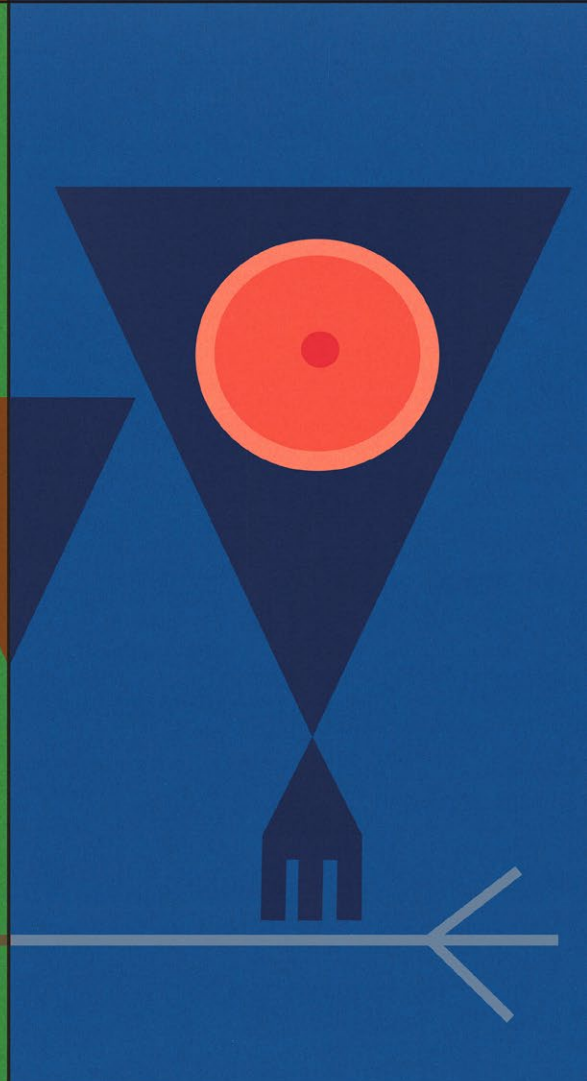



Ottawa International Animation Festival

20–24 September / 2023

Festival international d'animation d'Ottawa


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Dots, Lines, Washes: Animating Ink

by Alla Gadassik

TIMES

Thurs, Sept 21, 11:00am
Arts Court Theatre

Saturday, Sept 23, 1pm
Arts Court Theatre

jeudi 21 sept, 11h00
Cour des arts Théâtre

samedi, 23 Sept, 13h00
Cour des arts Théâtre

One night at the social club, cartoonist Winsor McCay promised a group of fellow artists that he could bring comic strip characters to life with the aid of moving pictures. This fictional boast opens McCay's silent film *Little Nemo* (1911), in which the artist acts out the challenge of drawing four thousand pictures in one month. In a visual gag that underscores this herculean feat, a procession of men delivers huge boxes and barrels labelled 'paper' and 'ink.' As this early cameo suggests, ink was quickly becoming a vital medium for animation. Iconic characters like Betty Boop would soon emerge out of an inkwell, and every cartoon factory would form its own ink-and-paint department.



(INK'S SILVER SCREEN CAMEO IN WINSOR MCCAY'S *LITTLE NEMO*)

More than a century later, ink continues to inspire independent animators long after commercial production has switched to digital tools. *Dots, Lines, Washes* is a collection of animated shorts that showcases the remarkable versatility of this medium. Whether they wield brushes or pens, the artists featured in this program embrace ink as a valued collaborator. Many artists, like Michèle Cournoyer, have turned to the physicality of ink after trying and failing to connect with digital software. Cournoyer's film *Accordion* (2004) explores the fragile intimacy of online relationships, but her portrait of virtual communication is also a testament to the intimate language of ink. Hand-painted lines oscillate between writing and drawing, as words transform into electric wires. Instead of hiding the erratic jitters produced

by ink strokes, *Accordion* allows them to flutter and unfold on paper like secret messages.

