of frame.
Camera zooms into waterfall.