

On why slowness makes you see things differently



Animator and filmmaker Joseph Brett discusses AI as an opportunity to justify his medium, the shared language of children, and making slow art with high concepts.

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As told to Mercedes Torrendell, 2011 words.

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I'd love to start from the beginning: when you first got the impulse to pursue stop motion animation. What made you think, "I want to create worlds with my hands"?

Stop motion is something I started when I was about seven. My mom borrowed a video camera from the school she worked at, and me and my friend Glenn just started. You couldn't even do proper stills; you had to double-click the record button to take a bit of footage. Back then, it was just that childish thing of, "Well, we can make these blobs move around." Then we went to a craft shop and bought a bar of plasticine, and we were like, "Wow, we can do this." That's what got me into film: the fact that it felt accessible. Even on a tabletop, you could make these things.

Were there specific projects or moments that shaped your trajectory?

I did an art foundation and there was a textiles unit. I remember suddenly becoming fascinated with the tactility of stuff, and that made me start animating paper. I was so into the way that you could create images you could feel. And I realized that was a huge part of animation. I love that you can watch something and go, "I know what that would feel like to touch."

Some projects are just projects, and some projects teach you a little bit more about why you're doing it. For me, that creative process is quite instinctual. A lot of the time you don't really know why you're doing the thing. You just know it feels right. And then sometimes a project will explain itself to you a little bit more, you realize stuff while you're just *doing*.

You use stop motion for horror, documentaries, music videos.. What does working with your hands, and with this slowness, give you creatively?

I was thinking about this: why make work at all? I think it's to be heard. You turn to creative things because you have something that you want to say or communicate, but sometimes speech is not enough. And so we reach for more.

When you're at a table trying to explain something, you'll find yourself grabbing a cup or a pepper and you go, "They're here..." and suddenly you're demonstrating it. Your language has gone into the physical space. And to me, that's what animating feels like. It feels like you've grabbed the things. With stop motion, they are physical objects; it's not up here, it's not out in the ether. It's on a bench or on a table. It's physical, and I think that adds a layer of dialogue to the real world around you.

There's a moment in *The Tale of the Fox*, one of the first feature-length stop motion films, where a fox takes a fish out of a wolf's mouth, and then closes the wolf's mouth, shuts it. And I always think the animator must have animated the fish coming out and then seen that the mouth was still open and gone, "Wait, I can get the fox to close it." Because that shot would have taken hours. You see in that moment how slowness changes what you make. You're sat there for hours with these physical objects, and in that moment a conversation arises between you and the material. The slowness gave him something he wouldn't have found otherwise.

I read that you led workshops for kids. What did their way of interacting with animation tell you?

Me and my friend Glenn did a few of these workshops, 8-year-olds up to early teenagers. What was interesting was how instinctually kids took to it. These things would happen where a kid would be animating a blob of red and you'd have no idea what it was, but another kid would come along and immediately understand, "Oh yeah, so the fire engine's doing this." They were speaking this other language. The kids had this interaction with the work they were making, and it gave them a medium to communicate in.

That was the real lesson: it's not about achieving a perfect end product. They're able to create this shared language. What's so amazing about stop motion is it's immediately tangible, immediately present, something you can grab. You're doing it with your hands, which is the most insane thing ever.

You once said that "effort always shows up on screen" and that watching stop motion is like seeing an "absolutely pointless amount of work condensed down into a tiny little thing." Do people today still see that effort and still value it?

It's a really interesting question, because with where AI is getting to now, it's going to reach a level where it becomes visually indistinguishable. And so you really have to ask questions about why you're choosing different ways of making work. I don't think it's just, "Because I do it, therefore it should continue to exist."

There is something about human labor behind something. It manifests in the product and I'm still struggling to find the language for that. It's been said in a way of brushing off AI that "if a person hasn't bothered to make it, why should I bother watching it?" I think that misses something. Are you just watching because you want someone to have labored for you? I don't think it's that. I often think about sand mandalas. Do you know them?

No, tell me.