The history of ink as a shape-shifting medium of communication can be traced back millennia to China and Egypt. Contemporary animation rendered in ink frequently draws upon the material's rich heritage in calligraphy, penmanship, and illustration. This storied past is honoured in Koji Yamamura's *Polar Bear Bears Boredom* (2021), which takes up the lineage of Japanese emakimono, or illustrated ink scrolls. The film's primary reference is the 12th-century "Chōjū-giga" scroll featuring anthropomorphic animals frolicking by a riverside. While the original scroll has no known accompanying text, Yamamura's film adds playful rhymes to reimagine the scene as an unfolding visit with a community of sea creatures. Semitranslucent undulating lines create the effect of rippling waves, and opaque washes on animal bodies bleed into paper like blurred underwater vision. The film's ink-drawn sequences on paper are digitally layered to produce the effect of a long horizontal scroll. Shifting between analog and digital canvases, as well as between Japanese and English, *Polar Bear Bears Boredom* highlights ink as a medium of translation.

Xi Chen's *A Fly in a Restaurant* (2018) evokes the influential history of Chinese ink wash painting. The film's colours echo traditional brushwork in carbon black ink, as well the cinnabar red used for seals and accents. However, where traditional ink wash painting emphasises the spiritual expressiveness of each stroke, Chen's film returns ink to its earthy origins in soot and grime. Grey washes depict the leaking walls and stained floors of an interior restaurant setting. Dry strokes and forceful dabs evoke the mess of soiled clothing and greasy weapons. The classic layout of a horizontal inked scroll is here folded into a circular panorama, surveilling the dining occupants and shadowy passersby from above. The film's roving eye scans the space across successive revolutions, seeking the elusive fly amid a busy grayscale composition.

The versatility of ink is expressed in the range of forms it can take, depending on what tools and

techniques are used to apply it. A brush, for example, allows ink to spread, splatter, and pool around a surface in minor lakes. Quills and nibs channel watery ink into narrow rivers. With each of these tools, small changes in pressure or release – deliberate or accidental – noticeably alter the width of a line and shape of a wash. In contrast with the brush and the nib, modern pens and markers roll out their ink cargo with economy and precision, forcing a vocabulary of crisp lines. An ink brush can cover a patch in one liquid movement, but a pen requires dozens of tightly packed strokes and zigzagging lines. This contrast is embraced in Ryan Larkin's film *Walking* (1968), which blends brushwork and penwork in a study of urban movement. Fine-tipped markers are used to outline figures and hatch detailed textures of fabric and hair. This more precise linework is complemented by blended ink washes, which establish a moody atmosphere of rainy greys and hazy neons. The film's most inventive sequences embrace the otherwise dreaded qualities of smeared ink to create motion blurs for breakdancing and running bodies.

Honami Yano's *Honekami* (*A Bite of Bone*, 2021) accentuates the detailed precision of ink markers. The film uses semi-translucent paper to blend underlayers shaded in coloured pencil with upper layers dotted by markers using a stippling technique. Adapting a drawing technique for animation, the artist gripped two or more markers together to dot the paper with multicoloured patterns reminiscent of pointillist painting. Once animated, these dotted compositions shimmer and blur across successive

frames, creating an unstable mosaic that reflects the film's interest in slippery childhood memories. The protagonist's early recollections find resonance in the markers' vivid synthetic colours, while the pulsating dotted swarms depict a natural world animated by interconnected particles.

The stippling technique in *Honekami* recalls the sharpest instruments used for ink application – the tattooing needle that pierces skin to deposit pigment, and the engraving burin that incises a plate to prepare it for ink. These pointed tools, which accumulate small dots of ink into shaded compositions, find a match in modern printmaking devices like the screenprinting matrix and the inkjet nozzle. Half-tone ink dots frequently appear in animated collages of print magazines and book illustrations, but Masha Vlasova's *Solar Storm* (2022) boldly applies an inkjet printer to print footage directly onto celluloid film. The pigment-based black ink of Vlasova's inkjet printer grips the surface, while the dye-based colour ink spreads and bleeds. The result is an unruly countdown of cosmic proportions, as spotty solar flares and grainy magnetic fields explode on screen.

