

WINTER 2022

ISSUE NO. 20

KEYFRAME

THE ANIMATION GUILD QUARTERLY

THE BIG PICTURES

THE
BIG
PICTURES

WINTER 2022



A close-up, dramatic portrait of Puss in Boots. He is wearing his signature black top hat and a black vest over a white shirt with a black cravat. His orange fur is highly detailed, and his green eyes are sharp and focused. He holds a small, dark, cat-shaped object in his right hand, which is raised towards his chest. The background is a soft, hazy mix of pink and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall tone is cinematic and elegant.

BEST ANIMATED FILM

Produced by
MARK SWIFT p.g.a.

Directed by
JOEL CRAWFORD

DREAMWORKS

PUSS IN BOOTS

THE LAST WISH

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WE ADAPT TO OUR CHANGING INDUSTRY



AS WE NEAR THE END OF THE YEAR, SO COMES THE END OF MY FIRST TERM AS PRESIDENT. MY WHOLE CAREER HAS BEEN A SERIES OF MANEUVERS AROUND UNEXPECTED ROADBLOCKS AND INTO SURPRISE OPPORTUNITIES. THAT NIMBLENESS HAS PROVEN BENEFICIAL FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS WHEN THE PLANS THAT I'D HAD FOR MY FIRST TERM WERE PUT ON HOLD AS THE PANDEMIC CHANGED OUR WORLD.

I had hoped my term would be one of building community in the animation industry through social opportunities and activism in person. Instead, we had to figure out ways to reach our members to offer support and connection at a time when we all isolated.

The entire animation industry pivoted immediately to remote work, and our Union had to match those new dance steps. The Guild office was shut, staff sent home, and we had to figure out how to keep serving our members who continued working while the rest of the entertainment industry was shuttered.

We hired more staff to keep up with our growing membership as "The Great Content War" between streamers raged on. They ordered more animated projects than ever and hired artists and production staff beyond the Los Angeles labor pool. Our members worked alongside crewmates who were not covered by our Union protections, and noticed they weren't being treated fairly. The Guild responded by taking a more active role in organizing outside of L.A. County in hopes of making it possible to cover all animation workers.

Our new organizer, Ben Speight, worked with a passionate group of animation workers in New York to organize the first studio outside of L.A. County in 40 years, making TAG an official national union! He guided engaged production workers at seven different studios and productions in L.A. to demand the same treatment as their Union colleagues, expanding our ranks further. This is a historic time for our Union.

The world is starting to open back up. "The Great Content War" is slowing down. There are mergers and restructuring happening at some studios causing a contraction in the industry. Shows are being canceled; pilots being shelved. Now we are all having to pivot again. These times can be scary when your career is built on jumping from one project to another, but I'm optimistic. Animation is resilient. This is the normal ebb and flow of business as the ways we consume our media evolves. And we at The Guild are ready to maneuver through these changes.

I will be starting my second term as President at the end of 2022, and I have high hopes for the strength of our Union and the community we've built together. It has been an honor to serve our members, and I am looking forward to my upcoming term with hopefully way more in-person events. I miss seeing your faces!

In Solidarity,
Jeanette Moreno King | President
The Animation Guild, IATSE Local 839

ON THE COVER

Puss in Boots and Strange World are among the Oscar-eligible movies we cover in this issue.



FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION IN ALL CATEGORIES INCLUDING
BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

Disney
**STRANGE
WORLD**



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the
animation
guild

Representing animation artists,
writers and technicians since 1952.



FORWARD MOTION



ANOTHER YEAR HAS FLOWN BY, AND IT'S BEEN A BIG ONE FOR TAG, FROM RATIFYING OUR COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT TO VOTING IN OUR NEW OFFICERS AND EXECUTIVE BOARD (P.21). IT'S ALSO BEEN A YEAR OF PROGRESS FOR THE CRAFT. ONE OF THE MOST SATISFYING ASPECTS OF MY JOB IS INTERVIEWING ANIMATION INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS ABOUT THE TECHNIQUES THEY USE TO MAKE MAGIC ON THE SCREEN. I ESPECIALLY LOVE WHEN THEY EXPLAIN HOW THEY ADAPTED A TECHNIQUE IN NEW WAYS OR DEvised NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR THE NEEDS OF A FILM.

In "The Big Pictures" (p.24), not only do we shine a light on the many wonderful movies TAG members worked on that are eligible for the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, but we also explore the innovations behind these films. In *Puss in Boots*, tools were developed to allow artists to put a textured edge on any object in a 3D space (with a dial to turn that texture up or down), and in *Strange World* a toolset was created to make thousands of moving objects seem like surfaces solid enough for characters to walk on. I may not have a single ounce of technical ability, but I absolutely love learning all these things!

It's also exciting to watch animation moving forward in other ways as it includes more diverse voices and experiences. "Authentic Voices" (p.34) explores the importance of having representation behind the scenes in writing and other areas of creative leadership, while "When Jabari Met Meadow" (p.14) dives deep into how an authentic voice lifts a story beyond one group of people into a space of universal experience.

With the seasonal festivities upon us, we can't forget our fifth-annual Holiday Gift Guide (p.41). Here in the magazine it highlights a few of the members participating in our Virtual Holiday Gift Guide on the *Keyframe* website (keyframemagazine.org). This collection of art, crafts, and other products reminds us how the talents of our membership run far and wide.

As we prepare to welcome 2023, all of us here at *Keyframe* wish you a safe, healthy, creative, and joy-filled holiday season and Happy New Year.

Kim Fay

Kim Fay
editor@tag839.org

CONTRIBUTORS



Freelance writer and author **KAREN BRINER** ("Tis the Season") grew up in Cape Town, South Africa where her garden was

home to wild chameleons. Her most recent novel is *Snowize @ Snitch: Highly Effective Defective Detectives*.



EVAN HENERSON ("Climbing the Walls") is a lifestyle and entertainment writer based in Los Angeles. His work has appeared in

L.A. Parent, *TV Guide*, *Orange Coast Magazine*, and the *Los Angeles Daily News* where he was a features writer and critic for nine years.



SONAIYA KELLEY ("Creative License") is a film reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*. The Bronx, N.Y., native previously served

as a digital producer at *Essence* and *Allure* magazines and has contributed bylines to *Complex*, *Mashable* and *Patch.com*. An alumna of Stony Brook University's School of Journalism and the Bronx High School of Science, you can find her on Twitter @sonaiyak and on Instagram @sonaiya_k.

COLLIDER

**“THE BAD GUYS’ IS A
REFRESHING ANIMATED FILM**
THAT IS BY FAR ONE OF DREAMWORKS ANIMATION’S BEST.”



CHICAGO SUN+TIMES

“WITHIN THE FIRST TWO MINUTES OF THE
RETRO-COOL AND WARMHEARTED ANIMATED CRIME SPOOF,
WE CAN TELL WE’RE IN FOR SOMETHING
REFRESHINGLY ORIGINAL.”

DREAMWORKS

the **BAD GUYS**

BEST ANIMATED FILM

Produced by DAMON ROSS p.g.a. REBECCA HUNTLEY p.g.a.

Directed by PIERRE PERIFEL

ARTIST: Allison Perry

TITLE: *Untitled*

MEDIUM: Digital/Photoshop

SIZE: 763 pixels x 1130 pixels

REFLECTING ON ART



As an artist, Allison Perry says she's done a little bit of everything, from tech to games to animation, where she got her start doing freelance work like character, prop, and background design before getting

her first full-time Union job as a Visual Development Artist in 2019. Most recently, she's worked as a Visual Development Artist, Background Paint Lead, and Art Director for Netflix. To get herself excited to paint, she follows photographers on social media. While collecting references, she came across an image of Bled Castle in Slovenia. She was immediately drawn to the lighting.

Using Photoshop, Perry says, "I built up layers of space from front to back, selecting simple shapes with the Marquee and Polygonal Lasso tools and then using a scatter brush effect with color variation within those selections." After copying and pasting the elements she wanted to reflect into the water, she mirrored them vertically, set them to "lighten" mode, and motion-blurred them vertically. "Lastly, I added a bit of atmospheric perspective with a big, soft brush."

"I really liked the contrast of the light blue/slate colors with the pink/salmon colors, and how they became more subtle as they receded into space," she says, adding, "I can never pass up a good reflection—they're so satisfying to paint!"

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ANIMATION ARTIST, ART TOY DESIGNER, DIRECTOR, AND SO MUCH MORE, CHOGRIN IS LIVING PROOF THAT YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST OF ALL CREATIVE WORLDS.

FROM TOP: Jay and Silent Bob figures from Chogrin's original art; Chogrin with Kevin Smith (RIGHT); Chogrin designed the collectible Elegorgon, based on *Stranger Things*' Eleven, exclusively for Netflix.



By day, Joseph Game (aka CHOGRIN) works as a Character Cleanup Artist, most recently on *Big City Greens*. By night, he can be found working on creative projects ranging from writing and storyboarding children's books to directing and animating short films.