A sand mandala is where you pour different colored sands and make these incredibly complex images and then they brush them away. There is something kind of joyful in the fact that this isn't the best way you could have done this. The process gives it meaning, in a strange way. It sometimes feels like that, when you're building a set and doing all these things, and then you get a three-second shot and you're like, "That's all I needed from all of that." It's not the best way you could have done it, but there is something in that process that gives it meaning. When I say that you can see the effort, I don't think it's as simple as, "That shot must have been hard to do." It comes in somewhere else. I think you feel it when you watch that stuff.

Does AI change how people receive your work?

I put out work and I go, "Is this going to mean less now because there's an easier way of making it?" Someone might look at something and go, "Oh, that must just be AI." You now have to have this layer where you go, "No, I did it the really stupid way. I actually spent days doing this."

There is this fear. I think you hear a lot of blanket condemnation in the craft-based world, and I understand that. I'm actually quite anti a lot of the AI art that gets made. But I don't think you can look at [Holly Herndon](#) and the way she uses AI and go, "She's not being creative, there is no humanity in that." That would be mad to say. That stuff is so evocative.

At the moment it feels so new that there's a kind of panic to either condemn it or say it's the future. But

sometimes you do something and you don't know why it's right yet. And I think as an industry, the arts is a little bit there. There's a lot of things we do but we maybe don't know why we're doing them yet. And AI is asking that question of us. It's making us answer that because we need to know now that there's another way of doing it.

Let's shift into Jackdaw Films. One thing I noticed looking at everything you and Bec Boey have made is this quiet radicalism in how you handle representation. Is that a conscious decision you make before starting projects?

The way me and Bec work is very much about finding, what are we trying to say? The projects we make are vessels for things we want to talk about. What's great about working with Bec is that we're so politically and morally aligned that we kind of get angry about a thing and then find a place for it. That's what we've been trying to do: finding ways of using the work to yell about the things that need yelling about.

The first significant thing we made was the web series. Bec is mixed heritage—her dad is Malaysian Chinese—and the experience of East Asians in the UK is a complex and terrible one, especially in terms of representation. It was seeing these repeated failures and going, "Well, let's just make something." With *Jade Dragon*, not to blow our trumpet, but there isn't really a comparable thing in the UK that any of the main TV stations have made. There still isn't an East Asian sitcom. There's a complete failure there. And yet we've made this thing that puts a line in the sand and says, "If you do want to make it, it has to at least be better than what these guys made for £100." Why not make work if not for that reason, to set a precedent?

An idea goes a long way. You worked to normalize diversity rather than just talk abstractly about it.

If you have strong opinions about things, it's very easy to trap that in theory rather than practice. The industry tells you it has to be at this scale of production to be valid. But a lot of the most important political records were not produced in the biggest studios in the world. They were made in people's attics. The agency you have as a creator to make something shouldn't be taken away by the idea that you need to jump this high to be valid.

There's a thing me and Bec say: you have to justify your medium. The thing you make should always feel like it could only have been done this way. With Stones, the stop motion we made, it was playing on nostalgia, all these ideas of what England looks like in childhood animations, and going, "We know what that looks like, but what if it looked like this?" You're using the connotations of the medium as part of your vessel.

What's next? Where do you want to take your practice from here?

With a couple of friends, we're at very early stages of trying to develop a kids' TV show, a stop motion project. Kids' animation has never been something I've actually made, but it's so formative. It's still present in even the horror films I make. This project is based in folklore and Arthurian legend, stuff which for me, as a kid, was really inspiring. But now I see a lot of that "good old England" mentality utilized for a not-great space. That "knights and castles" version of history is used to represent an England I don't relate to and don't see as being the England I live in. I'd love to make something, especially for children, that takes that stuff and makes it mean other things.

How do you make projects that go out into the world but still hold the values you have? How do you make slower art that has high concepts? How do you make trash that elevates? You want to make the film that everyone watches, but you also want to make the film that changes people's lives. And how do you put those two things together? Because it often feels like they're in conflict.

Joseph Brett recommends:

Wings of Desire by Wim Wenders

The Cosgrove Hall *Wind in the Willows* animation

The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro

Near Dark by Kathryn Bigelow

Gonzo singing "I'm Going to Go Back There Someday" in The Muppet Movie

Name

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Vocation

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