

LITTLE NEMO'S PROGRESS

ANIMATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Curator's Acknowledgments

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Exhibition Curator Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd (at far right) with Student Curatorial Team (left to right): Bianca Martucci-Fink, Syd Hammond, Kayla Andrus, and Hope Bailey. Photo taken by Teresa Holder.

I am also exceedingly grateful to the exhibiting artists: LaTurbo Avedon, Lyndon J. Barrois, Andrea Crespo, Daniel Canogar, Daniel Rozin, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Gabrielle Tesfaye. Their work—marked by formal innovation, conceptual complexity, and a tremendous passion for animation—has made this exhibition one of the most exciting and fulfilling curatorial projects of my career. I have also enjoyed the support and encouragement of Dr. Rebecca Brienen, Vennerberg Chair of Art and Head of the OSU Department of Art, Graphic Design, and Art History and the rest of my colleagues in the Department of Art. Additionally, I want to acknowledge OSU student Justin Robertson for providing assistance with video game design and history during the early stages of this project.

INTRODUCTION

The enduring global visibility—on merchandise, in films, in Pop Art and other incarnations in the fine art realm—of Walt Disney Studios' Mickey Mouse cartoon character has continued since his first appearance, nearly 100 years ago, in the animated film called *Steamboat Willie*,

directed by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks.¹ Several factors contribute to Mickey's continuing relevance, including the nostalgic visual associations his image calls forth, a highly recognizable anthropomorphism with human-like characteristics, his high-pitched, overtly dramatic speaking voice and expressive gestures, and a "funny animal" style of dress marked by one striking accessory: a generously scaled pair of white gloves.² As Walt Disney explained, "We didn't want him to have mouse hands, because he was supposed to be more human. So we gave him gloves."³

Mickey's gloves also reference the process of producing an animated image with pen and ink. Renowned animation historian John Canemaker has stated, "At the dawn of animation, certain techniques to make the animation process easier were used."⁴ Animators who employed traditional, hand-drawn animation sought shortcuts that would facilitate this time-intensive process, and they adopted a "rubber hose" design of rounded, simplified curves for gag-centered cartoon characters.⁵ The rubber hose, or "rubber hose and circle" style, was prominent in characters during the 1920s and '30s—often referred to as the "Golden Age of Animation." The simple design eased traditional 2-D animation, aiding in the production of hundreds, or thousands, of drawings of the same character, with minute shifts in movement for each frame.

Yet, above all, Mickey Mouse's gloves evoke American animation's early, intertwined linkage to vaudeville performance. As animation historian Donald Crafton points out, American vaudeville was "a rich and varied institution since the 1880s" that was "in its heyday ...

probably the second-favorite national pastime after baseball. ... Classic animated cartoons referenced stage acts, presentation styles, and character types so much that cartoons became a symbolic repository of past culture and the accrued knowledge of vaudeville."⁶ Early animators like Winsor McCay (c. 1866–71 – 1934), who had already gained fame for his highly popular newspaper comic strips like *Little Nemo*, often performed on the vaudeville stage, presenting "lightning sketches."⁷ Lightning sketches, a form of performance art that originated from variety theater, featured an artist standing before an audience at a large chalkboard or easel, who engaged in rapidly transforming images with a few brief strokes while simultaneously presenting an expressive narrative. These live performances were a significant precursor to animated film, and they became highly popular on vaudeville stages in the late-19th century.

The corporeal presence of Mickey Mouse and other animated characters of the 1920s and '30s—with white gloves, exaggerated facial expressions, elements of gag-based humor, and theatrical makeup—evinces American animation's origins in vaudeville and, most notably, its roots in minstrel traditions on the American stage.⁸ Nicholas Sammond has described how early cartoon characters, such as Bosko, The Talk-Ink-Kid, "didn't borrow from minstrelsy, they joined" its conventions, highlighting aspects of a performed identity that was both primitivizing yet also subversive.⁹ Sammond noted that these cartoon characters "behaved as tricksters, indifferent or even hostile to the social norms of polite society."¹⁰

Front Cover: LaTurbo Avedon, *Frontier Study*, 2018, single-channel projection installation with audio. © LaTurbo Avedon, courtesy of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, animation still by TRANSFER Gallery.