"As I'm finishing one project, I'm already beginning two or three more," he says. "It's this constant revolving door of things—If I'm not doing anything, I feel like something's wrong."

Chogrin grew up in Guayaquil, Ecuador, to an Ecuadorian father and American mother. The moniker Chogrin came from a childhood nickname. "It basically means 'a kid from two worlds,'" he explains. This has influenced his perspective because "it can sometimes make you feel like an outsider—feeling like you don't belong to either one. But it also has allowed for a larger worldview, which I incorporate into my art and stories."



When Chogrin was 13, his family moved to Pennsylvania. He attended the University of the Arts in Philadelphia with a major in illustration and a minor in film and animation. During the summer of his junior year, he landed an internship at Cartoon Network, working in Burbank on the André 3000 animated series *Class of 3000*.

"That internship was pivotal for me because I had mentors that were seasoned, and through them I found my voice and my style," he says. "It was a very transformative summer—two months that completely changed me as an artist and illustrator."

At the end of the internship, he could continue on the show as a full-time employee or return home for his senior year of college. He chose to complete school and upon graduation, found work at a design studio in Philadelphia.



In 2009, he was laid off. That would prove to be a formative moment in his career.

"The pop culture art gallery scene was popular around that time [in L.A.], so I wanted to do my own version of it in Philly," he says.

For his earliest shows, he'd send out invites to school friends, encouraging them to contribute their interpretations of characters like *Batman's* Joker. He moved on to bigger shows with official licenses and branding, showcasing artists both familiar and new. During this time, Chogrin reached out to the crew he'd interned with at Cartoon Network and found out they were now working on *Adventure Time*. "I was persistent until they gave me a job," he says.

After work and on the weekends in L.A., Chogrin kept up with his art shows at big galleries like Gallery1988 and Nucleus. "Through these shows I started experimenting [with different mediums] and dipping my toe into the world of art toys and making different connections," he says.

He worked on officially licensed events centered around *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Popeye*, *Hellboy*, and *Ghostbusters*, among others. One of the most memorable honored the work of Guillermo del Toro, one of Chogrin's heroes, who he'd met in L.A. at various signings and events. "I got to know him more when I curated various art shows in tribute to him," he says. At one such show, "the gallery had been completely transformed into a Guillermo del Toro movie set. It was around the time when his *Crimson Peak* movie came out, so we themed it to that. One of the pieces I did was a sculpture called Guru del Toro that I used as the prototype

for my first art toy. I worked with 3D sculptor Tayler Brown, and she sculpted, with my notes, a Guillermo-like tribute."

The director purchased the original sculpture at the show, and Chogrin later released a limited batch of the collectible statues. In 2018, he did another del Toro-themed show, this time creating a children's book, *Kid del Toro*, based on a story from the director's childhood. Because he was so busy, he says, he wrote and storyboarded the book before sending it to his friend, animation Concept Artist and Character Designer Pakoto Martinez to illustrate.

They made a limited printing and later reached out to the bilingual publisher Lil' Libros to publish it in both English and Spanish. Since then, Chogrin has released a Kevin Smith-themed art toy and *Stranger Things* merchandise, and he's directed an animated short film, *Lucky Brave's Sunshine*, which will premiere in film festivals next year. He has more children's books already written with plans for publication, and he ultimately hopes to open an animation studio in Ecuador.

"I look back, and I have to pinch myself a little bit," says Chogrin. "All of these amazing opportunities just came from having the idea of 'I want to do this,' and then it snowballs into something bigger. I've been checking all of these things off my list, and the next thing that I'm working toward is showrunning my own show. If all of the planets align, I'll be able to hire a lot of these artists that have worked in my galleries over the years, so it'll be a full circle moment."

Find out more about Chogrin's work at www.chogrin.com.

— Sonaiya Kelley

ABOVE: Chogrin's limited edition, vinyl collectible *Guru del Toro*. LEFT: (FROM TOP) Chogrin with Jorge R. Gutiérrez; *Kid del Toro* book signing at The Academy Museum; Chogrin with Guillermo del Toro and Tayler Brown.

**“THE YEAR’S
FUNNIEST FILM.”**

VARIETY

**“THE MINIONS HAVE
STOLEN OUR HEARTS, AGAIN.”**

Boston Herald



ILLUMINATION PRESENTS

minions
THE RISE OF GRU

BEST ANIMATED FILM

Produced By
Chris Meledandri p.g.a.
Janet Healy p.g.a.
Chris Renaud p.g.a.

Directed By
Kyle Balda



WHEN JABARI MET MEADOW

**INSPIRED BY THE
MUSIC OF KID CUDI,
ENTERGALACTIC
EXPLORES THE
UNIVERSALITY OF
NEW LOVE.**



**Maurice
Williams**

CO-WRITER,
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



**Fletcher
Moules**

DIRECTOR

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Attention to the small, personal details of daily life makes Jabari and Meadow's relationship relatable in universal ways.

The romantic comedy is tried-and-true. Certain tropes like meet-cute and misunderstandings are hallowed ground. But that doesn't mean it's not possible to breathe new life into the genre. Case in point: *Entergalactic*.

This adult animated story follows street artist Jabari and photographer Meadow, twenty-somethings living in New York City, as they, yes, meet-cute, and then navigate their feelings for one another. Creators and Executive Producers Kenya Barris and Scott "Kid Cudi" Mescudi both call *Entergalactic* a Black love story, but Maurice Williams, also an Executive Producer and the film's writer along with Ian Edelman, says that the storyline itself was not approached as such.

The focus, he says, was on "that trepidatious period in the beginning of relationships where one false move and maybe the rest of your life could be over tomorrow. That's something we can all identify with."

While it was important for the filmmakers to highlight the absence of love stories with Black characters onscreen, and to have

the two leads be brown skinned without "any apologies or caveats ... the idea was that there was never a flashlight on who these people were racially," Williams says. "Love is colorless. There is a yearning to see ourselves in that light, [but] it's not different. There is no creative difference. There is no inception difference. It really is about the idea of being able to execute something authentic."

"Maurice wanted to write a very real, very relatable love story. Very grounded. Very now," says Director Fletcher Moules.

One of the ways Moules approached this visually was to embrace imperfection because he believes this is an element of authenticity. "It's a rom-com, it should feel warm and loving, and I wanted to make sure that the artist's hand was on the screen the whole time," he says. He and his team used tools that projected brushstrokes so everything from the background to the highlights on a character's face looks hand painted.

Pacing was also used to capture the human element of the story. "In a lot of my favorite

live-action dramas and rom-coms, you have a beat to see the main character just being introspective. You rarely see it in animation,” says Moules. “In a lot of [our] scenes there’s two people talking about very relatable things.” To capture the emotional resonance of these interactions, step animation was used. “What’s the key pose for this line,” he says, “and what’s the reaction pose? Then what’s the reaction pose back from that. We’d animate every scene just from a key pose to the next pose to the next pose. And then fill the frames in until we had enough.”

“When [*Entergalactic*] is over, you turn it off and you see the real world and you think, man, I wish [it] would slow down a little bit,” says Williams.

Underscoring the whole production was the music—the inspiration for the film in the first place. *Entergalactic* was conceived

to support an album by Kid Cudi, which made for a unique process. “In the writer’s room, I would normally throw out some index cards and say I want [the characters] to be here by this time and here by this time,” says Williams. “[But] I didn’t have to do that because I know where they’re going to be because we’re shaping it around these big musical moments.”

“For me as a director,” says Moules, “when the writers’ room was going, I probably had four or five songs.” He knew roughly what direction the movie was taking because they were making a rom-com, and the music allowed him to visualize and feel scenes at a very early stage.

Was it a challenge working from the music first? Williams says no. “It was never a point where it was like, hmm, this is really limiting from a story standpoint. Because the music, the songs are such earworms of

“It’s a rom-com, it should feel warm and loving, and I wanted to make sure that the artist’s hand was on the screen the whole time”

– Fletcher Moules







emotion. You can remember how you felt when you heard them. [They] became tentpoles in the storytelling," he says.

With these tentpoles as a guide, the filmmakers explored the verisimilitude necessary "to make sure that the small things add up to the big things. I think that's where authenticity really exists," says Williams. They studied films like *When Harry Met Sally*. "The big thing is that these two best friends are falling in love," Williams says. "The small things are how they're doing it, and that makes the story feel authentic. It's the small things about *When Harry Met Sally* that make us realize how great of a love story it is for the time in which it existed."

Entergalactic is also inspired by Kid Cudi's time spent living in TriBeCa, and the team was intentional in capturing real locations, from street corners to bars. They would also discuss the tiniest details, down to what

would happen if Jabari wore glasses or if he didn't. "Those small choices started to make a brand-new character," says Williams, adding, "It was even more important for Meadow because of the vastness of the beauty of, not just women in general, but Black women. There are various ways in which they can come across onscreen." They discussed everything from how she wore her hair to sleep to how she wore her hair on special occasions. "Her look started to define the character and the character defined the look," he adds.

