

# The Red Book

By Holly Willis

The chimeric, nocturnal stories crafted by artist Janie Geiser in a collection of hand-made animated short films that span more than two decades tend to slip through the sieve of consciousness, eluding the screens of logic and coherence. They find refuge instead in the mysterious chambers of desire, memory, and identity inside us all. This characterization is no less true for one of the artist's earliest films, "The Red Book," from 1994, which juxtaposes a collection of systems for understanding and explaining the world – language, measurement, identification – with the lived experience of confusion and evanescence embodied by a woman trying to find clarity. The film, an exquisite cut-out animation confined to a color palette of red, white, black, and grey, and less than 12 minutes in length, communicates the slipperiness of being and knowing; it sifts through themes of memory and femininity; and it sets the stage for a robust body of work to follow that will continue to explore this rich territory across many more films.

Geiser, who currently lives in Los Angeles and is a faculty member in the School of Theater at California Institute for the Arts, began her creative practice in the early 1990s in New York City. Her first film projects were designed to integrate with her live performances and installations, but her subsequent films are critically acclaimed stand-alone projects. While Geiser has been recognized as a major artist within this context of experimental cinema, she is equally well-known for her work in avant-garde performance and puppetry, and has recently developed a series of riveting, live, puppet-based performance events that include film projection to craft rich, mediated experiences that comment on our contemporary experience inhabiting a world hovering between the virtual and the real.

Geiser's very first films, made in the early 1990s, consisted primarily of footage of live puppet scenes that Geiser shot using a camera rented from the Millennium Film Workshop in New York. Thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship, Geiser was able to purchase her own Bolex 16mm camera, and the ability to set up a long-term animation project dramatically altered her filmmaking practice from that point forward. She had been hoping to make a frame-by-frame stop motion animation for some time, partly to experiment with a manner of working that was more intimate, solitary, and personal than her larger-scale



*An image from this animated film depicts a woman grappling with the inconstancy of memory and identity. Courtesy Janie Geiser.*

puppetry projects, but also to more closely represent the images in her imagination. "The Red Book," then, was Geiser's first film employing her own camera, which in turn allowed her to set up the project, and then work at her own pace, frame by frame, for as long as she wanted.

"The Red Book" opens in the dark with only the sound of crickets at night. The title appears, in red, and then a hand appears and begins to write; several more hands appear from different sides of the screen, each helping to inscribe more marks, but the writing appears to be a set of incomprehensible hieroglyphics. Women's voices begin to chant, and then we see another hand, on the left side, maneuvering the cut-out figure of a naked woman. The hand uses a triangle, and then another hand writes a few words. Faces in profile appear, then a house, and some architectural drawings with more attempts at measurement. A wind begins to blow, and the attempts to measure, assess, and know are disrupted by the visual confusion of the wind and the layering of images on top of each other in a topsy-turvy chaos.

Geiser explains that the film's initial inspiration was a book titled "The Man With a Shattered World" by H.R. Luria; it tells of someone who loses his memory, but uses writing to aid recollection; working carefully, he rebuilds his past sentence by sentence, across more than two decades to recount his life story. Geiser was intrigued by this tale, and its implications regarding the essential mutability of narrative, memory, and identity. Using her background as a visual artist and painter, Geiser began making a series of painted drawings, using the point of view of a **woman**, but still investigating the core themes of the story, namely

memory and its loss, and the notion of identity in the midst of flux.

These paintings, along with a series of unusual dreams Geiser experienced at the time, in turn became the inspiration for the animated film. In one of the dreams, Geiser joined a group of architects, creating the plans for a building. This dream, with its point of view surveying a drawing board, contributed to the film's particular perspective in which the viewer, too, seems to participate in the design process. Rather than viewing a screen perpendicular to us and at a distance, we instead seem to hover over an animation table, the paper materials that tell the story seemingly right at hand. Like the animator, we experience the ability to reach into the frame and rearrange things at will.

Geiser explained in an interview that this perspective emerged from her working process. "The reason that the film often has the feeling of being somewhat first person, as if it is an extension of my body, is because this is how I approached some of these original painted pages, as if I were this woman." She continues, "In a sense, all that she knows is the present moment, and her own body – the part that she can see, as with all of us – anchors or frames those moments. And this gave the drawings a sense of interiority – it is as if they are being viewed by the person who is seeing these events unfold."

To make the film, Geiser set her camera on a tripod pointed down at the floor. She assembled all of her materials for the project – painted images and collages – and, working from the book, she began to tell the story. However, the production was improvisational; if an idea occurred to Geiser that she liked, she would integrate it. "This way of working was so exciting and so satisfying," she explains. "And it was very internal, like the space of the film itself. It offered a contrast to the work that I was doing in performance, which required many people to operate puppets and technical elements, or even in the earlier films, which also involved puppeteers and lighting assistants. Making the film this way was very much

like the way I worked as a painter, and it was an exciting discovery for me to find that I could work in a time-based form with this kind of immediacy and freedom."

This immediacy and freedom in the filmmaking process illuminate "The Red Book," making it a work in which the unfolding of the character's experience remains strange and unknown rather than familiar and resolved. How will this curious narrative unfurl? As the woman limns the boundaries among the real world and a collection of systems marked across her body, what will she discover? How will she know herself, or come to remember herself? That said, although she is a flat figure inhabiting a paper world in a narrative lacking familiar logic, the character's sense of psychic and somatic division strikes a deeply familiar chord. This paper woman joins many of Geiser's subsequent female figures, who similarly hover between the realms of proper order and a scary but strangely appealing chaos. And this is one of Geiser's gifts, offered from the beginning of her filmmaking practice: she extends an invitation to all of us to join her in an exploration of these hand-crafted realms of the interior in order to understand our own lives, and our own psyches, memories, and identities.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Holly Willis is a faculty member in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, where she also serves as the Chair of the Media Arts + Practice Division, and Director of Academic Programs for the Institute for Multimedia Literacy. Dr. Willis oversees projects and initiatives dedicated to new directions in curriculum, pedagogy and tools for scholars. She serves as co-editor of the International Journal of Learning and Media; she is the co-founder of Filmmaker Magazine, editor of The New Ecology of Things and author of New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image.*