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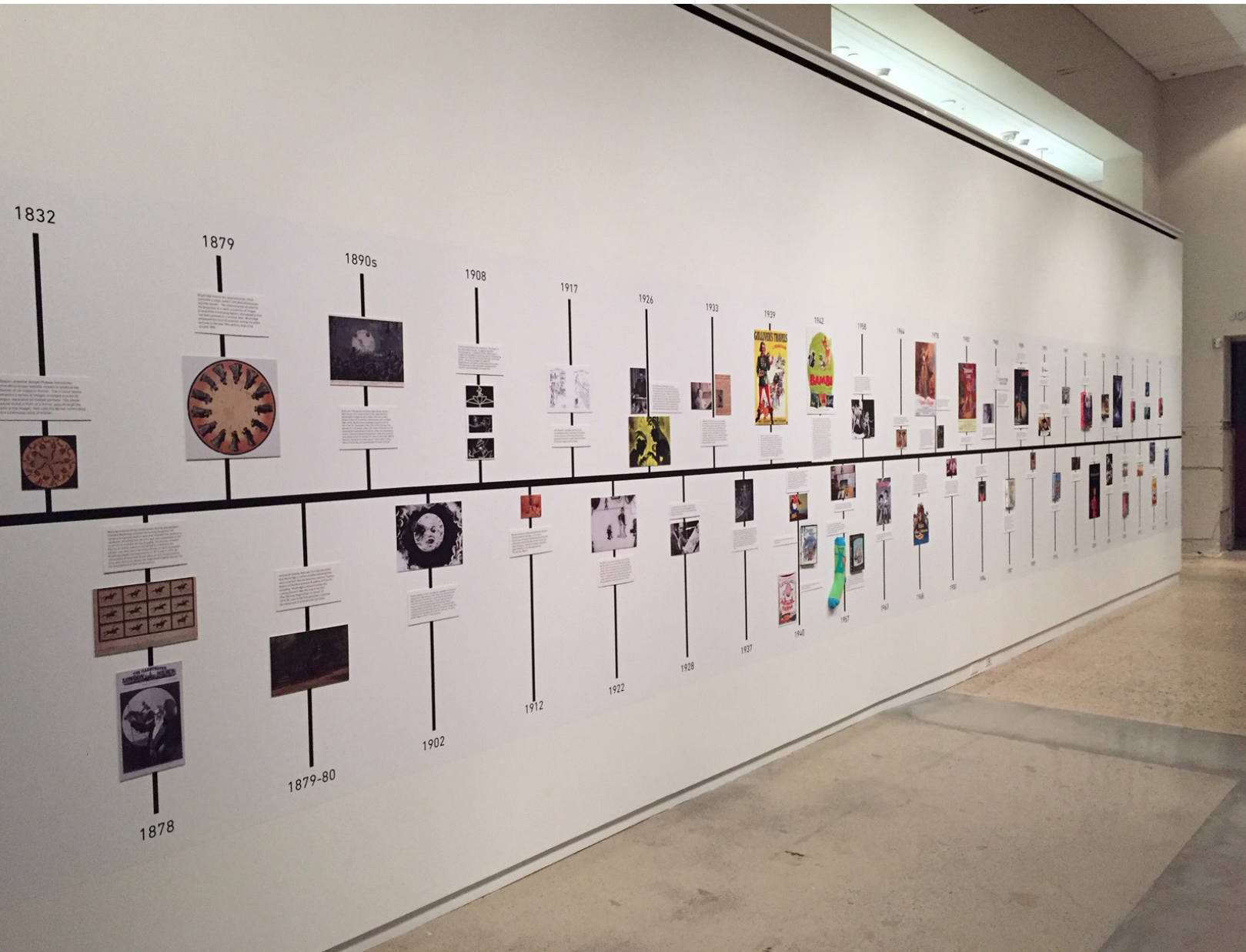


Fig 1: Little Nemo film still, Winsor McCay sketching *Impie, Nemo and Flip* in his first animated film of 1911. Image: History and Art Collection/ Alamy Stock Photo.

This exhibition, entitled *Little Nemo's Progress: Animation and Contemporary Art*, charts the illustrious legacies of early animation and presents digital, interactive, and stop-motion animated works by seven contemporary artists, including selections from the

Carl and Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation Digital Art collection. Featuring works by LaTurbo Avedon, Lyndon J. Barrois, Andrea Crespo, Daniel Canogar, Daniel Rozin, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Gabrielle Tesfaye, the exhibition highlights the performative processes—and creative possibilities—involved in crafting animated spatial environments. It also illuminates a broad range of innovative strategies for conceptualizing, fabricating, and presenting diverse realms of animated space. Recent innovation in digital animation is highlighted here, as is an emphasis on placing these contemporary works in context. Through contemporary

art, selected video games, and interpretive materials, this exhibition briefly charts the journey of animation's earliest beginnings, from 18th-century magic lantern shows, 19th-century zoetropes, and the "lightning sketches" of vaudeville, to *Little Nemo* (Fig. 1), Winsor McCay's first animated film in 1911, and to recent transformative advances in video game design.¹¹ Such moments in video game design include the 2017 release of *Cuphead*, which features hand-drawn animation, a jazz-based soundtrack, and a Surrealist-tinged aesthetic style that reflects 1930s animation of the Disney and Fleischer Brothers studios.¹²