While a great many of the movie's details are specific to Black culture, and "that authenticity will obviously have markers and things that ring true to certain people more than others, that's not the point," Williams says. "The point is that it rings true on a human level."

— Kim Fay

"The big thing is that these two best friends are falling in love. The small things are how they're doing it, and that makes the story feel authentic."

— Maurice Williams

THIS PAGE: Moules saturated real locations in New York City with rich colors and effects that give scenes the look of animated paintings. **OPPOSITE:** Unique in its visual style, *Entergalactic* relishes its rom-com influences, from larger-than-life magical moments to unforgettable best friends.

CLIMBING THE WALLS

"For me, every time I do a mural, it feels like I'm learning how to do it from scratch... Every location offers an adventure. The wall surfaces are different. So it's a physical challenge as much as an artistic one."



FROM MURAL COMMISSIONS TO LICENSED TOYS, DANNY "KANO" KIMANYEN HAS BUILT A SUCCESSFUL CAREER BEYOND HIS STUDIO JOBS.

What would a well-established Character Designer and traditional Animator ever be doing 40 feet up in the air taking a can of spray paint to the side of a building on New York's Lower East Side?

Five years ago, Danny Kimanyen asked himself the same question, and he was the man with the can. While by no means his first public art project, the four-story mural he created at the intersection of Rivington and Allen Streets as part of the Five Points Festival was definitely the largest. And Kimanyen, whose artist handle is kaNO, wondered whether he was in over his head.

"I had never been up so high on a boom lift, so it was super intimidating," recalls kaNO. "I wasn't sure I should have said yes to the project. So I got up there and we did it at night and projected it from across the street. And sure enough, while I was tracing my

OPPOSITE PAGE: *McFly*, 3D Retro, Glendale, 2020. THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): kaNO painting *McFly*; *Urban Rendition*, Chinese American Museum, Los Angeles, 2021; *LES*, LISA Project NYC, New York City, 2017.

outline, a party bus came by and clipped the arm of the boom so the whole thing kind of got turned. I was harnessed in, but it was traumatic, and when I went home, I couldn't sleep. I thought, 'Is that a sign? Should I not be up there?'"

All ended well, and kaNO finished the project. A graffiti artist in his youth, kaNO has been commissioned to do murals all over the world by the likes of Warner Bros., ABC, and Universal for promotional movie and TV tie-ins ranging from the *Teen Titans* in San Diego to a rendition of Wonder Woman and The Dark Knight in Tokyo. You can still check out his interpretation of *Back to the Future's* Marty McFly—paint can in hand—on the side of 3D Retro in Glendale.

"For me, every time I do a mural, it feels like I'm learning how to do it from scratch," kaNO says. "Every location offers an adventure. The wall surfaces are different. Depending on the time of year, it could be very cold or very hot, and it affects the spray paint. If there's no shade, you're getting beaten down by the sun. So it's a physical challenge as much as an artistic one."

By no means is he complaining. The public art works make for a dramatic change of pace from the demands of his work in animation. A veteran of multiple titles across the *Scooby-Doo*, *Ben 10*, and *Batman*

franchises, kaNO is currently a Character Designer on *Batman: Caped Crusader*.

"I like the balance," kaNO says. "If I spend the weekend painting a mural, then on Monday, all I would want to do is sit at a computer. Then when I get tired of pushing pixels, I'll want to get out there and get my hands dirty. If I work on a show that lasts three seasons, that's three years of my life. Usually at the end of that, I will have to take a year off and do my thing. Most of the time, my animation job is my financial backer for my other projects."

Toy design, for example. In the late 2000s, while working on the series *Little Einsteins* in New York, kaNO frequented a huge store called Toy Tokyo in the East Village where he came across urban hip hop-style figures imported from Hong Kong that resembled the kinds of characters that populated his sketch book.

Figuring "why can't I do that?" kaNO found someone to sculpt a prototype of one of his figures: a hoodie-wearing dude with a fist for his head. The sculptor thought the figure might have appeal in the toy market, and he offered a connection in California to help take it into production.

"I was like, 'Let's do it!' says kaNO. "I kind of rolled the dice, and before I knew anything about distribution, I had 500 toys show up at my apartment."

He took the figure—which would later become Moneygrip—door to door to toy stores before someone convinced him to find a distributor. The Moneygrips were shipped out to Culver City, and kaNO entered the world of toy making. He most recently debuted new figures, including his spin on the *Transformers'* character Bumblebee with Sideshow Collectibles, at DesignerCon in Anaheim in November.

One thing that helps him grow his creative efforts is his art studio. If you're an animator and want to have a separate space in your head for other projects, he says, "I think it helps to have a [separate] physical space, too."

Find out more about kaNO at www.kanokid.com.

— Evan Henerson



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MEET TAG'S NEW EXECUTIVE BOARD

THE ANIMATION GUILD'S NEW EXECUTIVE BOARD OFFICERS AND MEMBERS HAVE BEEN ELECTED FOR THE 2022-2025 TERM. HERE, THEY SHARE A LITTLE ABOUT THEMSELVES AND WHY THEY'RE EXCITED TO SERVE TAG MEMBERS.



JEANETTE MORENO KING PRESIDENT

Born and raised in San Antonio, Moreno King planned on being a biomedical engineer, but her path took a hard turn, from an engineering scholarship at university to her first job in animation, Key Assistant Animator on *Space Jam*. Now a Supervising Director on *Little Demon*, she enters her second term as TAG president. "I'd like to keep the momentum going to pursue some of our longer horizon goals," she says. Fun fact: Moreno King's very first job was working in The Alamo gift shop.



STEVE KAPLAN BUSINESS REPRESENTATIVE

Following a nearly 20-year career as a freelance Visual Effects Artist, Steve Kaplan joined the Guild as an organizer. He went on to become TAG's Business Representative, and now enters his second term. "I am eager to continue the work we started with the last board in growing the jurisdiction and strength of the Local," he says. "We must continue to expand our reach and connect with each other so we can be the strongest TAG possible going in to the 2024 negotiations." Fun fact: Kaplan and his wife have been homebrewers for almost three years.



DANNY DUCKER SERGEANT-AT-ARMS

Danny Ducker left college early to work as a Storyboard Revisionist at Cartoon Network. Eight years later, she's a Storyboard Supervisor on *Adventure Time: Fionna @ Cake*. Having already served a term on the Executive Board, she says, "production workers across the country are organizing for TAG representation, the incredible staff is growing every day, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to see where the next three years will take us with the right leadership." Fun fact: Ducker has a bifid uvula. Google it!



TERI HENDRICH CUSUMANO VICE PRESIDENT

Having worked in various design positions in animation for 15 years, Hendrich Cusumano is a Color Supervisor at Bento Box. She formed TAG's Color Designer Committee to bring pay equity to members working in this craft. As Vice President, she says, "I am looking forward to providing my insight and knowledge to the board with my recent completion of Cornell's certificate program in Labor Studies." Fun fact: Hendrich Cusumano's first job in animation led to her working as a DJ on the side for several years.



PAULA SPENCE RECORDING SECRETARY

Paula Spence started as a Background Designer on *SpongeBob SquarePants*, but her need to organize and manage led her to art direction. She is the editor of *The Pegboard* and now enters her third term as Recording Secretary. She plans to encourage new Executive Board members to take advantage of the IATSE's Officer Institute. "As more of our members and leaders get engaged and educated, I know we're going to see even bigger and better transformations," she says. Fun fact: Despite Spence's horde of cats, she actually considers herself a dog person.



CARRIE LIAO TRUSTEE

With more than a decade in animation, Carrie Liao is currently at WDAS as a Story Supervisor on the *Moana* series. "Over the last term I feel like we saw incredible growth in Guild solidarity, numbers, and engagement," she says, returning for her second term. "Hopefully I can lean on—and improve upon—my prior experience as I move forward with other veteran and first-time Executive Board members." Fun fact: Liao had braces for six years and had to get two oral surgeries because her teeth were growing in sideways.



ASHLEY LONG TRUSTEE

Much of Ashley Long's 17-year career has been in adult primetime animation. Most

recently she spent five years as a Supervising Director/Consulting Producer for two adult comedy shows. Returning to the board (she served a partial term from 2018 to 2019), she says she's "excited to be surrounded by other board members who aim to be innovative, progressive, and willing to put the muscle in to create change and growth to fit our modern membership." Fun fact: Long adopted a native California desert tortoise and also raises dwarf seahorses.



ROGER ODA TRUSTEE

Starting out as a Background Designer at Titmouse on *Metalocalypse*, Roger Oda has worked at

numerous studios and is now an Art Director at Marvel Animation. "The last three years have changed the world and people in it," says Oda. "Things will not be going back to the way they were before. It is important that we reflect on what we value. I'm looking forward to working with everyone toward a common good." Fun fact: Oda enjoys playing solitaire with real cards.