Richard Reeves' *Sea Song* (1999) also embraces celluloid film as its canvas, continuing a long tradition of direct animation using India inks. Black emulsion of unexposed film is scraped off its celluloid substrate, and the newly transparent areas are coloured with ink. Elsewhere, clear celluloid strips are painted with inks that splinter and crackle on the hard plastic surface. When the film is rephotographed for



A SHIMMERING MOSAIC MADE WITH INK MARKERS IN HONAMI YANO'S HONEKAMI
(*A BITE OF BONE*)

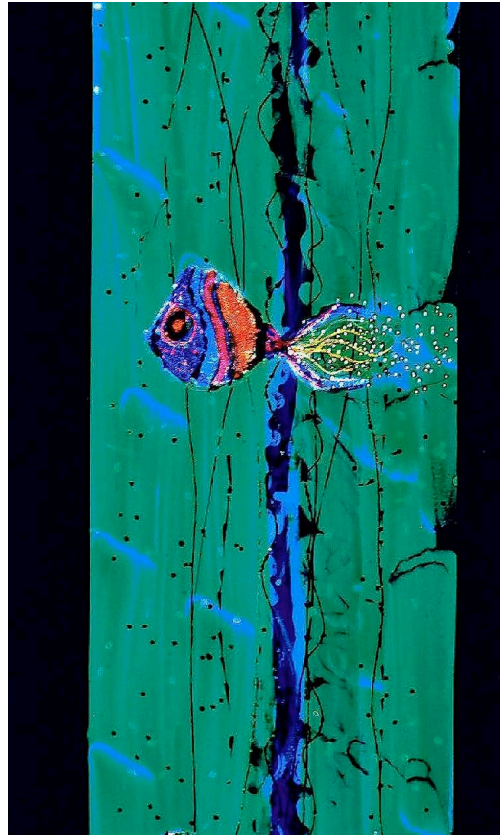
projection, it lights up like stained glass. *Sea Song* embraces the liquidity and translucency of ink to depict an aquatic world filled with quivering tentacled organisms. The film's underwater creatures include mollusks like squids and snails, whose luminous natural inks have been extracted and exploited by humans for centuries. As they wriggle and undulate on screen, the film's inky lines and scratches leak beyond the boundaries of the frame into a parallel optical soundtrack of crashing waves and bird calls.

Traditionally inks are applied to materials that can partly absorb them, such as paper or fabric. The bond between the ink and its surface assures a lasting hold that can transmit information across space and time. In animation, however, frames are scanned or photographed during the filmmaking process, allowing artists to use less reliable surfaces like celluloid. Sofia El Khiyari's *L'Ombre Des Papillons* (*Shadow of the Butterflies*, 2022) finds middle ground between paper and plastic with non-absorbent paper. Painted ink washes converge and intermingle on the surface, but the water evaporates to leave uneven pigment deposits. The ink clumps and crackles unpredictably, and the resulting image appears eroded by time. These sedimented washes are paired with direct impressions of the artist's fingers and lips, endowing the animated figure with a weathered skin.

As a medium, ink must always balance between fluidity and permanence. Inks made for drawing and painting emphasise liquidity, which allows them to travel smoothly through sinuous brushstrokes and vary their opacity or translucency. Inks made for writing and printmaking are valued for their consistency and ability to secure a permanent record. Sketches might start with a pencil, but serious lines are confirmed in ink. These dual qualities of fluidity and permanence invite an approach of controlled improvisation – because once a line is inked, it cannot be undone. Adam Beckett's *Evolution of the Red Star* (1973) and Jake Fried's *Night Vision* (2015) are both striking examples of improvising with ink. Most of *Evolution of the Red Star* is drawn in marker on just six sheets of paper, which are recycled and rephotographed with the aid of an optical printer. The composition begins with simple shapes like stars and squares, but new outlines are added with each cycle to form ripples and radiating doodles. As they accumulate over time and across subsequent reprints, the two-dimensional shapes transform into three-dimensional tunnels and hallucinatory patterns. An equally hypnotic effect is generated in *Night Vision*, which improvises with a ubiquitous pen on a single canvas. Black lines are incrementally added to the composition or covered with liquid white-out,

leaving newly primed areas that are inked once again. As layers of pigment build up, they form an uneven surface of bumps and grooves that creates the appearance of a coarse engraving. Recorded snapshots of the entire process accelerate thousands of minor alterations into a single evolving tapestry.

Dots, Lines, Washes highlights the impact of ink on the history of animation and the creative possibilities of this medium for contemporary artists. Whereas early cartoonists like Winsor McCay animated their characters with fountain pens on towering stacks of paper, subsequent artists expanded the range of tools – embracing everything from the calligraphic brush to the commonplace marker and the industrial printer. The diversity of their techniques and approaches reveals how the process of animation can amplify and transform the material qualities of ink, activating both the medium's fluid openness and its binding permanence.



AN UNDERWATER WORLD OF INKY ORGANISMS IN RICHARD REEVES' DIRECT ANIMATION *SEA SONG*