

# Starting At The Beginning

A group of 16 young people from the ages of 12 to 18 were the participants in a recent workshop on animation I conducted. As a teacher the big question that I had to contemplate was how does one teach a subject as vast, complex and one with as long a history as that of animation, in the span of one day. Where should one begin, how should one progress, where could one stop and be able to bring to these minds some sense of this wonderful medium? When there can be no end to the teaching, learning and experience of a medium such as animation what are the essential in-

movement. And this would have to be one that could be created by themselves using only the most basic tools and their minds.

One could, then, only start at the very beginning taking them back to the 1800s when the first experiments in animation were made by inventors first in China and then much later in Europe when the understanding of the persistence of vision which made perceiving animation possible was first articulated. These were the times of the magic lanterns, thaumatropes, zoetropes, phenak-

istoscopes and other endless innovative variations of these visual devices and projection systems. Probably these delightful toys were a part of the natural evolution of animation from the flickering images of shadow puppetry, which in turn evolved from painted narratives far back in human history on fire lit cave walls.

A first step in the workshop was taken by constructing thaumatropes, where two distinct images on two sides came together when this 'turning wonder' was twirled. A fish on one side and the sea on the other, a fish again but now a fish bowl on

the other and then a fish on one side and a plate on the other! The image syntax gained a new semantic and interpretation with each participant choosing to shift the context.

Flip books were then made to get a sense of straight ahead animation where one starts with an image and works upwards page upon page in a stream of consciousness rhythm. Flipping through the pages I found snakes flicking past, shapes morphing one into another,



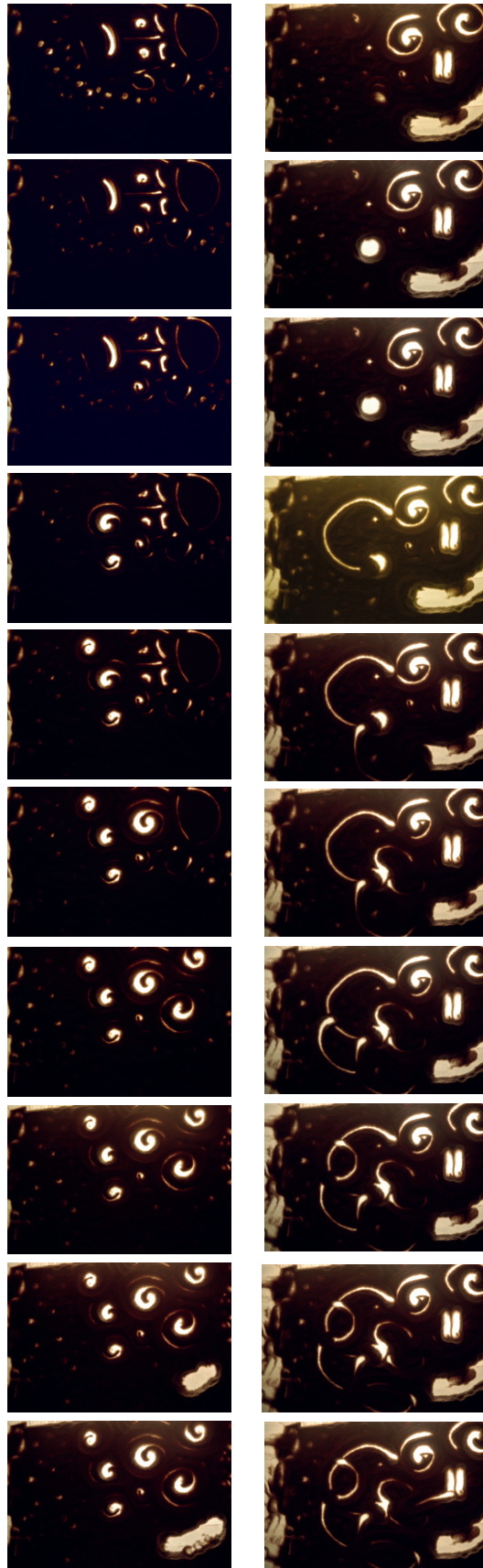
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sights one can pass on and leave them wanting to listen deeper?

Animation to these young people predictably meant cartoons, all were familiar with mainstream feature length and serialized animation and only vaguely with the process involved, most attributing it to 'computers'. The goal then would have to be to broaden their perception to include any image series that is manipulated frame by frame to run in a sequence to articulate the illusion of





cracker bursts, plants growing quickly into trees, all with intuitive timing and energy.

Then came the zoetrope, or 'wheel of life'. A drum moving on a turntable with slits running around it to allow the viewer to peek at the strip of paper running on the inside with a series of drawings on it. It would seem that the sheer magnitude of the exposure to sophisticated animation would deaden the sense of wonderment at this crude home made version to view animation, but the delight was intact, the surprise and the sheer charm of the moving image continues to mesmerize. A plane takes off, retracts its wheels and flies, and then the wheels are back and it lands, only to take off again, and again while the wheel keeps turning. All this in twelve frames by someone all of twelve years old. Then there is the untiring gymnast who does clever and impossible summersaults unendingly. The rose blooms and buds and blooms and the butterfly flits from flower to the same red flower.

The workshop space then took on a dramatic look, all lights were put off, the glow that lit all the faces around the table came from the light box, sand strewn upon its flat surface. A camera lens faced down to capture a series of images etched frame by frame in the sand. In a short span of time all sixteen people had worked the sand with their fingers in a collaborative sand animation clip where a face was pushed and pulled out of shape, changing its identity at the will of the animator.

The 'computer' had successfully been kept out of the way all day and stayed discretely in a dark corner serving quietly to store and composite all the work done that day. The image remained the focus and most importantly as Shagun said, "I was astonished that it uses a lot of brain and hard work for animating something. Its fun making something animate like in flip page, thermotrop, zombotrop or sand animation. It feels good when we see our own hard work coming like a magic. I like animation and understood how cool it is."