MAIRGHREAD SCOTT

An animation Writer with more than a decade of experience, Mairghread Scott is currently a

Showrunner at Netflix. "This is an exciting moment of growth for TAG, in terms of size, engagement, and power," she says. "I feel honored and privileged to be at the heart of this Union at this pivotal moment." Fun fact: Scott loves fiber-based, analog pixel art (also known as cross-stitch).



CANDICE STEPHENSON

Candice Stephenson has been working in Look Development for almost 15 years doing Surfacing and

Groom, with about 10 of those years as a Department Lead at Nickelodeon. Noting TAG's ever-growing number of engaged members, she says, "I really look forward to hearing new ideas and working with so many active people to make improvements to the entertainment industry that we haven't seen before." This will be Stephenson's second term on the board, having served between 2016-2019. Fun fact: When Stephenson was little, she took clown classes so she could perform with her mom who worked as a professional clown.



ALEX QUINTAS

In 2011 Alex Quintas came from games and VFX to work in animation and has been storyboarding for the past six years.

"There is a lot of work to be done before our next negotiations, and I am grateful that people have trusted me with that responsibility," she says. "We have done so much these past three years, and we have so much to do in the next two!" Fun fact: As the Co-chair of QueerTAG, Quintas hosts QT hikes once a month for the group's members.



MADISON BATEMAN

Working for the past 12 years in animation, Madison Bateman is a Story Editor and Co-Producer, as well as

Co-Chair of the Writers' Craft Committee and a member of the Negotiations Committee. "I hope I can help improve conditions for our members during my tenure and continue to grow and encourage the engagement we've seen taking place," she says. Fun fact: Bateman grew up on a cattle ranch and had a horse named Dewey, which she's certain helped her get a job on *DuckTales*.



BRANDON JARRATT

Brandon Jarratt started as a general Technical Director at WDAS ten years ago and has worked mostly on feature films since then. Entering his second consecutive term, he's excited to

be on the board "because our growing Union has big goals and a bigger presence than ever in the animation industry," he says. "Anything I can do to further those big goals and grow that presence is something worth doing." Fun fact: Jarratt, his wife, and dog have driven round-trip across the U.S. on a circuit that took them through 22 states.



JUSTIN WEBER

Justin Weber started in animation in Minneapolis in 2008 doing commercial projects and short films, and he has been an Animator at WDAS since 2013. As a board member,

he says, "I plan on working to help our Union build up mobilization among the membership, so we can have more leverage when we go into negotiations with the studios." Fun fact: Weber plays piano while his wife, Salina Trevino, sings along.



ERICA SMITH

Erica Smith got her start in animation in Atlanta before moving to L.A. in 2019. She has worked as a Background Designer, Background Painter, Color Designer, and Concept

Designer for numerous studios. "I'm excited to be on the board for this upcoming term so that I can help the Union continue to grow over the next three years," she says. "I'm grateful to have the opportunity to be elected and am excited to be able to lend my time to the Guild." Fun Fact: Growing up Smith had 17 pets at one time.



MARISSA BERNSTEL

Marissa Bernstel is a Storyboard Artist who has worked on shows such as *Bless The Hearts*, *Little Demon*, and currently *The Great North*. "Our membership is going through a very interesting

time right now, and there's a lot ahead of us," she says. "I'm eager to get to work with my fellow Executive Board and Guild members to make sure we are tackling the membership's top priorities." Fun fact: Bernstel has aspired to become a falconer since middle school.



ILLUMINATION PRESENTS

PengLai

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For Your Consideration

**BEST ANIMATED
SHORT FILM**

Directed by
Momo Wang

FEATURE



THE BIG PICTURES

This year's Oscar-eligible contenders for Best Animated Feature showcase the many talents of our TAG members.



By Kim Fay



THE BAD GUYS

The classic heist film gets a CG makeover in *The Bad Guys*, about a criminal gang of anthropomorphic animals led by the oh-so-cool Mr. Wolf. Director Pierre Perifel says that the movie is an attempt to push the envelope for animated films, both visually and narratively. "I like to think of it as a gateway for family audiences into the world of heist movies, a genre that has rarely been explored in animation," he says. "However, it is not just a stylistic exercise. It was important for us to truly explore what's at the core of our character's story." The result: a message about friendship, acceptance, and redemption cleverly wrapped up in an entertaining romp.



Bad Guys images courtesy of DreamWorks Animation LLC.

Luck images courtesy of Apple.



LUCK

On the surface, *Luck* seems like a fantastical story about an unlucky girl who stumbles into the Land of Luck and teams up with a magical cat in order to bring home some much-needed good luck for a close friend. But the story has depth rooted in reality, focusing on a lead character who grew up in the foster system and reflecting on the definition of family. Plus, how does "luck" affect the course of your life? "Sometimes when you're going through the worst bad luck ever, you step back and you think, 'Wait a minute! If that hadn't happened, maybe this wouldn't have happened.' So, maybe it was actually the best good luck ever," says the film's Director Peggy Holmes. It's this optimistic view that keeps you thinking long after the movie ends.



PAWS OF FURY: THE LEGEND OF HANK

Feudal Japan meets the Wild West as a ruthless feline villain sets out to displace a village inhabited by cats so he can use the land to expand his palace. Unfortunately, the samurai appointed to protect them is a sad sack beagle named Hank who has no idea what he's doing. *Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank* is a martial arts satire that's loosely based on the Mel Brooks' classic *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks served as one of the film's writers). Art Director Sylvia Liu says the movie was also "a special opportunity to create unique designs centered around dog and cat themes." Animal lovers are sure to agree.



Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank images courtesy of Paramount Pictures.



DC LEAGUE OF SUPER-PETS

DC League of Super-Pets is a superhero movie with a twist. Pets, not people, save the day. Superman's pet dog Krypto partners with a ragtag band of shelter animals to rescue the Justice League from Lex Luthor and his villainous guinea pig, Lulu. Director, Producer, and Co-writer Jared Stern thinks the movie resonates with viewers "because of the relationship we all have with our pets—they love us unconditionally. And that love, more than heat vision or freeze breath, is the greatest superpower. Because their love is so pure, it hurts us even more to see our animal friends in peril, and it gives us that much more joy when they succeed." Add to this a kitten who coughs up a hairball grenade and Keanu Reeves as Batman, and you'll never look at crime-fighting the same way again.

MINIONS: THE RISE OF GRU

Who doesn't love the Minions? Gru's adorable, naughty pill-shaped pals take us on a nostalgic trip into the past in the fast-paced comedy, *Minions: The Rise of Gru*. But the film proves to be more than a litany of laughs and gags. "There's something so funny and touching about The Minions' undying loyalty to little Gru; his journey in the movie is learning how rare and valuable that kind of love is," says Writer Matthew Fogel. "The idea that we need to find our tribe is important at any age. Even if your tribe trades magical stones for Pet Rocks, steals airplanes, and nearly destroys your mentor's funeral." All in all, the movie strikes the perfect chord between humor and humanity.



Minions: The Rise of Gru images courtesy of © 2022 Universal Studios.



The Bob's Burgers Movie images courtesy of 20th Century Studios.



THE BOB'S BURGERS MOVIE

In *The Bob's Burgers Movie*, Bob Belcher and family hit the big screen—in a musical! With Bob's Burgers at risk of having its restaurant equipment repossessed, a sinkhole appears out front and the skeleton of a carnie is found. An entertaining premise, to be sure, but what makes the movie special, in Simon Chong's view, is that "we were able to really get in there, into every frame, and craft a story that felt true to the show without losing its heart while pushing the visuals to new heights." A Supervising Director on the series and Storyboard Artist on the film, Chong says, "Ultimately, the movie is about hope, which I think resonates with viewers. We could all use a bit of that today!"

STRANGE WORLD

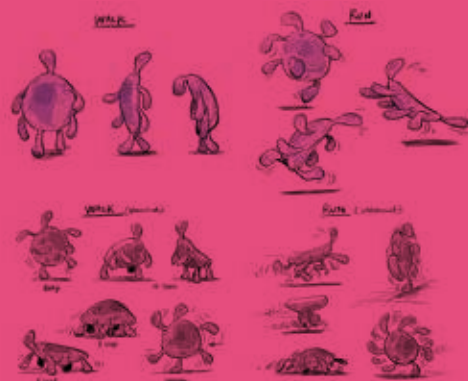
CAPTURING MOTION

In the strange world of *Strange World*, millions of moving creatures and plants required filmmakers to come up with innovative techniques.

At heart, the movie *Strange World* is an adventure story with roots in classics like *King Kong* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. In the land of Avalonia, a farmer named Searcher Clade discovers pando, a plant that Director Don Hall describes as a “farm-to-table power source.” The cultivation of pando takes Avalonia from a kind of horse-and-buggy existence into the modern age.

But when the president of Avalonia informs Searcher that pando is no longer producing power, they set off to discover its source. Their journey takes them to the “strange world” of the movie’s title, a bizarre place that presented numerous challenges for both characters and creators.





Hayao Miyazaki films in designing the costumes, which are “ambiguous in their time period,” he says, making viewers wonder if they are in the future or the past.

