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Forget technology, it's traditional media that count at Pixar



EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Pixar: 20 Years of Animation
WHERE: Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Tel: (02) 2595-7656
WHEN: Until Nov. 1. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm and until 8:30pm on Saturdays
ADMISSION: NT\$200
ON THE NET: online.tfam.museum/pixar

After visiting Pixar: 20 Years of Animation, it's easy to imagine a whole generation of Taiwanese youngsters eager to enter the animated film industry when they grow up.

With 650 works on display that cover much of Pixar's output, the exhibit — currently running at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum — goes behind the scenes at the studio, and is organized in three sections: Character, Story and Worlds.

With 22 Academy Awards, four Golden Globes and three Grammys to its name, Pixar is unquestionably an animation powerhouse. Led by creative guru John Lasseter, the film studio's critical acclaim is matched by its commercial success, with each of its 10 feature films grossing an average of US\$200 million. Formed 23 years ago by Apple cofounder Steve Jobs and bought in 2006 by Disney, Pixar continues to earn plaudits from critics and children alike.

The exhibition charts the evolution of Pixar's films and the links between traditional media — sketches, painting and sculpture — and the latest computer technology, while emphasizing the central role that storytelling occupies.

In one section, the meticulous work that goes into developing Pixar's characters is shown, including Jerome Ranft's eight sculpture prototypes of Sullivan from *Monsters, Inc* and Tia Kratter's mixed media color sketches of the monster's fur.

Storyboards predominate in the Story section including Jan Pinkava's for *Geri's Game*, which explores camera angles.

According to the exhibition catalogue, the worlds created by Pixar are either derived from real locations or are new interpretations of genre films. The color scripts from *Ratatouille* brilliantly recreate the architecture of Paris and Monstropolis from *Monsters, Inc* was inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

Pixar curator Elyse Klaidman started the exhibition more than a decade ago.

Taipei Times: How did Pixar: 20 Years of Animation begin life?

Elyse Klaidman: When we moved into a new building in 2000, I asked Ed Catmull [president of Pixar] if I could have a little space that could be a gallery. They gave me a huge space ... to use as a gallery for internal artist exhibitions and I did the show internally with *Monsters, Inc* and it was showing the development of the concept and artwork. And as Pixar grew, I realized there were lots of people in the building who weren't necessarily seeing this artwork.

TT: So the exhibit was almost fully formed before New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) approached you to first mount the show externally?

EK: Not really. We had done a number of exhibits before that point — *Monsters, Nemo*, *The Incredibles* — so there had definitely been some selection process internally.

TFAM's exhibition goes behind the scenes at the world's premier animation studio

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

But we started fresh. When the creators at MoMA came — they came to Pixar maybe four times for two or three days — we just went into a very intensive process explaining to them how the process worked because people have all kinds of preconceived notions of what it is. And then we started showing them ... hundreds of thousands of pieces of art. And then eventually, through this process of explaining our process and looking at the work, we divided it up into Story, Character and World, which are these three main components.

TT: Is it fair to say that the exhibit focuses more on traditional artistic mediums such as painting, pastel and gouache?

EK: Yes, that is fair to say. John Lasseter, who is creative head of Pixar, very much wanted to showcase the artists and the art because when people write about Pixar, they are writing about great films, but they are also writing about the technology and I think it gets lost that really it's artists behind everything. So although at Pixar we are very much a marriage between art and technology — it goes back and forth all the time — this exhibit is really about the traditional art and artists. We've incorporated some media pieces and some very technical pieces into it, but the original focus started there.

TT: When you chose the content, what criteria did you have in mind?

EK: Beauty, the exquisite nature of each one of the pieces. It was not originally a show about the process. People are interested in the process and we've definitely incorporated aspects of the show that help people understand where these artworks fit into the process, but it's really about aesthetics. It's about the line on the page, the interaction of color and beauty.

TT: How long is the filmmaking process?

EK: It's long. It can be anywhere between four and six years. Always at least four years. Frequently longer and sometimes the inception of the idea can happen quite a bit earlier but then not be a project that is not worked on immediately. But five years is roughly what it is.

TT: And what takes up the most time?

EK: The first couple years are primarily story and editorial. So you are working out the story and drawing storyboards and there is a script, which is not all the way developed necessarily, but at least there is a structure to the script. We want to work out as much of that as we can before we go

to the computer phase. So the art process is happening in that first two or three years. As soon as you know what the character is going to look like or you know what the world is supposed to be and once the director has said yes, then the technical side, the computer side, can start.

TT: What about the characters and characterization? Is there, for example, a Sullivan (*Monsters, Inc*) working at Pixar?

EK: I think the most important part about the characters for us is that they are believable, that they have qualities about them that you and I can relate to, that we believe and we care about them. For example, *Monsters, Inc*, that's a world that our artists and storytellers could go anywhere. What are monsters? How do you research that? And they researched it by talking to little kids and asking them what they thought monsters look like or looking at all kinds of books and thinking about their own experiences and really just getting creative and having a lot of fun.

TT: Do children play a role in the filmmaking process?

EK: You know, I think primarily it's the child within us, which pretty much everybody at Pixar has in a very obvious way. We like to have a lot of fun and there are a lot of toys everywhere and I think we are just very much in touch with that part of ourselves. We don't generally go out and test things on kids. I think that example in *Monsters* was a fairly unique one.

TT: What advice, if any, would you give to a youngster who wants to pursue a career in animation? What kinds of skills are required?

EK: I think one of the most important is the ability to collaborate, because what we do is a collaborative art form. A willingness to listen and to hear and to be flexible about what you do because it's not one person just sitting and perfecting something. Live action filmmaking is fundamental to animation as is traditional storytelling, as is drawing and painting and color and all the basic visual skills are really important.

TT: To what extent is the research process an integral part of producing a film that allows audiences to suspend their disbelief?

EK: I think this whole idea of research and authenticity — it's really about making it feel authentic. I think it was in *Finding Nemo* where someone was saying: It is wrong, it doesn't actually work that way that if you get swallowed by a whale you wouldn't be able to go out of the spout. And there was a whole long conversation about it and at the end of the discussion the director said: You know, fish don't talk. Our goal is to tell wonderful stories [and] I think that the little child in all of us is happy to go along with it and happy to believe things that seem ridiculous or incredible if they are authentic, if we make them believable, if it all fits together seamlessly.



Elyse Klaidman, curator of Pixar: 20 Years of Animation.

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This interview has been edited and condensed.