“MOVING COMICS”: EARLY ANIMATION

Winsor McCay is best known for his innovative experimentation with his newspaper comic strips as well as with his animated works. His full-page, weekly *Little Nemo in Slumberland* strip,

was presented in *The New York Herald* from 1905 to 1911, and then, renamed *In the Land of Wonderful Dreams*, it ran in William Randolph Hearst's *New York American* from 1911 to 1914. The comics featured a young boy's dreamtime adventures and experimented with strip panel size and placement, elaborate architectural details, and variance in the scale of individuals and objects. Its aesthetics reflected Art Nouveau style and evinced a circus or World's Fair-like environment. McCay's pioneering first film, *Little Nemo*, drew from his earlier strip and was a melding of live-action and animation. The film was also called *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and his Moving Comics*. Its narrative includes a live-action section in which McCay bets a gathering of colleagues that he will be able to make drawings that move. He then proceeds to produce more than 4,000 drawings on rice paper in one month, animating the characters as their bodies stretch and move in realistic gestures, then with distorting, funhouse mirror-type effects, thus winning the bet. From 1911 through 1921, McCay produced ten animated films, including the acclaimed *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). *Gertie* features segments that include McCay instructing the dinosaur to perform various circus "tricks," all while revealing a form of "personality animation," in this case reflecting a dinosaur whose disposition is in equal parts beguiling, playful, and mischievous. The animated portions of the film were incorporated into McCay's vaudeville performances, again highlighting the inextricable relationship between early animation and theatrical entertainment.

Contemporary artists have often referenced the early beginnings of animation. Lyndon J. Barrois's *Black Jockey Praxinoscope* (Fig. 2) engages with the early history of animation in its form: a spinning, cylindrical drum that was invented in late-19th century France by Charles-Émile Reynaud. Barrois's work also references the experiments of British photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), who achieved increasing recognition for his motion photography studies that revealed how a racehorse's legs were all suspended in the air for a brief moment during its gallop. *Black Jockey* and Barrois's video, *They Were the First to Ride*, narrate the history of the eleven African American jockeys who won the Kentucky Derby from 1875 to 1902. In many ways, Barrois's work exemplifies a documentation, or migration, of ideas regarding the history of animation, while simultaneously highlighting the medium's tremendous potential for world-making through technological innovation.

LaTurbo Avedon's 2018 *Frontier Study* (Fig. 3) also references early animation. It features a digitally rendered landscape, examining the simulation of nature while simultaneously evoking Eadweard Muybridge's late 19th-century motion studies. Working primarily in the United States, British photographer Muybridge began his experiments in 1872. His process entailed the use of twelve cameras, connected by tripwire to racehorses' legs and capturing twelve photos in rapid succession. In 1878, Muybridge successfully proved that at one point during its gallop, all four of a horse's hooves were aloft. Paving the way for the development of motion pictures, Muybridge's experiments are critical to the history of early animation, thus inspiring Avedon's *Frontier Study*.



Fig 2: Lyndon J. Barrois, *Black Jockeys Praxinoscope*, Chewing gum wrappers, ink, acrylic, watercolor, grass mat, sponge, oil pastel, Lucite rods, copper pot, glass mirrors, 12" x 12" x 15". Courtesy of the artist.