The purpose of Kim’s off-the-beaten-path details was to craft a more exaggerated look than is usually found in Disney’s contemporary, naturalistic-looking films. “Without those character designs being stylized, I don’t know that we could have sold the stylization we were going for,” says Amy Smeed, who served with Justin Sklar as Heads of Animation.



STRIKE A POSE

When it comes to the movie’s characters, the Art Director Characters Jin Kim says, “I wanted them to look like my neighbors, my family. Like real people.”

Kim notes that Hall is a big fan of classic French comic book artists like Didier Conrad, and this influence can be seen in unconventional choices like the oval faces and bulbous noses of the Clade clan, from Searcher’s 16-year-old son Ethan, who is torn between farming and a life of adventure, to Searcher’s father, Jaeger, an explorer who disappeared on an expedition long ago. Kim also borrowed from early

“[We were] trying to reconceive all the little in-house rules that we have about how we animate,” Sklar says. To get the look they wanted, they examined old-school Disney films, studying how to draw 2D design poses from every angle.

“We’re stepping through every frame and seeing, okay, here’s a key pose and here’s a key pose, and how are they getting from one pose to the next?” says Smeed. “What is the spacing? What is the timing? We were really dissecting and figuring out some fun ways that we could push on stylization for this show.”

Sklar says that the poses are much broader and describes lines that are long, simple, and flowing, with an emphasis on making “really beautiful transitions. The choices are surprising and unexpected, because they are often less concerned with reproducing reality and more concerned with big bold shapes.”

Smeed and Sklar also knew that if they pushed broad, comical movements, they had to do it in a way “where you weren’t going to laugh it off when danger showed up,” says Sklar. “If a character feels like you can drop an anvil on them and they’re gonna just get back up [and] be fine,” it’s

difficult to convince an audience that they’re in peril.

The goal was to make interesting choices but ensure that the stakes felt real. “We were always looking for what was at the heart of these characters, so that even while we were stylizing, there was still that truth,” says Smeed.

CROWD CONTROL

It’s not unusual for an animated feature to have large crowds in the backgrounds of scenes, but the ones in *Strange World* were unique. According to Crowds Supervisor Yasser Hamed, approximately 90 percent of the crowds in this film are creatures, from flying organisms shaped like red water drops to flying dinosaur-type beings. “That included the most diverse and largest scale of crowds we’ve ever done at Disney Animation,” he says.

Hamed estimates that roughly one in four shots has creatures in them—and in total, the movie uses approximately 56 million creatures. A notable example are the flying creatures that look like red drops of water. “Tens of thousands of these creatures, tightly packed in formation, produce a walkable surface for our main characters to interact with,” says Hamed.

In order to achieve this, he explains, “we developed a toolset within our department that would automatically instance thousands of creatures along an art-directed path and compress them tightly by using some collision-avoidance algorithms. Each creature had to behave and act in a unique way to ensure it had its own identity while still behaving as part of this overall formation.”

Because it would be impossible to animate the huge number of creatures used in various scenes by hand, Hamed’s team worked closely with the animation department to build differing “swim” cycles. These cycles were then incorporated into a simulation that allowed an entire formation of creatures to behave like a fluid. “We programmed the solver to artificially switch each character from one cycle to the next, blending it seamlessly,” he says. “Some cycles had creatures moving faster than others, while some cycles were animated so that they could break away from the main formation of characters, do something unique, and then rejoin the formation all automatically as part of the simulation.”

Along with the challenge of having these creatures come together to give the illusion of a solid surface, “another added level of complexity was that the speeds of the formations defined the speed at which the main characters would traverse through the scene,” Hamed says. To sell the physicality of characters walking or running on a moving environment “we had to work closely with the layout department to get the timing of the creatures just right as it played a big part in the cinematography.”

GOING GREEN

Compounding this, the creatures weren’t the only things moving. Countless plants moved too, beginning with pando, which grows pods that can be picked and used as a power source. “Whenever you see pando on the screen, there’s always a glow, there’s always a motion,” says Sean Jenkins, Head of Environments.

Plants played such a physically active role in the story that an entirely new role was created to deal with them: Animated Environments Supervisor. In the way that Hamed dealt with creatures, Ben Fiske was assigned to come up with new ways to deal with the plants.

Typically, the effects department might animate the same plant a hundred times for different shots, according to Fiske, but the scale of *Strange World* made that approach especially unwieldy. So, they did animation in the asset phase, rather than in the production of shots. “What this means,” says Fiske, “is that I worked with a crew of really talented plant animators from effects and from tech animation, and they provided me with cycles.”

Software developers and technical directors then used these cycles to create

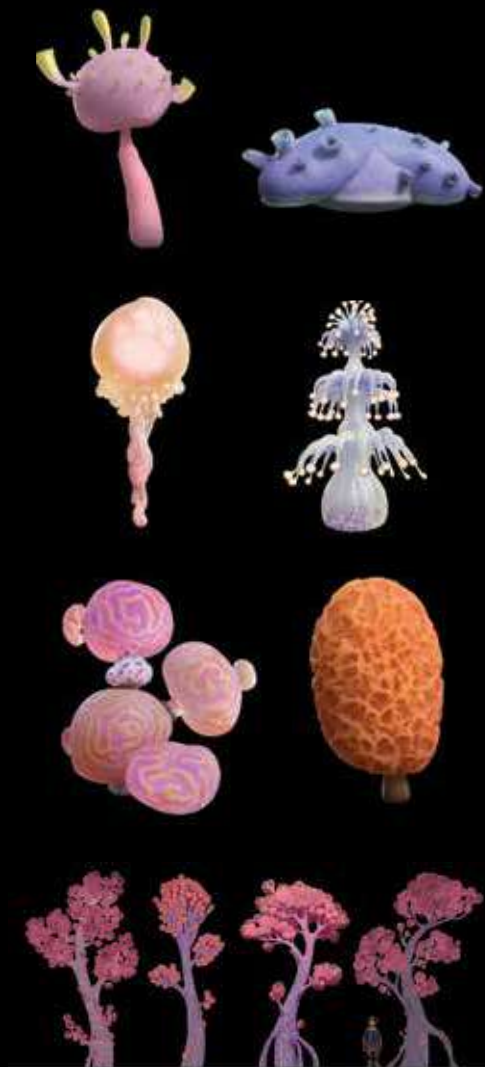
libraries that enabled “animation on the entire environment,” Fiske explains. “If you think about the modern CG pipeline, we would wait until almost the last step to have plants animating. Instead, now, the directors are able to see animated plants [moving] pretty much right out of layout.” With so many plants in motion throughout the story, this enabled the filmmakers to visualize early in the process how the characters would interact with the background, making the production more efficient.

Fiske says that when he finally had the opportunity to flip a switch and turn on the whole environment, though, the immediate response was, “This is too much!”

Sklar says it looked like a rave, and Smeed says it was “distracting from the characters, and you always want to be with the characters.”

That the environment could compete with the characters was something the filmmakers had discussed, and Fiske was prepared for it. The system provided different options: low, medium, and high for every one of the plants. With 600 to 700 shots of moving vegetation, each shot was tailored by an artist in final layout. “[They] could either offset the animation of the plant or turn down the plant’s motion,” he says.

This solution did more than just “take the weight off a lot of really talented artists,” says Fiske, so they didn’t have to animate the same plant over and over. It also provided a manageable method of trial and error to find the best ways to forefront character performance. The result is a movie that honors animation techniques of the past and evolves technology of the future to tell the story of a family trying to figure out how much of the past to preserve, what kind of future to embrace, and how to find harmony between the two. ©



OPPOSITE PAGE: Characters include the malleable Splat, who was the first and trickiest character Jin Kim designed. **THIS PAGE:** (from top) So many animated plants led to a new pipeline to streamline the process; Toolsets were created to turn sentient creatures into surfaces for characters to move on.



Previsualization art (OPPOSITE PAGE) developed the emotional tone of the movie, leading to the depth of character found in the final version of Puss (THIS PAGE).



PUSS IN BOOTS

A MODERN FURRY TALE

Along with the expected blend of comedy and adventure, *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* offers a surprising degree of pathos.

An existential crisis. Musings on mortality. If this sounds like the makings of an indie art film, think again. Puss in Boots is back, and this time around he's dealing with some serious emotional baggage.

In *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, the beloved feline is down to the last of his nine lives, and his notorious bravado has been declawed, so to speak. "We get to see a more vulnerable, authentic, and emotional side to a character that usually never lets his guard down. It's a fun space that I wasn't expecting the character to go into," says Production Designer Nate Wragg. "It doesn't feel like a sequel to just say, hey, let's see Puss in Boots do some more stuff. [This movie] explores the character in a deeper way while still getting all the adventure and comedy in there, too."

Inspired by traditional fairy tale illustrations, the filmmakers faced the challenge of "updating an iconic character's look without losing the familiarity of that character," says Wragg. Every detail had to be carefully managed. Take Puss's fur, for example. "Instead of being fine-detailed fur that CG would develop without any tweaks, we have a painterly treatment on it," says Ludovic Bouancheau, Head of Character Animation.

