

Carpenter Center

No Slop, No Second Screen: Animation – the hard-won image

June 12–October 4, 2026
Level 1, AUX: Intermedia Gallery

Animation – moving image that is created or mediated frame-by-frame – is a famously (and sometimes fetishistically) laborious, time-intensive process. It demands our undivided attention.

This exhibition and associated screenings showcase work by Harvard students, alumni and visiting faculty.

Animation at Harvard started in 1963 with a focus on materials, and hand-made animation has always been a strong strand of student work, alongside some classes in newer approaches including VR and coding. The rise of AI has coincided with an upsurge of student interest in the sorts of work that foregrounds the human hand and fingerprint: puppet animation and other stop-motion materials such as paper, sand, and objects. The recognition of the textures of reality and the perception of small mistakes seem to be experienced as a nourishing human interaction rather than troublesome imperfections.

Animation is at an inflection point. The spigot of AI-produced animation is opening and threatens to flood us with too many images to process, some of them beautiful, some crass, all designed to ignite instant dopamine hits. Can human-produced animation survive this tidal wave? Certainly, sharp and flexible minds will find many ways to harness the power of AI to achieve amazing personal visions, but something important will be lost. The acceleration of image production is unfolding alongside a broader fragmen-

tation of attention and spectatorship. The contemporary splintering of attention is manifested in the phenomenon of the “second screen”. Producers of films and series are now taking into account that most of their viewers will be scrolling on their phones while watching their productions - they are finding it necessary to signal plot points more clearly, with repetition, to make sure that the audience can follow along while giving only half their attention. This is not a scenario where the hard-won intensity of human-made animation can flourish - every second of animation may have taken an hour or more to produce.

Harvard students tend to expect to art into being through sheer force of intellect. Our classes force them to play, experiment, to make mistakes. They can discover the hand's intelligence and the creative potential of working with and against the particular resistances of different materials. Many students come into animation classes saying that they can't draw, only to persevere and find their own distinctive style. It may be harder to find motivation for this perseverance when impressive animation is just a verbal prompt away!

Animation was at a similar inflection point in the early 1990s, when computer animation was first becoming widely accessible. Dire predictions circulated throughout the industry: mass unemployment, the loss of human touch, and the collapse of traditional craft. Some jobs were indeed displaced, but many others emerged in their place. Computers became a profoundly democratizing force within animation—where expensive equipment had once been required. Suddenly anyone with access to a home computer could make a film. The result was an enormous proliferation of animated work, much of it forgettable, but also a flowering of remarkable experimentation

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as artists began to discover distinct voices within the digital realm.

One hopes that today's anxieties surrounding AI will eventually appear similarly overstated. In the meantime, these hard-won films offer a powerful reminder of the value of sustained human attention, labor, and imagination.

— Ruth Lingford, Senior Lecturer in Animation in Art, Film, and Visual Arts

Text by David Leo Rice, AFVS Alumni: excerpts from “Master of Puppets | On My Mother’s Death and the Last Chapter of the History of the World” in *Southwest Review*

...As I spent night after night in the animation studio in college, pressing my soft black pen against the underlit paper, I became increasingly aware of the line expressing its own desires, teasing something out of me that I didn't recognize as part of myself. Copying the same image again and again, with the tiniest possible differences each time, I felt some force (I wouldn't have called it Holy Spirit then, but I would now) binding me to the paper and working itself out through my attention upon it, coaxing me into a place I didn't recognize even as I also, to return to Freud's “Uncanny” yet again, understood that it was more fundamental to my being than any other. This is the place from which I've worked ever since.

....the atmosphere that lives most vividly in memory, other than those middle-of-the-night drawing sessions in the bright, silent studio, were the department's Friday-afternoon screenings, when all the animation students gathered to plunge together into a series of netherworlds, some of them cozy, others blighted and alienating.

Not only were Švankmajer's and the Quays' herky-jerky puppets emissaries from this twilight realm, covered in the blood and dust of some social order that seemed to have

collapsed just offscreen (or “upstairs” from the basement in which these films seem always to take place), but they reached me in twilight as well, in the New England dimness of fall and winter afternoons like the one on which I'm writing this now. At the screening, I sat there in my sweater with a paper cup of coffee between my feet after a long week of schoolwork and dozed, enjoying the feeling of becoming less and less certain whether the symphony of clacking automatons and grinning dolls—freed from the puppeteer's string like humans cut loose from God—existed on the inside or the outside of my eyelids. As I loosened my grip on consciousness throughout the screening, the unconsciousness of the beings on screen grew increasingly familiar, until it seemed I, too, became a puppet, passively absorbing images and ideas that had nothing to do with me and yet, for that reason, struck me as more familiar than anything I could think of while properly awake and compelled to live only the life of “David Rice.”

