

# On embracing experience rather than chasing success



Filmmakers Emily Collins and Nathan Fitch discuss what the career of 95-year-old working artist and *New Yorker* Cartoonist George Booth taught them about passion and persistence.

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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2376 words.

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**Nathan, how did you first meet George—and also know you had a story to tell?**

**Nathan:** I worked at *The New Yorker* as an in-house video producer, and cartoons were my beat. I worked on a series called *The Cartoon Lounge*. Each week I would shoot, edit, and produce a short piece with Bob, the longtime photo editor. When Bob retired, David Remnick had a going away party. I was invited as “*The Cartoon Lounge* guy.” It was a who’s who of the players and powerful, famous cartoonists.

As a non-cartoonist, I felt awkward and out-of-place, but George was next to me, and we started chatting. I didn’t know his work. I just thought he was interesting. “This guy has charm and persona and great stories. This should be in a documentary.” Later, I asked his daughter, who he lives with, if she would be open to filming. I went over and hung out to learn if they would be comfortable. Then I shot him a couple of times—a sit-down interview, a block party. George and his family live on a vibrant block in Crown Heights, where he draws each year for the community. I went and filmed footage into what would later become a documentary.

**How did you and Emily decide to collaborate on *Drawing Life*?**

**N:** I’d known Emily in grad school, not well, but I admired her work. She always had a good vibe. At this point, I thought, “I’ve done a certain number of short, character-driven documentaries,” and I knew how to do that well. While I thought George was unique and would make a great subject, I also tried to consider how it could be something different. So I reached out to Emily to see if she would be interested in potentially collaborating and bringing animation into a piece about George.

**Emily:** Nathan laid an excellent foundation for me to see who the subject was and learn about his work. Once he introduced us, I dove into exploring further and learning about all that he does within the cartooning world. It was early in the Trump era when we started talking, and everything felt doom and gloom. George has been this light force in the world, and I connected with that. It felt positive and good to focus on somebody who has such a great sense of humor. When we embarked upon conceptualizing the animation for certain aspects of his story, that took time to piece together. All the different interviews and segments that Nathan was editing. But I was excited to see how we could bring his work to life through animation.

**What did working on this film show you both about your own creative practices?**

**N:** When I met George, I didn’t know or connect him immediately to his work. But I had studied illustration in

undergrad and was looking through an old reference notebook that I had pulled together, maybe from my freshman year of college, that had some of his work in it. It was interesting, many years later, to meet the person. I'm dyslexic. I hated school growing up and was bad at it. I basically just drew during all my classes. And one of the things that was cool about this project was to see how George evolved as an artist. You can see his style evolving from a technical ability to render things accurately and then finding his voice in much looser lines.

In the film, there's a moment where he's having lunch with other cartoonists, and they're talking about how he became successful when he stopped doing the thing that he thought was going to make him successful. He embraced his own life experience. And it's this unique, loose line that has become iconic of him and *The New Yorker* to some degree. I think that's a lesson all creative people could take. Following your own instincts, instead of following what you think you should be doing, is the best path forward.

**E:** I agree. He's a genuine person who focused on what he had an incredible knack for, regardless of what other pressures, or pre-existing structures, existed in his life. For me, if I'm captivated by someone's story, especially if it's someone who does creative work, I become excited to explore that person's experience. With George's artwork, I learned so much, not only about him but the broader cartooning community. I was able to learn about all these different artists and work with Nathan to celebrate the work of this person who is just such a unique individual.

#### **Was it a challenge to animate his work?**

**E:** Probably the most challenging part, and Nathan and I talked about it over and over again, was working on a project about the life of a person who creates still images—but we're discussing animation. We wanted to be cautious not to simply make his drawings into animated cartoons but to highlight them in a way that integrates with the live-action moments in the film and fits stylistically. That doesn't push George's drawings into an unnatural realm.

The good thing about stop-motion and collage-animation was that we could bring still images into an animated world without doing a ton. We move them, but they stay static. They're just embedded in different compositions. No matter what, when you're animating, you're manipulating and presenting it through another piece of work. There's always going to be room for potential. It could be misconstrued as "you're taking it and altering it in a way that's too heavy-handed." But we tried to be true to the film, be true to ourselves as creators of the project, and also as true as we possibly could be to George's work.

**N:** There was a breakthrough moment where we came across a treasure trove of old photos at George's apartment. Hundreds of images. And that became useful to pull from. If you look at the animated segments, we lean into animating artifacts—George's Marine ID card from the '40s, for example. We got lucky to have those.

After our initial meeting, when Emily and I talked about the project, we set up a time for George and his daughter, Sarah, to meet Emily and do a demo. To make George feel like a collaborator. It became more challenging to have him be an active collaborator in the animation process for various reasons. But we definitely wanted to make him feel like he was a part of the conversation. That Emily and George had a good rapport was vital as we moved forward.