This sounds simple enough, but Bouancheau notes the vast difference in how a shaved cat looks versus how a cat with fur looks. "The modeling department delivers the model of the character 'furless,' and the surfacing department delivers the fur—length, groom, color, etc. Both combined should give us the final design," he says.

THIS PAGE: In *The Last Wish*, Puss evolves not only emotionally, but also physically with a look reminiscent of classic fairy tales.



His team was adapting that Puss design while “trying to find a new visual treatment for the fur—a treatment that would change the way the fur’s volume would look in the end—so we had to be conscious about both aspects,” he says. “The delicate part was to know how to change the skin—shaved cat—to affect the fur that is attached to it without losing the design now that we introduced a third variable through the way we rendered that fur. A lot of back and forth and teamwork had to happen to find the right balance.”

At the end of this process, hand-sketched lines were digitally added to enhance the look and the motion, “things like impacts or sword hits,” Bouancheau says. “They were painted by animation either on an animation movie or early lighting movie, then taken over by our 2D compositing department for the final compositing over the final image.”

Bouancheau explains that the addition of the hand-sketched lines first came up as part of the step animation process used in some of the scenes because those lines would help complete the style when a scene shifted into step animation, “but we ended up expanding the use of those lines to many more moments in the movie. [We] even added brushstrokes over motion blur to enhance the look of some quick frames.”

THE FAST AND THE FURRYOUS

Meanwhile, Heidi Jo Gilbert, Head of Story, had to find ways to convey Puss’s complex personal journey through storyboards. “We really wanted the audience to feel the stakes and the weight and the emotion that Puss was feeling.” In describing one scene, she says: “You want to draw him small so he feels small on the screen. There’s storytelling through the composition that makes the audience feel a certain way.”

Gilbert notes that each scene required

its own unique solutions because so many different tones were covered throughout the movie. Those tones weren’t just driven by Puss and his moods. *The Last Wish* has a significant cast of side characters, all with their own story arcs. Kitty Softpaws returns in an amped-up role, and she has her own personal demons, beginning with trust issues when it comes to Puss. Then there’s the endearing Perrito, a scraggly mutt who is optimism incarnate. His dream is to be a therapy dog one day.

Along with these two sidekicks, the villains build on classic fairy tale characters. “But they’re definitely reinterpreted for *Puss in Boots*,” says Bouancheau. The Goldilocks and The Three Bears crime family are scene stealers with their Cockney accents and rough ways, and mob boss Big Jack Horner is a sociopathic baby man using his plum pie business as a cover for his illegal dealings. Most notable, though, is The Wolf. “[Because] Puss’s fear is the engine that drives the whole [story],” says Gilbert, the film needed a character as spine-chilling as The Wolf to drive that fear.

Puss is in pursuit of the magical Wishing Star so that he can wish for his lost lives back. The problem is, most everyone else wants that star too because they have their own wishes to make. This storyline, while entertaining, required a certain mindfulness according to Gilbert. “We have to make sure we focus on Puss and we’re telling his story and not getting sidetracked by all these other fun characters,” she says.

PITCH PURRFECT

As much as the filmmakers wanted to play with a traditional fairy tale aesthetic, they didn’t want a movie that looked aged or vintage. “Our approach was, let’s elevate the design and the world into this more contemporary illustrated space,” says Wragg. “What’s great about this is, it’s given it a little bit more of an artistic sensibility and flair across the whole scope of the film.”

Wragg says that one of the methods for achieving a film that feels like a modern fairy tale “was developing our surfacing style in the computer digitally.” Using digital painting techniques and custom digital brushes, “we would generate the look and feel of materials like wood, metal, cloth ... in place of using real photos or reference on our models. In the end, it helped us create a digital feeling of wood or metal, without it being an actual image of wood or metal.” This was spread across the whole production. They created an entirely new surfacing library for the film, which “paved the way for an artistically driven look to our characters and environments,” says Wragg.

In addition, tools were developed that allowed artists to put a textured edge on any object in a 3D space. “Using this tool, we can control the level of asymmetry and irregularity at the object’s edge, which gives it a painterly feel,” says Wragg. “Much like if you took a paintbrush and swiped it. It’s a tool we can control as a dial. If we want more of it, turn that dial up. If we want less of it, turn that dial down.”

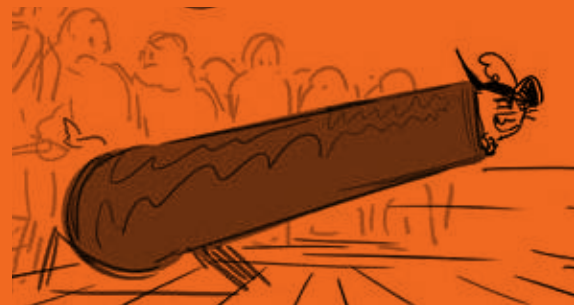
Overall, the dial was turned up for the perimeter of the frames to create an impressionistic look, and it was turned down in the center around the characters to make it more believable as they touched and interacted with objects and one another. The result, says Gilbert, was “stunningly beautiful. Multiple times we would stop a frame, and everyone would think it’s a painting. But no, it’s a still from the movie.”

Of course, no matter how gorgeous the art is, animation is about motion, and this was given the same attention to detail as the movie’s style. For emotional scenes, spline animation was used. This is typical of CG style, with the computer helping to fill in all the frames between keyframes, creating the realistic, smooth flow of movement needed to keep the audience immersed in Puss’s moments of sadness and despair.

For the action and fight scenes, on the other hand, filmmakers looked to the hyper-realistic but, at the same time, larger-than-life spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone. Framing included the dramatic use of close-ups and wide shots, and this is where the use of step animation came in. Dropping

frames or holding a single frame onscreen for a count of two frames gave these scenes “a kind of choppy feel, which is more true to hand-drawn animation,” Gilbert says. This, in turn, heightened the tension.

While step animation has been used in features before—*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* being the most notable example—Bouanchau points out that *Puss and Boots: The Last Wish* used it to very different effect. This was a big part of



the creative challenge. Not only breathing fresh life into a legacy character, but also expanding on existing tools in new and innovative ways.

“It’s easy to go to what you’re comfortable with or what you know,” Wragg says. “We know how to make a movie like the previous *Puss in Boots*. But really turning the style on its head and

pushing it in a whole other direction, it’s a little scary, but at the same time it’s also exciting and rewarding.” ☺

THIS PAGE: Despite its emotional resonance, *The Last Wish* is a true action-adventure movie with lots of comedic elements like street-smart Goldie and big-hearted Mama Bear (bottom).



AUTHENTIC VOICES

VOICES OF EXPERIENCE
DEEPEN SHARED CONNECTIONS
IN TWO ANIMATED SERIES

By Kim Fay

SEEN AND HEARD

***Abominable and the Invisible City* takes children on a playful ride through Chinese culture.**

While *Abominable and the Invisible City* is a spin-off series from the 2019 feature film *Abominable*, it trades in the movie's "epic quest" trope for adventure-lite stories that take an imaginative look at Chinese tradition. Each episode features Yi, Jin, and Peng, along with the lovable yeti Everest, as they help a different magical creature, some original but most inspired by mythology, such as Todd the Toad and Sewer Koi.

For Tiffany Lo and Ethel Lung, the series' Story Editors, one of the exciting things about working on this project is that much of the creative leadership is Asian American, sharing similar reference points. "When you say, I want a sesame bun, that's it," says Lung. "[The art directors] don't need to look it up. They eat it with their kids. Or [take] Voice Director Stephanie Sheh. She understands exactly how to speak to an elder. The respect level. The luxury of

bantering in a certain way. It would be hard for us to convey that to a director who didn't have those experiences."

A big fan of cartoons as a kid, Lo says that when she watched the characters: "I would insert myself into them in a way. But they never looked like me. What that did to me—it was this subconscious thing: I didn't want to be me. I wanted to be what I saw on the screen. That is why it's so important to have representation behind the screen in writing."

As for any characters of color that did exist, most were written by white writers, and Lung adds, "we need to make sure that our voices are heard in authentic ways."

The show is also important, they say, because of the recent rise in anti-Asian hate. "Very few media outlets report on it," says Lo. "There's very little outrage around it other than from our own community. What we can do as writers and creators is put people who look like us front and center in the mainstream as normal, flawed individuals—not the quote-unquote other."

The message they hope to convey comes organically, according to Lung, because a lot of Chinese folklore and mythology is about acceptance. Not that they want *Abominable and the Invisible City* to be a "message show." They want it to celebrate Chinese culture in a fun way, and to do that, they took inspiration from original folklore and then built modern stories around that.

