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 to 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.

LISA GYE © 2003

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