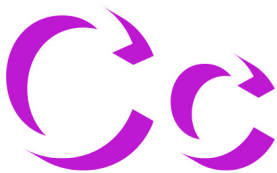
What I loved so much about those films in college was the combined feeling of unpredictability and inevitability: that whatever happens is going to happen no matter what, and yet, moment to moment, there's no way to say what that's going to be, or why. It's a layer of motivation and action beneath the way we tend to understand history as a series of causes and effects, of the needs of the individual bolstered by or foisted upon the needs of the population, of great thinkers and great events set in motion by human goodness and human evil. Perhaps none of this is really the case, but in stop-motion it obviously isn't. There is, in the greatest stop-motion films, a purified perception of Holy Spirit, a sense that all these pieces are moving for no reason except the ultimate one, which is that they can't resist the force that's moving them. Stop-motion in this sense is the least psychological art form, in that it posits no interiority at all for the puppets; and also the most psychological, in that it's a pure and uninterrogated expression of the puppeteer's psychology, which, as I've come to believe, would have no

bearing on the world if not for the puppets waiting to submit to it, just as God is nothing without believers.

A great puppeteer therefore becomes great by overcoming the paradox in which animation, the most rigorously planned and obsessively detail-oriented art form imaginable, the furthest from improvisation, nevertheless attains a level of pure spontaneity—a feeling not only that anything could happen but that anything will happen, that there are no laws of physics or of morality or even of time and space except those that the puppets dictate through their movements, which have no purpose except to be those movements—yet this wild freedom is attainable only through absurdly slow and complex planning, and is in this way an illusion, as false as the puppets' movements themselves.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

This exhibition is curated by Ruth Lingford, Senior Lecturer in Animation in Art, Film, and Visual Arts and Danni Shen, Senior Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant, and is organized by Matt Murphy, Exhibitions Production Coordinator and Preparator; Laura Cere, Communications and Administrative Coordinator; Caitlin Tucker-Melvin, Interim Exhibitions Manager and Registrar; and Kate McNamara, John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director.



CHECKLIST:

A.

Alex Lee
My Van Goghs, 2025
8 minutes

Devon Guinn
The Hedgehog's Dilemma, 2017
5 minutes

Golnaz Sharitzadeh
Animal, 2022
8 minutes

Breslin Sibley
Bell Metal, 2021
4 minutes

Renee Zhan
Hold Me (Caw Caw Caw Caw), 2016
11 minutes

B.

Ariella Rabin Dagi, Mohammad Djuneid
Dulloo, Andrea Jo Koenker, Lorena
Lama, Sorah Seong, Lamisha Ann Tucker,
Frank Lloyd Washburn
VES 10 / Final Drawing Output, 2007
3:09 minutes

Alex Lee
Poker Night, 2024
4:29 minutes

Xiao Xiao
Andante, 2014
2:39 minutes

Tim Reckart
Token Hunchback, 2008
6:21 minutes

Lauren Teichhol
Hooks and Loops, 2025
2:25 minutes

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C.

Bogdan Bintu
Cylinder, 2013
2 minutes

Pomai Ogata
Ilium, 2023
2:14 minutes

Ellie Fithian
Akyvernisia, 2024
3:11 minutes

Dan Ashwood
Fever Dreams, 2006
5:09 minutes

Riley Cullinan
Year 1, 2025
2:08 minutes

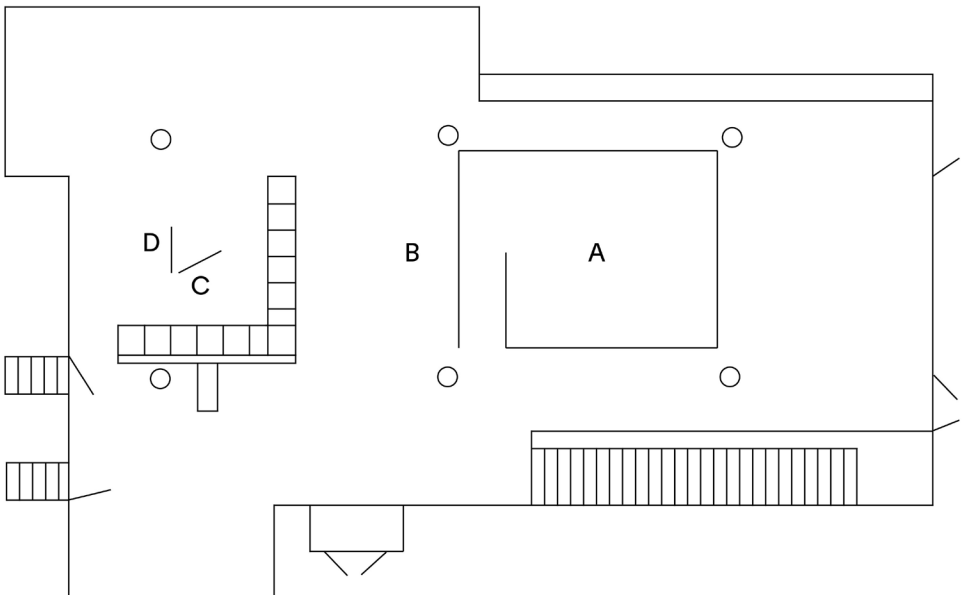
D.

Olivia Park
*In Beer there is Freedom, In the Woods
there are Deer*, 2026
TBC minutes

Felicity Wong
Songbirds, 2025
4:13 minutes

Maya Erdelyi
Plume, 2006
1:33 minutes

David Leo Rice
Nettalk, 2007
6:18 minutes



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