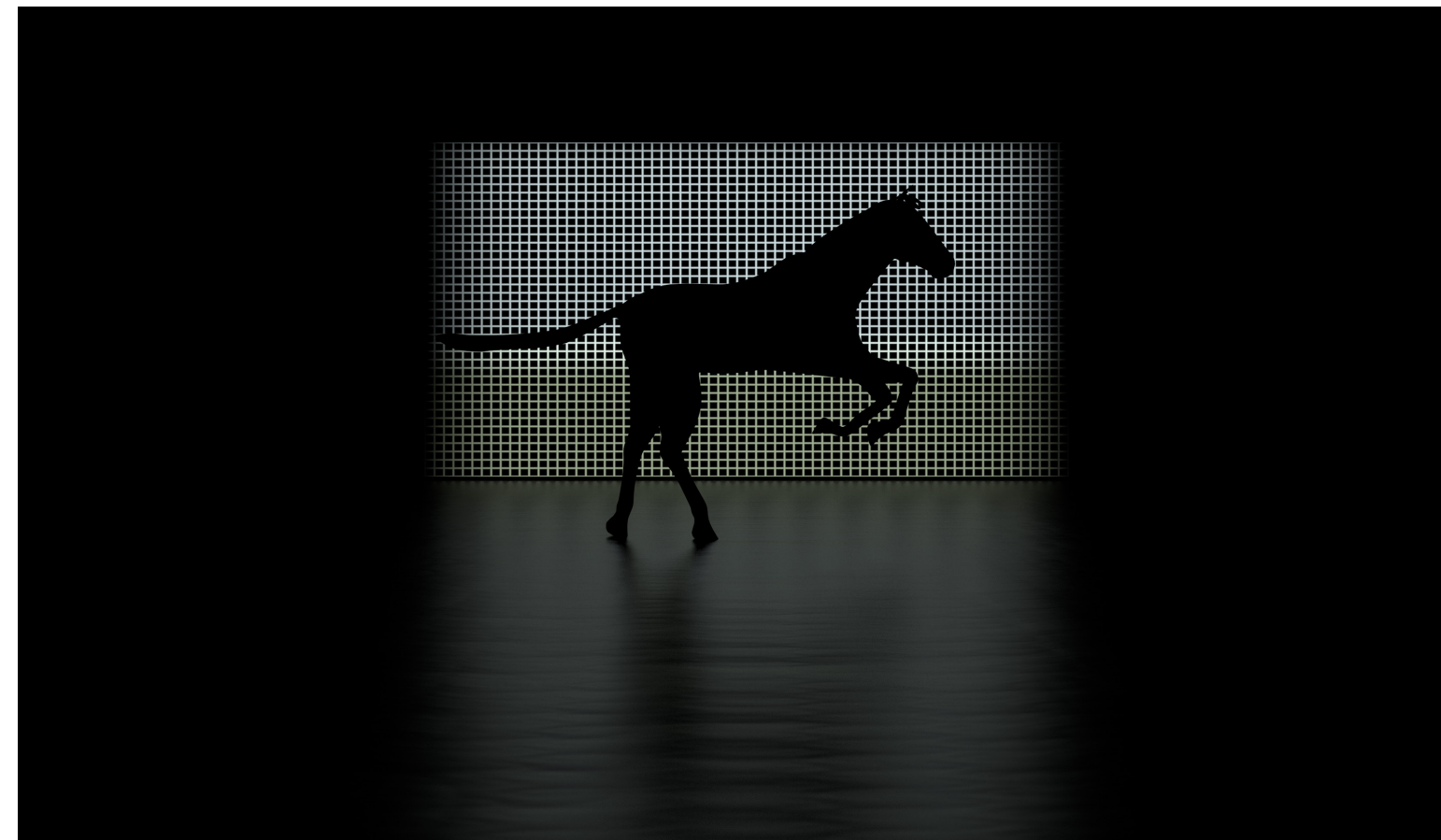
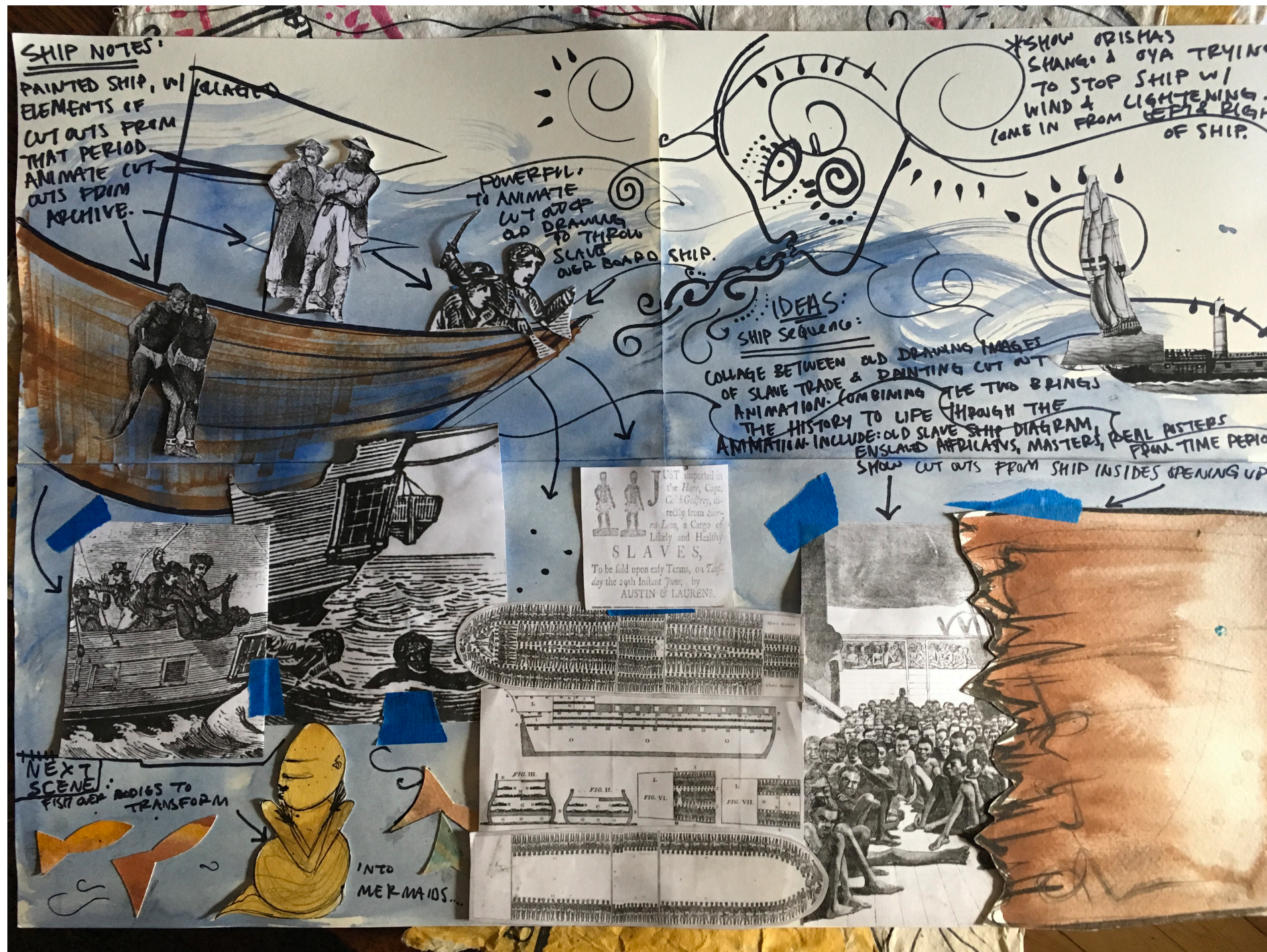


