

B.F.A. Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

Presented to

**The B.F.A. Degree Committee
Art Department
University of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska**

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**The B.F.A. Degree Thesis Exhibition Report
of
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Title: The Fate of Children

Dates: Gallery April 21-25, Showdates April 23rd, 24th, and 25th.

**Location: University Art Gallery
University of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska**

Introduction

Upon entering the University of Alaska Fairbanks I immediately began taking art classes in preparation for a Bachelor's degree in Art. I started, as is required by our system, with Beginning Drawing. Beginning Drawing was the course that introduced me to the uses of charcoal and the format of a college level drawing class. Very quickly, however, I migrated toward the computer art related classes. I knew this to be my peak area of interest and previous talent. The initial course for that line of classes was Digital Photography and Pixel Painting. This class introduced me to my teacher, advisor, and committee chairperson Miho Aoki, whose mentoring has been of the utmost importance in my academic career. Moving through courses designed to teach me to use high-end graphics applications and the techniques used in creating art on computers, I also began to take art history courses, which introduced me to a wide variety of artists and styles which I had never heard of. Throughout my time here at the University the two constants in my art education have been computer art courses and art history courses. I dabbled in other areas such as sculpture and painting briefly, and of course have had a secondary emphasis in Drawing during my time in the B.F.A. Program, but my primary focus has always been Computer Art.

B.F.A. Thesis Project

After being accepted into the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree program here at the University, I began to evaluate what I knew about art and how I wanted to express myself as an artist here. I took multiple classes in film theory during my time here, knowing that film-making and animation would be a key focus of my art. I also knew I wanted to apply the skills I had learned in Miho's Digital Video Compositing and Visualization and Animation courses, so I chose to do a single animation work as my Thesis project. My objective was to create an original animation work using all of the animating methods I knew how to use, blended seamlessly to create a final work that would be emotionally and intellectually stimulating for an audience. In deciding on the content, I thought about how we go through art classes creating art that fulfills requirements and assignments. I knew immediately that the focus of my B.F.A. Thesis project was going to be creating something that meant something, not just to me personally, but a message that could be understood and appreciated by my audiences.

The concept came from a reaction to both our current situation with the war in the Middle East and also looking at history, specifically the history of fascism and the First and Second World Wars. The cycle of violence created from the First to the Second World War was catastrophic, and we can still feel the results of those wars today. I wanted to create art that would remind people of the human cost of violence and war, and how it can perpetuate itself over time. It is a message of caution, a conveyance of grief and outright terror at the destructive power that humans turn upon each other. I wrote the story draft in the beginning of the summer of 2007, editing and revising it into a completed film storyboard. I used the visualization technique taught to me in the Visualization and Animation courses that I had taken: initially, once I had the story draft complete, I worked on storyboard

drawings. These rough pencil sketches were to serve me right up until the end of principal animation work. It can not be stressed enough how important it is to do your pre-visualization work long in advance of doing final animation work. These rough sketches were then scanned into a computer and digitally colored to create quasi-moodboard like pieces of artwork. These were important because I could view the general color scheme and composition of the shots before I started work on them. These digital stills were used in the creation of the animatic, which is a rough cut of the film using still images instead of final animation. I inserted all the shots of the film into this animatic, making them take up the proper amount of time for each shot, and could finally watch the film. Though each scene wasn't moving or animating the way it would in the end, the timing of the cuts was very important to have finished here.

The next step in the creation process was moving from conceptual images into final art assets, meaning I began doing work on what would become the final frames of the animation at that time. Each plate (or individual drawing) was done piece by piece, drawn entirely on computer with the use of a Wacom tablet and Adobe Photoshop. I designed the background plates (meaning all that wasn't character or prop plates) first, after deciding on a visual style that lies somewhere between “painterly” and “sketchy” in an animation sense. Character plates were created next, each piece of lineart was individually colored and lit using Photoshop brushes. Finally, with all art assets in place, the animation was created, using the same timing and shots as the animatic. Principal animation took most of a year's time. My final contributions to the film were the music, which I played as an improvisation while watching the film run, and various title and credit cards.

A substantial portion of the animation was done using a technique known as rotoscoping.

Rotoscoping is the process of filming live action footage of a subject, then drawing over this film to produce animation plates. I applied this technique to various characters in the film. I filmed myself performing many of the actions that the onscreen characters would take, then went through and drew frame by frame over the live action footage. The result of this sort of character animation is a more realistic, weighty drawing that conveys a very interesting sense of believable motion. I mainly reserved this technique for the characters I wanted the audience to really connect with (the children). Since the final drawings in rotoscoping have a very “human” quality to them, I found that it was easier for audiences to identify with the characters if they had rotoscoped animation. I did no rotoscoping for the soldier characters or for minor characters, as I did not want the audience to feel that these were important. I was especially careful about how I animated the soldier characters, as I wanted them to appear as inhuman and machinelike as possible: their motions are more like the motion of a vehicle than a person.

During the creation of this film, I spent a good four months simply discovering/inventing the ways I could create the animation, going from still images to final animation sequences. I understood the groundwork laid by traditional 2D animation (which this film has more in common with than newer 3D animation techniques), but transferring that into the tools I could use and a digital medium took quite a long time. By the end of the process, I had perfected my techniques and was creating entire shots in less than a tenth of the time it took me to finish the first few shots I created. I have gained technical and artistic experience doing the digital drawings, and I have a clear idea of where my strengths are and what kind of projects I want to move into next. It's an exciting field with new possibilities opening up all the time, and I have found a path to travel. Creating this animation has

been the single most rewarding experience of my college career.

Artistically, the style grew out of the background plates. As I did the background plates first, I developed a somewhat painterly approach to creating the world in which this animation would take place. The result is an often hazy, dreamlike background, and I wanted the characters to stand out from the background enough so that the animation was noticeable, but still have them believably fit into the final frame. I developed a style of art that used both dark outlines for shapes and very smooth shading, to give the characters the feel of cartoon characters that were being lit by the painted backgrounds. The result is a line-art pass that is generally very clean, followed by a color pass that is smoothed and painterly.

Taking on a project this long solo required me to work too quickly, causing a lack of polish that I feel could be cleaned up a bit. However, as I stated above, my technique in this particular animation style has become increasingly more adept. I think if I sat down to create this animation again I could do it both faster, more creatively, and with more polish than before. I am also very happy with the final work, and feel that it represents myself as an artist and the emotional message I wanted to convey.

B.F.A. Thesis Exhibition

The showcase section of my show, which housed printouts of background plates, character plates, and other related artwork, was also to have a looped copy of my animation running.

Unfortunately, after I had built the harness to protect the computer hardware I installed into the case, on the day of my show opening the computer suffered a massive technical error and no longer functioned.

I am disappointed with myself for not having a strong backup plan, but I feel gratified that my animation has been accepted into the student Film Festival and thus will still see a larger audience than

just the showcase alone would likely have provided.

As part of my show, I also did three screenings in three different theaters around campus. At these screenings I showed the film to the audience members, and did a presentation on how the animation was made. The presentation was intended for audience members that might not know anything about animation but would hopefully be somewhat technically savvy, as it was somewhat in-depth at points. I am very happy with the way these screenings turned out, as at each screening I received insightful questions from audience members and I felt like I both touched them with the art and taught them through the presentation.

Conclusion

The B.F.A. Program was a challenge, but a rewarding one that has instilled in me a sense of confidence in my work, given me direction and a source of great learning, and in general was the most valuable part of my education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. It took a great deal of time and energy, but the focus required to complete it has made me into a better artist, one with a more complete view of my own talents and with a path to walk.