#### **I loved the scenes of all the old-timer cartoonists at lunch together. What is it like to be a cartoonist coming up now?**

**N:** There's a new cartoon editor, Emma Allen, who's young, female. I think that *The New Yorker*, as a whole, has been shifting—the old guard of cartoonists, as you see at the lunch, are older white men. It's an exciting time for *New Yorker* cartoonists because it feels like there's more diversity in terms of gender, and racial diversity, within cartooning. Looking back to older cartoons, the people represented were majority white families from a certain social stratum. I think that's changing and is going to continue to change. It's a great time to be a young cartoonist trying to get into that world because the idea of "what a *New Yorker* cartoon is" has expanded and grown along with culture's ideas of gender identity and racial equity. But to be a cartoonist, and to make a living as a cartoonist, has always been extremely hard.

**E:** Across the board, doors are opening across creative industries. But there's still work to be done and space that needs to be made for new voices. It seems like there's more of an opportunity now than ever for all different folks to enter into that universe. But I can't speak to how and where cartoons are being published beyond *The New Yorker*. It's such a different world to break into these days than when George started since we have so much less print and so much more digital material.

**N:** Pre-pandemic at *The New Yorker*, anyone could come and show their cartoons to the Cartoon Editor. There's one day a week when anyone who had a bunch of cartoons could go and pitch. People don't know that that's a thing. That this is an open door. You don't have to be George Booth to have your cartoons at least considered. They take such a small fraction of what they get every issue, and the chances are against you, but you still have that opportunity.

**Through this work, you're capturing the story of a life. How do you do that in a 24-minute doc?**

**N:** There's a formula for making a biopic about a famous artist. It's been done a lot, and it works. You go chronologically and tell their life story, and this film could have been that. But as a filmmaker, the challenge is how do you tell that—the story of a 95-year-old animator – in an interesting way. George is still active. How can we capture him going into *The New Yorker* to pitch? Or even hanging out in his flat. How can we capture his life in a more fairy tale, spontaneous way versus the formula? And that was my thought process. We had access to George and could still film with him. How can we get who he is and not say who he is? Show versus tell? And working with Emily and her amazing animation techniques felt like now we could do this in a fresh, different way.

**Emily, when Nathan first spoke to you about this project, how did you envision it?**

**E:** The amount of footage that Nathan captured for this film is insane. There's so much material from George's life. And from that was carved a shorter documentary. When I first pictured the film—it was easy to comprehend. I'm somebody who's optimistic and gets excited by projects if I think that they're interesting, and I was excited by George's work. It's easy for me to get carried away and think, "we could do this animation, or this style thing, or this." But over time, by having conversations with Nathan and thinking about it further, we explored how we could show this person's history while staying true to their artwork through animation. Between collage and photographs, we honed in on an animation approach. But that came to be after multiple conversations on balancing the different aspects of the film and showcasing George's work in a fresh and interesting way.

**What is something that you would like people to know about this project?**

**E:** To me, George represents a different moment in America. Both of his siblings served in different branches of the military. They grew up during The Great Depression. And it shows up in the film as a certain decency and responsibility. George is a decent, kind human. I feel like the moment we're in politically, and where we have come from, he's the last of a generation when there was some type of...stability. And there's something political about being decent at a time when everyone is so stratified and angry at each other. George is progressive and lives in New York and draws for *The New Yorker*, but he straddles worlds, and someone on either side of the aisle could watch this documentary and not feel alienated. And maybe remember a time when we could at least talk to other people, even if we don't totally agree with them.

**What's next for both of you?**

**E:** For me, especially having a toddler, I just try to work on as many projects as possible, whether in or outside of official work with my studio, Mighty Oak. But I do have a desire to create a children's book. So I'm brewing some ideas. And then, I have an interactive project that I had been working on with a collaborator that's a website that celebrates a woman named Hansu's life with animated components. And the site and the whole team focus on accessibility and animation for those who are blind and or have partial or no hearing.

**N:** For me, it's not visual, but I've been listening to a lot of podcasts lately. I was listening to Long Form last night, and there was an interview with Aaron Lammer. He's a Renaissance musician and podcast producer, and

he was discussing his process of learning new things. As a creative person, it's easy to get into the rut of saying, "There's this thing I'm good at, I'm just going to keep doing the thing because it feels like I'm good at it, and people reward me." And I feel like I definitely fall into that. We all want to do a good job at what we do, right? No one wants to suck. But I was inspired. "Yes, I can still learn things and fail!" And, in some ways, it goes back to the film. Every day, George sits on that bench reading a newspaper and tries to come up with a cartoon. For every cartoon that he publishes, there are probably 500 or so ideas or scribbles that don't make it into a finalized, published cartoon. This whole project is like that in a way. Something a little bit different than what could have been a short, traditional documentary about an older cartoonist. By collaborating with Emily, I was hoping to do something different. To create something a little more unique.

#### **Nathan Fitch Recommends:**

The *American Sector* by Courtney Stephens, Pacho Velez

"I'm Here" by Spike Jonze

The Longform podcast (even if you are not interested in journalism per se)

The Team Deakins podcast

#### **Emily Collins Recommends:**

My go-to source for inspiration is animation and illustration that came out of Eastern and Central Europe, in the '50s through the '80s.

50watts

Childrens Book Club

A variety of films/filmmakers

Yuri Norstein - *Hedgehog in the Fog*

Igor Kovalyov - *Hen, His Wife*

Name

Emily Collins and Nathan Fitch

Vocation

Filmmakers

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