Fig 3: LaTurbo Avedon, *Frontier Study*, 2018, single-channel projection installation with audio. © LaTurbo Avedon, courtesy of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, animation still by TRANSFER Gallery.

Fig 4: Gabrielle Tesfaye, *Ship prep collage #2 for The Water Will Carry Us Home*, February, 2018, 23" x 16", ink, watercolor, and collage on paper. Courtesy of the artist.



PROCESSES STOP-MOTION ANIMATION

This exhibition also highlights animation processes like stop-motion—a broad range of practices focusing on the frame-by-frame motion of figures, such as puppets, clay figures, and paper cutouts, that are then modified

through form, gestures, and poses or positions for animated works.¹³ Lyndon J. Barrois's works, including *They Were the First to Ride*, are produced through his signature process: traditional stop-motion techniques, made unique through the artist's meticulous construction of miniature, painted figures comprised of Wrigley's chewing-gum wrappers, and shot using iPhones and the Stop Motion studio app.

Gabrielle Tesfaye's video entitled *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018) employs puppetry, stop-motion animation, and live action in a narrative focused on the Middle Passage. In Tesfaye's video, a group of living enslaved Africans have been thrown overboard by a ship captain (a common practice resulting from illness, or water shortages, coupled with a general disregard for African lives, as well as a strategy for claiming greater insurance compensation). The narrative continues in the ocean, where the traumatized individuals encounter a series of Yoruba orishas (deities) such as Yemaya (or Yemoja), goddess of rivers, oceans and seas, and mermaids, benevolent beings that ultimately provide a form of spiritual salvation. Highlighting animation processes, *Little Nemo's Progress* includes Tesfaye's *Ship prep collage #2* (Fig. 4) for *The Water Will Carry Us Home* and a storyboard, a graphic rendering that reveals the sequence of scenes as consecutive sketches, and enables animators to strategically plan the course of a narrative and the compositional arrangement of scenes.



INTERACTIVE ANIMATION

Daniel Rozin's 2013 work *Mirror No. 12* (Fig. 5) exhibits an interactive digital projection that transforms live images of viewers into a digital animation,

Fig 5: Daniel Rozin, *Mirror No. 12*, 2013, video camera, custom software, computer, projector, and wood mount. © Daniel Rozin, courtesy of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, photo by John Berens.

an impressionistic or painterly illusion of an animated painting. Rozin developed imaging software for this work that manipulates a set number of straight lines, shifting position in an incessant attempt to mimic the features, contours, and other details of a momentary scene. Significantly, the projected image is framed by an oval form that references a mounted mirror, formal portraiture, and/or the idea of surveillance through a peephole.