Todd the Toad, for example, is a traditional symbol of prosperity. Most Chinese businesses display a toad with coins in its mouth. Using this as a foundation, Lo and Lung built on the character, giving Todd the ability to grant wishes. Another character is Sewer Koi, who is based on a traditional giant fish who wants to be a dragon. "Why not utilize our [Shanghai] cityscape and the close relationship with



OPPOSITE: Story Editors Tiffany Lo (left) and Ethel Lung united traditional Chinese culture with their own modern perspectives to create universal stories of adventure and acceptance. **THIS PAGE:** Todd the Toad.



“How we deal with our emotions. What we have to face. What we carry with us, and how it affects how we connect with other people. That’s something we didn’t have growing up, culturally.”

— Tiffany Lo

water-slash-sewage, modernize it, add a heist into it,” Lung says.

“Todd the Toad is a closer inspiration,” says Lo. “Then Sewer Koi is a very loose interpretation. That’s what was so fun about it.”

The writers also brought their personal stories and perspectives into the series. Both lived with their Chinese grandmothers when they were young, and when Lung’s Nai Nai passed away and was cremated, she was kept in an urn in the family’s home in America until she could be taken back to her homeland. “I just remember going into the study and talking to her all the time. There was solace for me,” says Lung.

This memory found its way into an episode where Yi visits her deceased father in a temple filled with urns. “Yi showed up and talked to her dad, said, ‘Hi dad, I need some advice,’” says Lung. “It was definitely therapeutic for us to have that storyline.”

Personal to Lo was the bigger-picture idea of making sure the show has an emotional heartbeat. “How we deal with our emotions,” she says. “What we have to face. What we carry with us, and how it affects how we connect with other people. That’s something we didn’t have growing up, culturally.” She thinks a lot of people can relate because “this is not a specifically cultural thing—it’s just a human thing.”

ABOVE: Seen here with Yi, Peng, and Sewer Koi, Everest is Lo’s favorite character. “Every time I see him I just want to cry and hug him,” she says.
OPPOSITE: *Spirit Rangers* creator Karissa Valencia with Spirit Ranger Eddy.

IN THE PRESENT

An all-Native American writing room is one of many firsts for preschool series *Spirit Rangers*.

When Karissa Valencia took hikes with her dad in the Los Padres National Forest as a girl, they read plaques that described how the Samala Chumash used to live on this land. “And we’re like, we’re literally right here,” she says.

Bringing her culture into the present was one of many things that led her to create *Spirit Rangers*. Valencia is also the Executive Producer and Showrunner behind the preschool series about the Skycedar family living in a fictional California national park. Mom, the Head Ranger, is from California’s Samala

Chumash tribe, while Dad, a scientist, is from Washington state’s Cowlitz tribe. The kids—Kodi, Summer, and Eddy—are Junior Rangers and also Spirit Rangers. Spirit Rangers are land and water protectors with the ability to transform into bear, red-tailed hawk, and turtle spirits, respectively, to help other spirits in need.

Growing up, Valencia says, “it was hard to feel proud about my culture.” If she shared it with others, “I would get so many dumb questions like, ‘Can you sage my apartment? Can you make me a dreamcatcher?’” By watching the Skycedar children, she hopes that Native youth will feel a sense of pride and “that they can be loud and proud Natives,” she says.

One of the reasons Valencia loves doing the show for such young children

is that “preschoolers are just so earnest and come with open hearts. They’re building their own communities, figuring out their place in the world. That’s exactly what the Spirit Rangers are doing. They’re new at everything, too, and I think that’s a universal thing.”

With the Skycedar children learning about new spirits, and as a result, new tribes in California and around the country in each episode, the series has the opportunity to introduce viewers to a wide range of Native American culture and history. To do this, it was important to Valencia to get approval from the tribes the series portrays. When it comes to the representation of Native Americans in film and TV, “a lot of these tribes have never been invited into the process,” she says.



TOP: Affiliated with the Samala Chumash, Coyote and Lizard accompany the Spirit Rangers on their adventures.

BOTTOM: Loving, supportive family life is a foundational theme in the series.





Middle child Summer can turn into a red-tailed hawk.

Valencia worked with Native Production Consultant, Joely Proudfit, Ph.D., who was crucial in selecting the right elders in different tribes to approach to provide language consultation, sign off on a story, or give a head's up: "Hey, that story is from Google, don't use it." This method didn't mean that tribal elders authorized every story Valencia wanted to tell, though. She wrote a premise for one, and her own tribe's Elder Council said no because it is "one of our creation stories which are really, really sacred. They were afraid it could be like a game of telephone," Valencia says, changing once it was out in the world. "Any time they said no, we backed off."

Because Valencia was aware that she can offer only one perspective, she assembled the animation industry's first all-Native writers' room, with members of tribes from around the country. She worked hard to create a safe space, and she says, "I'm really grateful that they took the time to be vulnerable, to talk about those moments when they were Native kids, and how they felt overlooked, because we brought all that into the show."

Balancing traditional and urban Native life, Valencia calls the series her love letter to Native culture. "And if anybody's taking anything away," she says, one of the things she hopes they learn is "seeing Natives in the present space." ☺

NATIVE AVENGERS

Karissa Valencia calls her all-Native team the Native Avengers. Among them is Avenger/Staff Writer Kelly Lynne D'Angelo, who is Tuscarora of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Muscowpetung Cree, and Avenger/Staff Writer/Consulting Producer Joey Clift, who is enrolled in the Cowlitz tribe and grew up on the Tulalip reservation north of Seattle.

"It's always been a dream of mine to have a chance to tell our stories as people, but also, to a greater extent, showcase our pride," says D'Angelo. "Showcase the love that we can give to ourselves that we've always deserved but never seen reflected onscreen."

Clift says that growing up he loved shows like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, "but because I didn't see any Native animation writers and Native comedians on TV getting opportunities, I didn't think I was allowed to work in the entertainment industry." He sees *Spirit Rangers* offering kids "the permission to dream that I wish I had."

Neither D'Angelo nor Clift considered themselves preschool writers before Valencia approached them, but for D'Angelo it felt natural because her tribe follows the principle of the Seventh Generation: What we do today should contribute to a sustainable world seven generations into the future. "This felt like the right way to honor that," she says.

Clift, on the other hand, had doubts about what a preschool show could accomplish. But *Spirit Rangers* addresses real issues, like Native sports mascots and how the U.S. government didn't honor its treaties with tribes. "There aren't really a lot of issues I can think of where the brakes were put on because the audience was too young. ... The thoughtfulness that went into not just making the story shine, but the representation shine, it took me from being hesitant to being all in on this."

Both Clift and D'Angelo are familiar with being "the only Native in the room" and having to be the one to explain everything Native to non-Native colleagues. *Spirit Rangers* was entirely different. "For me personally, there was an unspoken understanding from the get-go," D'Angelo says. "When you get in a room full of people who have a shared experience ... of knowing this is and was and always will be your homeland, you carry a deeper responsibility. We all felt the weight of it."

"Something I don't think a lot of non-Natives grasp is a tribe is basically a collection of families," says Clift. "There's a lot of pressure there." He says the most nerve-wracking experience he's ever had was making a presentation to his Tribal Council. "If they say no, that's not just Hollywood rejecting an idea. That's like my family saying no. Getting their approval was like, my family accepted this in a real way."

Avengers/Staff Writers
Joey Clift and Kelly
Lynne D'Angelo



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Photo Credit: Save the Children / Rachel Pinnell

The background of the page is a dark green textured surface. Scattered across it are several black line-art outlines of pine tree branches, some pointing upwards and others downwards, creating a festive, wintry atmosphere.

TIS THE SEASON

By Karen Briner

TAG members have talent. No doubt about it. For many that extends beyond the job as this year's fifth annual Holiday Gift Guide shows. You will find art, crafts, and other products by more than 40 creatives at Keyframe online, and here we feature a few of those vendors to give you a taste of the many wonderful items on offer. This is the perfect opportunity to buy unique gifts, as well as support local artists and our Union kin.



BEAUTIFUL ENERGY

Tristin Cole

Tristin Cole developed a passion for making jewelry after seeing all the hippies trading their handmade goods and buying a garnet necklace at a Grateful Dead concert in 1993. The necklace is still her favorite. "Even though I have restrung it a few times, the stones carry such beautiful energy and memories," she says.

Working with semi-precious stones and natural materials, Cole finds that making jewelry is similar to painting animation backgrounds in that it puts her in a meditative state. "I find it to be an alternate creative outlet in which I can use my hands and problem solve, while enjoying the benefits the natural stones have in terms of their colors and soothing properties," she notes.

With more than 20 years' experience in animation, Cole is currently working on *Animaniacs*, and she has a new children's book out called *Into the Night*. She donates a percentage of the profits from her creative endeavors to organizations helping to make the world a better place.

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MCMASTERING THE PROCESS

Mo McMasters

Participating in Cartoon Network's seasonal markets helped Mo McMasters realize how many different formats they could apply to their work. From stickers, zines, and comics, they branched out into other mediums.

"I love every opportunity I get to learn a new method of making," says McMasters, who has learned how to risograph print, laser cut, screen print, and make resin casts—all skills picked up after art school. "Now my work spans a breadth of formats that keeps me from pigeonholing my approach to creation."

