

THE ANIMATED FILMS OF HELEN HILL: THE HOUSE OF SWEET MAGIC

Curatorial essay by Erin Oakes and Will Roberts to accompany a screening of the work of the late animator Helen Hill on December 5, 2009

Helen Hill's arrival in Halifax in 1995 was a pivotal moment in the Halifax film scene. To be sure, she did not arrive in a city devoid of filmmakers; there was a well-established and fiercely determined community that dated back to the 1970's. Helen was an infectious breath of fresh air whose joie-de-vivre and belief that anyone can make a film helped to revitalize the scene. After settling in, it didn't take long before she recruited a new generation of guerilla filmmakers to her DIY army.

Far, far away from Hollywood, Halifax and Helen were a good match. Isolated and economically challenged East Coast filmmakers were traditionally do-it-yourself by necessity. Helen not only shared a scrappy approach to filmmaking she full-on embraced it as her preferred mode of making art. That belief was picked up, digested and re-interpreted in turn by the new crop of filmmakers popping up in Halifax at that time.

As anyone who knew Helen can attest she was a larger-than-life character, albeit in a quaint and very polite kind of way. Her homespun charm is readily apparent in all of her works; harbingers of the lo-fi aesthetic long before DIY became chic. Eclectic, inventive and unhampered by convention, her films are noteworthy for their inspired variety. She employed an amazing range of styles and material techniques that included traditional animations, cutouts, pixilation and live action.

Helen was a great lover of all things old-fashioned, and she brought that to her approach to media arts. She worked almost exclusively in film and in later works completed as much of the filmmaking process herself as possible, scratching, drawing on and hand processing film.

A great believer that people from all walks of life should be able to tell their own stories through filmmaking, Helen incorporated this philosophy into everything she made. It is reflected in the unabashedly personal diffraction of the lens through which her stories took form, as well as in the simple techniques and materials she used. Using things like construction paper, markers and felt tip

pens Helen created films that proved filmmaking could be done at home with everyday items, turning what is often understood to be a “technology” into a handcrafted art rooted shamelessly in the heart and not a lab. She eschewed hi-tech gadgets and expensive processes, choosing instead to craft intimate films instilled with genuine wonder at the magic of filmmaking.

Helen spread her populist message as an instructor at NS College of Art & Design and the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative where she taught workshops in hands-on and experimental animation, but her impact spread far beyond the traditional filmmaking community. She had a way of becoming a subtle but potent guiding force, and wherever she and her family went, roots quickly spread into the surrounding neighborhood and into the lives of those around her. You didn’t need to be enrolled in an institute of higher learning or be a member of an artist-run centre to learn from Helen. You could be a friend, a neighbor or someone she met in a café. Helen was happy to invite you into the home she shared with her husband Paul to teach you some filmmaking with no more fuss and no less love than baking some cookies.

The corpus of Helen Hill’s work is almost impossible to assess outside the aura of her personality. The intensely intimate nature of her practice as an artist intuitively determined her methods and manner to a degree associated most commonly with naïve, folk or outsider art. Despite being often noted as a significant factor, or even a turning point in the development of several filmmakers’ and students’ careers, little has been written in any critical context to position her work as part of any discourse of the medium. Many artists develop themes and context for work derived from “personal” references, yet such attempts, while not disingenuous, are frequently either contrived or become disengaged from the personal through the intellectualizing or critical reflection involved in the artist’s creative process. Helen however, shot true and straight from the heart in a manner which almost resists critical reflection; the context was Helen herself and her way of being in the world, and in turn the context became those individuals who adopted her intuitive strategies.

Many of Hill’s students identify her as a significant influence. During her time in Halifax she taught and inspired many filmmakers, contributing much of the momentum still seen in the active community of animators and hands-on filmmakers today. Many like Heather Harkins (*The 8 Husbands of Zsa Zsa Gabor*), Becka Barker (*Assembled*), Siloen Daley (*Lets Op Filmen*, *Olive Prepares*) and Amy Lockhart (*WASPS*), among others, have themselves become established within the Canadian film community or internationally, won awards and become teachers.

The idea that filmmaking is a hand-made craft or skill originates with the first inventors of light sensitive materials who experimented widely in unstandardized chemical hocus-pocus. In the 1800's even potions derived from flower petals were tried for light sensitivity, since after all, flowers open to the sun, a line of enquiry which would likely have appealed to Helen. Despite the rise of digital technologies, it remains possible to subscribe to newsletters which will tell you useful things like how to process film with coffee and vitamin C (yes it works).

Experimental filmmakers like Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage or Marie Menken for example, are part of a genre still described today as experimental, but they represent a response, or sometimes resistance, to what may be called mainstream cinematic practices and industries - so in this relationship are themselves integral to the broad scope of film history. Filmmaking of the kind found in Helen Hill's oeuvre, which relies on DIY or hand-made techniques, exists in a somewhat separated tradition, responding, or more accurately, driven by, the intuitive expressions of the artist. In this tradition, engagement with the larger world of cinema, and its critical discourse and creative mores, is incidental when it occurs at all. In a sense it may be illuminating, for a moment, to understand Hill's films as outside the experimental genre.

Helen never ceased spreading the good word about filmmaking. The conveyance of this message culminated in the creation of two well known instructional pieces; the film *Madame Winger Makes a Film* and the widely used book *Recipes for Disaster*, which turns up at film workshops as far a field as India. *Madame Winger* is an animated how-to film hosted by, of course, the eponymous *Madame Winger*. The film advises the audience that, as long as there are good ideas people will find ways to make films with any and all materials available to them. *Recipes for Disaster* was a collaborative effort in which Helen collected handcrafted film recipes from fellow filmmakers.

As a social activist Helen was well aware that the world could be a bad place but in her films she seemed compelled to celebrate the things that gave her life meaning. The subject matter of her films is made up of the people, places and things she treasured; amongst them her husband (*Your New Pig is Down the Road*), Halifax (*Bohemian Town*) and her beloved cotton candy machine (*The Worlds Smallest Fair*). Her clear and engaging presence can be felt in all her work, as well as an implicit and warm invitation to join in the sheer enjoyment of it, and the life from which it was drawn. In Helen's

work the medium really is the message: you too can make a film (probably with stuff in your fridge and bathroom).

About Erin Oakes

Erin Oakes is a Halifax-based media arts programmer and filmmaker. Erin programs for Monday Night Movies and Atlantic Film Festival, as well as curating independently. As the former Programs Coordinator for the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative, Erin was the supervising producer of over thirty short films, ranging from experimental to dramatic. In 2006 Erin received a media arts scholarship from the Centre for Art Tapes to complete a short animated film, *The Millennium Heavyweights*. *The Millennium Heavyweights* is part of a larger documentary film production Erin hopes to complete in 2010.