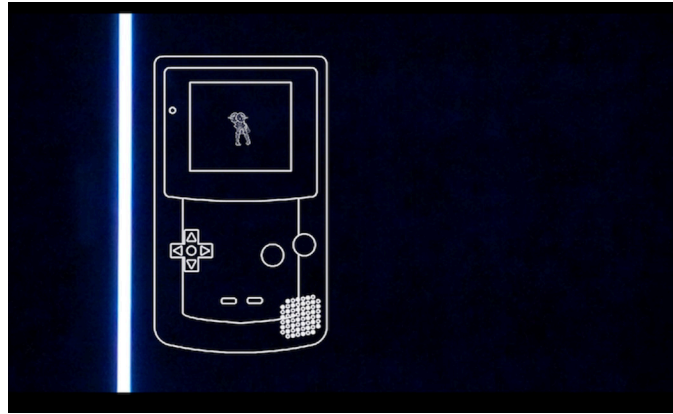


DIGITAL ANIMATION

Emerging in the mid-20th century, digital or 3-D animation has been increasingly employed in advertising, feature films, video games, and in contemporary artists' work.

Daniel Canogar's *Rise/Times Square, July 2014* (Fig. 6) is a generative animation that employs an algorithm of 1,200 recorded images of writhing individuals. The diverse corporeal forms and crawling movements of participants were captured from a public performance that took place from July 24–27th, 2014, in Times Square, New York City. Passersby were invited to move forward, through an inching or dragging motion on their hands and knees, along a large-scaled, green-screen surface area. Their movements were recorded from above using a video camera, culminating in a vibrant, action-fueled abstraction that features incessantly evolving figures advancing upwards while engaging with themes of empowerment, upward mobility, and revolutionary social protest.¹⁴

Fig 6: Daniel Canogar, *Rise / Times Square, July 2014*, 2015, high resolution screen display, generative animation, and computer. © Daniel Canogar, courtesy of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, photo by Jamie Stukenberg.



This exhibition also includes Andrea Crespo's *parabiosis: neurolibidinal induction complex 2.2*, 2015 (Fig. 7), a digital animation, featuring Japanese manga-inspired drawings, medical charts, and an Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) light that engages with gendered identity in online communities.

EMDR, a psychotherapy treatment that was initially developed to ease the feelings of anxiety resulting from traumatic memories, has been used to address post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Crespo's projected installation positions the viewer in a womb-like space that evokes the intimacies, potential uneasiness, and self-examination involved in both art-based experiences and in psychiatric examination, diagnosis, and therapeutic strategies. *parabiosis* is both mesmerizing and unsettling, due to an intermittent, high-pitched transmission signal; a darkened, cosmos-like atmosphere; a piercing stream of light that appears to scan the viewer; the appearance of floating, manga-inspired characters; and streams of text, evoking the ominous potential of clinical diagnosis through medical data and terminology, and therapeutic verbal inducements. *parabiosis* is part of a series of works by Crespo grouped under the title "sis," that examines "unusual forms of identity and sexuality," particularly in the context of online interactions. The two-headed, manga-inspired characters, named Celinde and Cynthia, are based on hentai, a term referring to perversion or abnormality, and defined in English as an overtly

sexualized form of Japanese manga and anime.¹⁵

Little Nemo's Progress also includes Jennifer Steinkamp's 2013 work *Bouquet 1* (Fig. 8), a mural-scaled installation featuring "a bouquet of trees," as described by the artist in a 2017 lecture. A virtual bouquet of flowering tree branches, the work transforms the notion of still-life painting through its monumental scale, dynamic bursts of color, and teeming environment of mesmerizing natural (and digitally enhanced) splendor. The artist produced the work through combining a selection of efflorescent tree branches into a single bouquet. Steinkamp's installations often simulate the billowing movement of trees, flowers, and shimmery fabrics through digital processes. In their stunning configurations of scale, texture, and undulating movement, and real and illusionistic space, the site-specific projections often engage with time-based themes, such as seasonal or life cycles and environmental concerns. Steinkamp employs 3-D computer animation and new media to produce lush, seductive video installations that animate and expand architectural spaces, examine notions of the sublime in painting traditions, and blur the boundaries marking real and illusionistic space.