Currently making the switch from character and prop design to storyboarding, McMasters finds that animation work challenges them to be faster and loosen up, while their personal work is more methodical and detailed. "Both styles are relevant to big picture projects, though—the ebbs and flows of these methods help my creative process stay fluid," they say.

shopmomcmasters.com



SIMPLE ARTISTRY

Sarah Sobole

Along with stickers, prints, apparel, and comics, Sarah Sobole also creates a range of ceramics from jars and mugs to planters and animal pipes. "I took some ceramics classes in college that I loved and have been making pottery on and off since then," they say.

Both the process of creating and the enjoyment of looking at an object inspire Sobole, who started working as a Storyboard Revisionist in 2015. Quickly moving on to become a Storyboard Artist, they recently finished boarding on the latest season of *We Baby Bears*.

Asked if there is any crossover between their animation work and personal creations, they say that the styles and some of the subject matter are pretty similar at times. Plus, working as a board artist for so long has made them appreciate faster and rougher drawings. "I love simple characters and doodles, so a lot of my personal art is really simple and cute," they say.

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WEARABLE ART

Emily FitzPatrick

"I started selling shirts and sweaters because I wanted something specific to wear myself," says Emily FitzPatrick. "I couldn't find a design like the one I had in my head, so I decided to make it."

She started off with a small batch and says she was lucky in that a lot of other folks liked the design, too. "What started as a one-time thing to fulfill my own fancy became a bigger apparel, stationery, and sticker business," she says.

As for her style, FitzPatrick is inspired by anime and kawaii aesthetic. She thinks she also probably brings in some of the cartoon aesthetic from the work she does in her day job, currently a Character and Prop Designer for OddBot. Her favorite animation assignments are the ones where she gets to make really "cute" designs. "Like when we need stuffed animal props or stickers for a character. That's definitely where my work shines the most," she says.

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RUSTIC REWARDS

Rob Lilly

Exhausted from sitting at a desk all day and feeling creatively stagnant, Rob Lilly eased his way into woodworking several years back. It reminded him of

the days when he was a child playing with Legos. "The reward of constructing something with your hands, something that's tangible. It's a great feeling!" he says.

Lilly has worked as a Storyboard Artist, Character Designer and Animator for 24 years. He has no formal woodworking training, relying on a creative mind and YouTube tutorials. "It can save you hours on the saw and help save a finger or two," he says.

Inspired by frequent wine-tasting visits to the Central Coast, he loves giving wine barrels and old reclaimed lumber a second chance, whether as an accent piece or furniture. Through the years he's slowly built up his woodshop in his garage. Recently, he acquired a laser printer for customizing pieces with portraits, logos, or art.

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BEAR NECESSITIES

Jiny He

Jiny He loves wearable art. "It's a great way for artists to bring their creations to life that add just a little bit of happiness to our everyday lives," she says.

The bear drawings on He's scarves are from a picture book collaboration she did with the China Bear Rescue Centre in Chengdu, China. The book identifies the eight unique species of bears of the world. "I really wanted to bring these images into lifestyle by designing them as scarves," He says.

For He, who has worked as a Color Designer and Background Painter, color is important in both animation and her personal work. "I love the way different palettes can define a mood to tell stories without having to use words. I approach each design with color psychology in mind."

houseofmykorisa.com

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AL MERCADO

Landscape Art

Al Mercado has been painting landscapes, both plein air and in the studio, since his student days at ArtCenter College of Design. He enjoys experimenting with various styles within the genre, from traditional painterly techniques to more graphic expressions.

Starting out as a Background Designer about six years ago, he is now a Background Painter. He finds that there is quite a bit of crossover with his traditional painting and the animation work he does, especially with *Disenchantment*, the show he's currently working on. "The look of that show is so beautiful and painterly, very reminiscent of Disney classics like *Pinocchio* whose backgrounds were all created by hand," Mercado says. The artists from that era are a huge inspiration for him, and he's always amazed at the worlds they created and the path they charted for animation today.

alfredomercado.com



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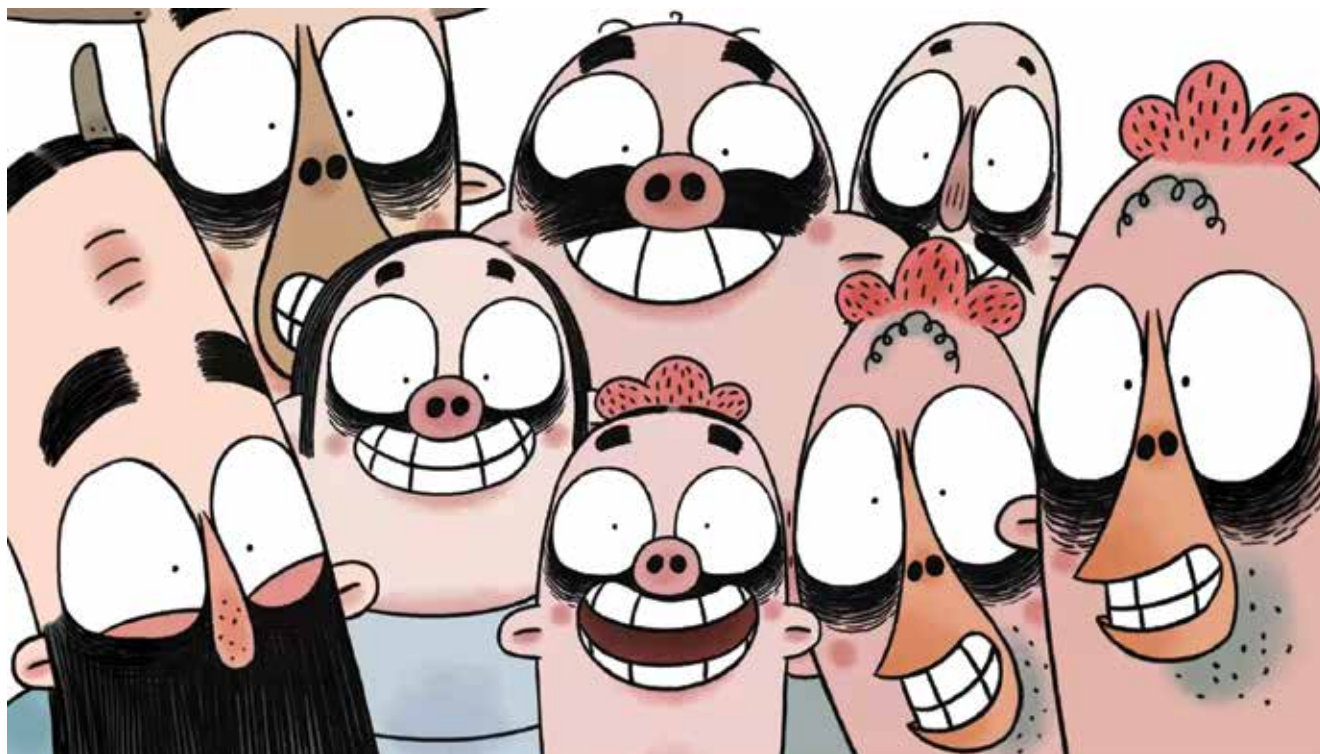


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KEYFRAME





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT TAKES ON NEW MEANING IN AN OSCAR-ELIGIBLE SHORT FILM BY CHENGLIN XIE.



What would happen if people literally turned into the food they eat most? This is the idea Chenglin Xie explores in his short indie film *Meal on the Plate*.

In a small village, the locals do more than enjoy their meals. While they remain human, they take on physical characteristics of the animals they're eating, from fish tails and chicken beaks to pig snouts and sheep horns. Then—in the middle of the night—a stranger arrives, and he has an eating habit the villagers haven't seen before. Curious, they try this new way. Things don't go well, giving Xie the opportunity to use

black humor to convey serious messages about addiction, desire, and humanity.

Currently a Story Artist at Netflix, Xie has made a number of short films, and he says the initial process is always extensive. "Writing the story, developing the visual style, designing the characters, finding the tone, thinking about styles of the music and sound, and so on—it is important that I figure out most of those key creative decisions and have a clear overall idea of the film myself before moving forward," he says.

For *Meal on the Plate*, Xie chose 2D hand-drawn animation in a muted color palette. The setting and characters rely heavily on simple lines and shapes, and action and facial expressions, rather than dialogue, are used to build tension—and amplify the dark humor.

Xie says he experimented with different versions of the film until he gradually found its shape and direction. This included at least four different endings. While some might find this laborious, he says, "It's satisfying when each time it gets better."

While working on *Meal on the Plate*, Xie had several other projects going. This taught him to move more flexibly between projects during the creation process. It can get tricky since he searches for new combinations of concept, design, theme, and tone for every new film he makes. As for whether every attempt succeeds or not, he says that's not what is most important: "[They all] become my precious experience and benefit my future filmmaking."

ABOVE: A still of the characters taking on animal features in *Meal on the Plate*.

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