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The Hamish Koci Story

by Lisa Gye

Growing up in a small Victorian country town, Hamish Koci believed that a career in animation in Australia was almost certainly impossible and set his sights on zoo-keeping instead. Lisa Gye investigates what kept him out of the animal enclosure...

Growing up in a small Victorian country town, Hamish Koci believed that a career in animation in Australia was almost certainly impossible and set his sights instead on zoo-keeping, among other things.

"It wasn't until I did a Bachelor of Creative Arts at Melbourne University (which comprises the study of a broad range of arts practices and theory), that I started to experiment with animation as a means of storytelling, making a few short films. In 2002, I found myself studying animation at AIM (the Centre for Animation and Interactive Media, RMIT) and was pleasantly surprised to discover that it actually was possible to be an animator in Australia."

A year of study at RMIT culminated in the production of *Fog Eyes*, a charming story that explores the power of misunderstanding and the absolute logic of children when faced with the fire and brimstone themes of rigid theologies. Set in a hospital ward, the main character is a young girl who has come to have her fogged up eyes fixed. Upon her arrival, she is met by the overly-zealous nun, Sister Enid, who teaches her to pray by the light of a bedside lamp. The child, in her innocence, mistakes the bedside lamp for God and the suicidal patient in the next bed for the devil. What follows is both tragic and comical.

"I see the evil in *Fog Eyes* as being the dogma laid down by Sister Enid, and the antidote being the response of the girl, who acts quite unexpectedly within the set of limitations placed on her. In a sense I think I was interested in exploring whether perceived notions of good and evil really matter when they can be so easily flipped depending on whose point of view or interpretation we are experiencing."

In particular, *Fog Eyes* is testimony to the importance of strong narration in animation. Storytelling is the key principle that drives Koci's work.

"I'm very interested in storytelling and most of my work has been narrative based. Stories come out of odd places, sometimes from the characters, sometimes from strange dreamt-up scenarios or random sketches on paper. I try and work these ideas into a narrative and so usually start with a script, which I will have ideally seen through several drafts until I am happy enough to pick up a pencil and start drawing anything. From my short experience in animation, I've discovered that not clarifying, simplifying and down-right nailing the idea at the script stage will only lead to much pain later on. For *Fog Eyes* I ended up doing three storyboards and three animatics because I hadn't completely resolved all the issues with the script in the first place. This is a very long-winded and sometimes excruciating way to work, as you end up making all the important decisions while you draw. It's much easier to write something over and over again than it is to draw something over and over again!"

Drawing, however, is central to Koci's aesthetic. He says that

drawing is the most natural way to animate and has always felt the need to draw from a young age. Translating this ability into the digital environment, however, brought with it certain consequences. "It took some time to get used to using a wacom tablet to draw directly into graphics packages - at first it feels a bit like drawing with mittens on, as you have to adapt and regain the accuracy of hand-drawn on paper. But losing a bit of control was quite liberating, as it resulted in a much looser style than I would have originally considered, and offered a very enjoyable and seemingly freer way to animate. I think that by loosening up my style by drawing digitally, I was able to animate faster and learn a lot more about the fundamentals of animation in a short period - as opposed to when I was drawing on paper, where it was much harder to regularly see the results of my work and there was much more emphasis on precision because I was used to the accuracy of a pencil... this slows things down. Being able to draw does make the process easier - at the very least, you have to be able to draw the same thing over and over again with relative ease or it would simply take too long! Working in a digital environment is difficult in that you are drawing in a medium which is slightly different to what you are used to, and can be frustrating when you can't get the outcome that you would expect from regular hand drawn. But this just takes getting used to."

Aside from the hand-drawn aesthetics, Koci's work is stylistically difficult to characterize. It exhibits an interest in a quite diverse range of visual styles. Koci himself cites a disparate array of animators as influential.

"The work of Anthony Lucas is particularly inspiring - because of its unique, beautiful, and richly textured look, as well as its visual inventiveness. I also find book illustration a particularly rich source of inspiration, particularly in the realm of characterisation - I love the work of Brian Froud and Alan Lee. Disney was probably my earliest and most lasting influence when it comes to animation. Apart from the squeaky clean content, I was always dazzled by the amount of skill displayed in Disney animations, from beautiful character animation and design to cleverly developed stories (I even forgave them for daring to pervert many of the darker stories they adapted with sickly sweet overtones). While I love and respect the precise and confident style of Disney, in my own work I'm tempted to resist or reject developing my own polished/slick style in favour of the looser and, for me, more refreshing modes. Hence, animation like "South Park" is a revelation because of its simple and entertaining style. I'm kind of afraid of settling in to a particular style as I'd like to be able to produce a diverse range of work and, style-wise, often make it up as I go along. I find the process of discovering a new style or way of animating very exciting."

At just 23, Koci has plenty of time to experiment. His work is starting to attract attention and *Fog Eyes* has been extremely well received playing at the Melbourne International Film Festival 2003, Edinburgh International Film Festival 2003, Ottawa International Student Animation Festival 2003 (October). It is also being currently considered for the Stockholm Film Festival and the Short Shorts Film Festival (Tokyo). He has recently been commissioned to create an animated short for the forthcoming SBS/Film Victoria project, *World Tales*.

When asked about his aspirations as an artist, he acknowledges that, while he may not have to retrain as a zookeeper anytime soon, supporting himself in his chosen profession is challenging.

"It is difficult as there are not many opportunities and lots of talented people to compete with. There seems to be lots of work for people with skills in 3d animation - in TVC and SFX production houses and games development all over the place. 2d animation doesn't seem to offer the same amount of jobs at the moment, so

I'm considering re-training in 3d. I feel lucky to be paid at all to be creating animation in Australia at the moment, which I think is the way most Australian artists feel if they are actually paid to practice their craft. But I don't think its fair, really, that we have to feel that way. We should just expect it!"

Perhaps his dream job of directing animated features from the comfort of his own environmentally friendly theme-park is somewhat further away than he might hope. But I suspect we can expect to see more of Hamish Koci and his craft in the future.

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LISA GYE'S WEBPAGE

www.swin.edu.au/sbs/media/staff/gye/



ANIMATOR : Hamish Koci



ANIMATION : Fog Eyes



WORKSHOP : Lipsyncing Techniques



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