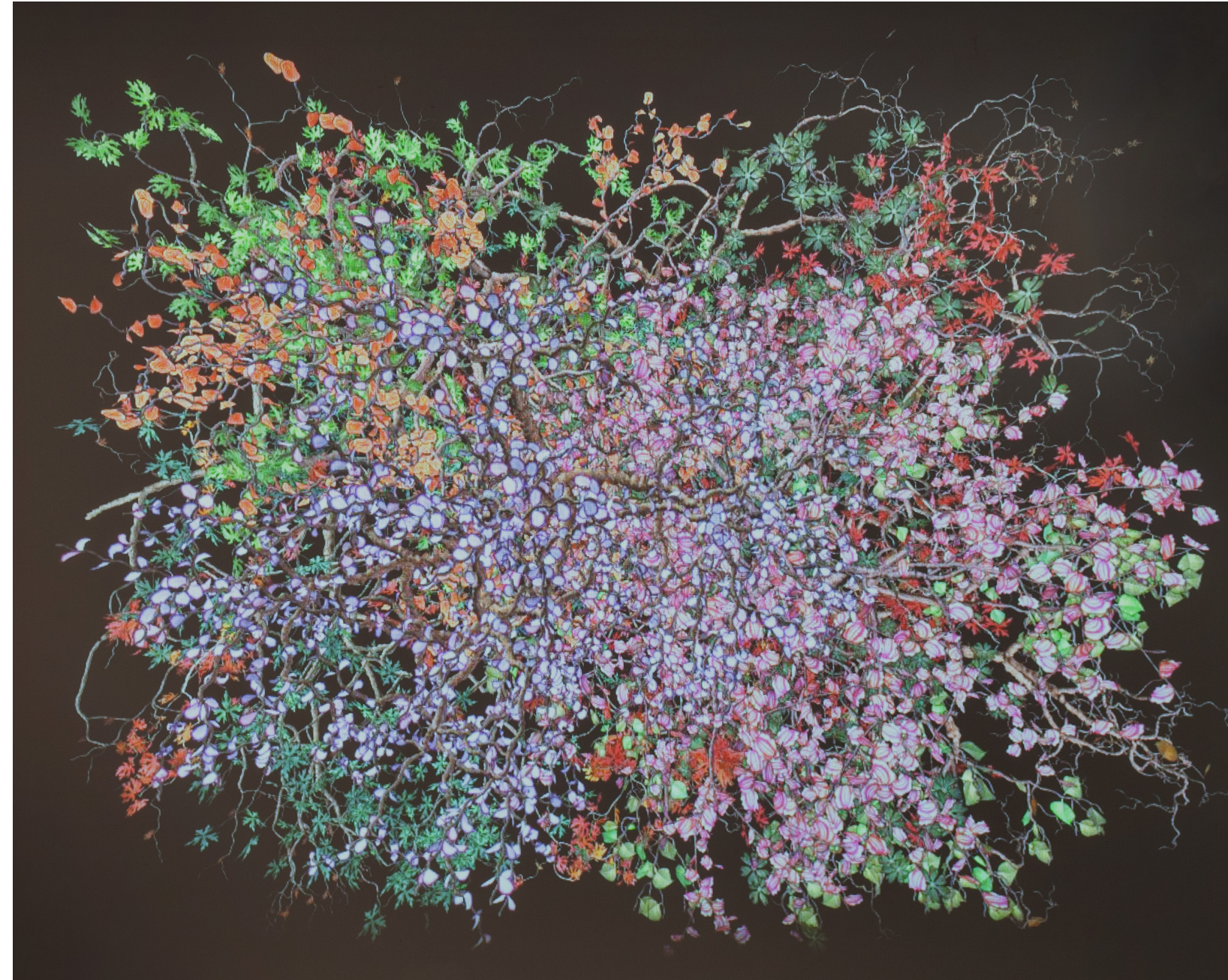


Fig 7: Andrea Crespo, *parabiosis: neurolibidinal induction complex 2.2*, 2015, digital video. Background audio sampled from data.vortex by Ryoji Ikeda. © Andrea Crespo, courtesy of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation, photo by Hester Gallery.

Fig 8: Jennifer Steinkamp, *Bouquet 1*, 2013, computer-generated animation. © Jennifer Steinkamp, courtesy of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation, photo by Joseph Rynkiewicz.

Fig 9: Gabrielle Tesfaye, *Papa Legba*, 2018, paper puppet, 22" x 30". Courtesy of the artist.



Fig 10: Lyndon J. Barrois, *Futballet*, 2018, Video and mixed media installation with chewing gum wrapper figures, wire, grass mat, and fish cord, on pedestal, 38" x 50" x 7". Courtesy of the artist.



This exhibition presents contemporary artists' uses of animation for exploring themes such as constructed and/or performed identity, as in Crespo's work, and experiments with sensory stimulation, as seen in Avedon, Crespo, and Steinkamp's images.

Other themes of contemporary relevance include engagement with issues of diaspora and migration, as seen in Tesfaye's representation of Papa Legba (Fig. 9) in puppet form. The figure appears in Tesfaye's film, *The Water will Carry Us Home*. In Haitian vodou (or vodun), derived from belief systems of the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria (relating to the deity Eshu Elegba) and the Fon from Benin (formerly Dahomey) in West Africa, Papa Legba is often represented as an elderly man, who functions as a trickster. A guiding force who challenges humankind to question moral and spiritual decisions, particularly during a crossroads or critical juncture in a life's journey, Papa Legba is associated with comedic wit and sexuality, and he is the only being that serves as an intermediary between the loa (spirits) and the living.¹⁶

