

The Hole

By Greg Cwik

In the 1950s and '60s, John Hubley's experimental animation seemed uncontainable — wildly singular visions that owed more to Hans Hoffman than Max Fleischer. Hubley gave audiences intimate glimpses into the lives of those who were often ignored by major animation studios, and tackled topics such as nuclear war, agnosticism, and social justice. While children hunkered down in front of big, boxy televisions to watch Silly Symphonies, John Hubley was recording his children's voices and using them to create socially-conscious animated films.

Hubley started his career painting backgrounds and layouts for Walt Disney Studios in 1935, when he was 22 years old. He worked on the first classic Disney film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", and acted as art director for "Bambi," "Dumbo" (uncredited), the "Rite of Spring" section of "Fantasia," and "Pinocchio." Of these projects, "Rite of Spring" best hints at the ambitious, idiomatic vision of his personal projects that was percolating just beneath the surface: the harmonious marriage of music and animation, and the lush, boundless backgrounds, and Hubley's penchant for breathing life into nebulous entities. "Rite of Spring" has a massive, cosmic scope, of course; Hubley would scale down these aesthetic peculiarities and funnel them into intimate exposés of quotidian life.

It's wonderfully fitting that John Hubley got his start working for Disney: Hubley, that sly, subversive artist, chipped away at the establishment from within, and his art and his ambitions were the antithesis of Uncle Walt's gargantuan company.

After leaving Disney during the strike of 1941, John Hubley joined the United Productions of America, for whom he created the Oscar-winning "Mr. Magoo." In 1952, Hubley was forced to leave UPA consequent of his blacklisted status. He subsequently founded Storyboard Studios, which acted as an alias, and started turning out wildly popular animated commercials. Though they didn't bear his name in the credits, Hubley's animated ads, such as his famous 1956 "I Want My Maypo," were wholly his own, stamped with his invisible signature; they felt simultaneously out of place within the advertising establishment and, somehow, in some inexplicable way, connected to each other, coursed by a common thread that tethered them to the unnamed artist behind the animation, like episodes of a television anthology.

At the same time Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman



Frame enlargement from the film shows two construction workers discussing society and current events.

and John Coltrane were altering the concept of what jazz could be, John Hubley was altering the concept of what a cartoon could be. Still operating under his Storyboard alias, Hubley began orchestrating more aesthetically complex, narratively opaque projects. He worked in oils, water colors, pen and ink, felt-tip markers; he commingled black-and-white sketches — wiry, emaciated things, like scratches from low-hanging tree branches — and splashes of color, over-saturated, under-saturated, deeply layered and endlessly energetic. Hubley made family-friendly acid trips with delightful liberal leanings while he was black listed during those scary, shrouded years known as McCarthyism. These cartoons are vivid portrayals of a hazy time in American history, when the martini and gray flannel suit were giving way to the counter culture and rock 'n' roll.

The last short he made before his blacklisting, 1951's "Rooty Toot Toot," is the most structurally linear, and thus most well-known of Hubley's shorts. It's the story of two sweethearts, Frankie and Johnny, the former of whom shot the latter dead. There's love, lust, treachery and murder in this ten-minute cartoon, which is notable for its depiction of black characters on the jury in Frankie's trial. Hubley eschews outlines and simply paints their skin color directly onto the backgrounds, leaving the characters in ethereal, opaque shapes. It's not an overt political statement, but the presence of blacks integrated, not assimilated with whites in a court room, as a jury of peers, stands

in stark contrast to, say, "Cinderella," which Disney had released the previous year.

Hubley's shorts offered myriad innovations and detours from established norms: the use of his children's voices in "Moonbird"; the beautiful controlled chaos of "Adventure of an *"; the use of layers to create parallax and depth in "The Tender Game"; the gentle encapsulation of commerce and consumption's Sisyphean cycling in "Urbanissimo," which originally ran paired with Godard's "Weekend" — the list goes on.

Hubley's sense of aesthetic innovation and social consciousness coalesced in his 1962 short, "The Hole," co-produced by his wife Faith. The 15-minute cartoon depicts two blue-collar workers (voiced by jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie and character actor George Matthews, both of whom improvised their dialogue), skulking down in a hole at a construction site as the skeletons of skyscrapers loom above. The short is billed as "an observation," and the free-form conversation — all banal banter that veers from insurance and the government to nuclear weapons and weight loss — lends an air of verisimilitude; even as the ethereal characters drift through Hubley's messy hodgepodge backgrounds, every frame caked in dirt and grime, the short never feels artificial or forced. Six minutes in, as Gillespie is "supposing" about nuclear weapons, Hubley shows us the bombs waiting underground, in holes not unlike the one in which the two men bicker. Matthews refutes each of Gillespie's hypothetical scenarios, saying the men in charge — ghostly-looking splotches adorned with Medals of Honor — have everything

figured out. In the end, an explosive slips off of the rising lift in the construction yard and plummets to the ground, destroying the city. The two men scale the ladder and gaze upon the smoldering ruins. Matthews looks shocked; Gillespie doesn't. The trumpeter descends back into the hole, softly singing: "Now that you gone / You left me / I'm sittin' on top of this world."

Hubley's style evolved over time, organic in its constantly shifting, swaying aesthetic. He portrayed human characters lost in an irrational world that was ill at ease with itself. He channeled Picasso, Klee, and Matisse; and he conjured coteries of aesthetic and philosophical -isms, upon which Uncle Walt would have frowned: modernism, minimalism, postmodernism, deconstructuralism, surrealism, Dadaism — synthesizing them all into potent commentaries on culture and society. John Hubley worked in social realism through artistic abstractionism.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Greg Cwik is the weekend editor at New York Magazine's Vulture. His writing has been featured at Indiewire, The Dissolve, Movie Mezzanine, BrightWall/DarkRoom, and elsewhere. He has a master's in arts journalism from Syracuse University.