Also included in the exhibition are references to scenes of revolutionary mass demonstration, as evoked in Canogar's *Rise*, and reimagined art historical genres, tropes, styles, and movements, including still-life and landscape traditions, as seen in Jennifer Steinkamp's installation. A focus on animated narrative is at play in Barrois's *Futballet* (Fig. 10), an installation that re-enacts pivotal moments in World Cup soccer history, while his *Prizefighter* video (2018) centers on the life of the legendary boxer Jack Johnson (1878–1946), who became the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion and held the title from 1908–15. The video recreates Johnson's 1910 "Fight of the Century" with Jim Jefferies, known as "The Great White Hope," and it concludes

with Johnson's death in a car wreck, which occurred after he had raced away from a roadside diner that refused to serve him, a blatant act of racial discrimination. Also included is Barrois's *Ta-Nehisi Coates: Dreams of a Father* (2018), an animated rendering of a published Topic.com interview with the MacArthur Genius Award-winning author and journalist Coates that documents his relationship with his father.

The broad range of these works—conceptually, thematically, aesthetically, and in terms of their realms of presentation and distribution networks—evokes animation scholar Suzanne Buchan's conception of a "pervasive animation" that increasingly informs contemporary art installations, film, video games, advertising, and other forms of global visual culture.¹⁷ Together, the images assembled here reveal animation's continuing relevance—its enduring sense of magic, its blurring of boundaries between art defined as "high" and "low," and its limitless potential for world-making through technological exploration and performative possibility.

—Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, PhD, Exhibition Curator and Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History Oklahoma State University

ENDNOTES

¹ The Mickey Mouse character was introduced in a black-and-white film entitled *Steamboat Willie* (1928), Disney's first sound film and the first cartoon produced with synchronized sound.

² "Funny animal" cartoons feature anthropomorphized characters, and prominent examples include Krazy Kat, Felix the Cat, Tom and Jerry, and Woody Woodpecker.

³ See Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

⁴ See Estelle Caswell, John Canemaker, and Gina Barton, *Why Cartoon Characters Wear Gloves*, Vox video (2017) and Estelle Caswell, *Why Cartoon Characters Wear Gloves*, Vox.com, Feb. 2, 2017.

⁵ The "rubber hose" style has been largely credited to writer, animator, and director Bill Nolan (1894–1954). For additional details regarding "rubber hose" aesthetics and history, see Gordon B. Arnold, *Animation and the American Imagination: A Brief History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016).

⁶ Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 101–102.

⁷ For a comprehensive overview of McCay's life and career and the sole existent biography on the artist, see John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay: His Life and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005).

⁸ See Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹ Sammond, *Birth*, 18.

¹⁰ Sammond, *Birth*, 28.

¹¹ For a global history of animation, see Maureen Furniss, *A New History of Animation* (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 2016). For more US-centered animation histories and theoretical examinations, see Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) and J. P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

¹² *Cuphead* was produced by Studio MDHR. Other key moments in video game design history include the 1983 release of the highly popular *Dragon's Lair*, one of the first hand-drawn video games (animated by Disney veteran Don Bluth); the 2006 introduction of the critically acclaimed action-adventure video game *Okami*, produced for Sony PlayStation 2 and known for its Sumi-e ink art style and compelling narrative of a Japanese sun goddess who assumes the form of a legendary white wolf; the 2011 release of *Minecraft*, a sandbox construction video game developed by Swedish game developer Markus Persson, marked by a Lego-like blocky style; and the 2012 release of *Journey*, an award-winning adventure video game presented by thatgamecompany, which is known for its visually striking concept art (highlighted in an accompanying hardcover book) and simplified but compelling gameplay.

¹³ For further details on the history of stop-motion animation, see Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *A Century of Stop-Motion Animation, from Mèliès to Aardman* (London: Aurum Press, 2008).

¹⁴ The vibrant animated footage in *Rise* was initially presented in Times Square as a multichannel, three-minute video installation called *Storming Times Square* in September 2014. The project was part of the "Midnight Moment," a program that presented synchronized, innovative creative content on LED billboards throughout the bustling commercial and entertainment intersection, known for its Broadway theatres and flashing billboards.

¹⁵ In a 2017 interview, Crespo noted that various images included in the video were "traced directly from the computer screen using tracing paper," and then scanned in.

¹⁶ Papa Legba is also a guardian of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. In Haitian vodun, he is often represented as an elderly man with a cane and wide-brimmed straw hat, smoking a pipe. For additional details on the Papa Legba figure, see Donald J. Consentino, "Who is that fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 100, no. 397 (July–September 1987): 261–75, and George Chemeche, Vagner Goncalves da Silva, and Donald J. Consentino, *Eshu: The Divine Trickster* (New York: Antique Collectors Club, 2013).

¹⁷ Suzanne Buchan, ed., *Pervasive Animation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).