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Savage

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RIT

Savage

By

Andrew Curran

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art
School of Film and Animation
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
December 13, 2013

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Isaac Holze,
Technical Director
Blue Sky Studio

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Abstract

"Savage" is a stop-motion, animated graduate thesis film. It was originally conceived as a story about the perils of socially constructed reality. The film follows a feral boy and his dog as they go hunting to close to civilization. One day the two come upon a farm and it is their undoing.

This film was made using traditional stop motion techniques, with the assistance of Dragon Stop Motion Software. The post work, mainly rig removal was done in After Effects and Photoshop.

The following is an attempt to outline my process from concept to completion.

Introduction

I started "Savage" in March of 2009 and completed it in December of 2013. School of Film and Animation thesis committee members Skip Bataglia, Tom Gasek, and Isaac Holze supervised this undertaking. The process started with a story, which lead to character and set design, and then - thumbnailed storyboards. After each set was constructed it was lit, animation was blocked out and the scenes where shot. Once the animation was completed the rigs were removed and the whole thing was edited together.

The main goal of this project was to make a visually appealing piece of art. Being that MFAs aren't worth the paper they're printed on without a portfolio to back them up. I needed footage for a reel - good sets, characters, and photographs. I didn't want my life of student loan slavery in be totally in vain. By this time I had fallen far to deep in to the MFA pyramid scheme to turn back now. So I set out to make one more film for myself, just to have fun and learn as much as I could along the way. After racking up this much debt with nothing to show for it, there was no way I was ever going to untether myself from the banks long enough to do anything for myself until I was in my 50's.

Concept

I'm fascinated with the idea of feral children. I relate to his plight for a number of reasons. I've always had a strong draw to nature, I hate western religion, and I've never really understood why people play along with socially constructed reality. When I was twelve I ran away from home and sold animal pelts for a living, until the authorities locked me up and domesticated me. I also know what it feels like to not have the ability to speak, having once lost verbal ability due to a brain injury. I believe there is thought without language, and that if humans have souls then beasts must have them as well. It has been argued that wild children are a meaningless phenomenon, because humans essentially domesticated themselves. I think that there is great meaning in anything that helps people remember that they are animals. Jean-Jacques Rousseau said, "children of nature symbolized a lost personal authenticity, an imagined self prior to that which had grown up within the social and the historical. They retained the power and the clarity of origins from which the civilized observer had been estranged."

Preproduction

Story

I began developing the story in Alan Rhodes' thesis class. My Ideas were all over the place. I'm much better at brainstorming than I am at deciding.

Originally I was going to make a werewolf comedy about binge drinking.

Researching werewolves lead to researching feral children cases. I came across a story about Meme Le Blanc and I was hooked. I read every feral child case study I could find. There was Victor of Aveyron, Kamala and Amala of India, the girl of Calcutta nursed by a bear, Ishi Yahi the native America wild man, the boy from Burundi, Roger Shattucks - forbidden experiment and many others. Most cases would now be explained by autism, or severe neglect or abuse.

To me, socially isolated children and wild children are different phenomenon, like an abused dog at the pound and wolf in the wild. There was enough information for me to begin forming a story of my own. I was really drawn to the idea that most wild children seemed to have physical power, which their captors did not. Most feral children were incredibly fast and had great climbing abilities. In captivity, however they all seemed to lose what made them able to survive in the natural world.

Much as nomadic tribes like the Mongols would lose their warrior superiority after settling in a village, humans seem to lose something when they rely too much on the modern world. There is a real romance in living in

accordance with nature instead of seeing one's self as above nature. Not only did I love the idea of a feral child, I also thought it would be a lot of fun to animate one. Also it was a story I could tell without dialogue, which would save some time and allow me to focus on the animation and not worry about finding voice actors.

So I wrote a story about the feral child for my thesis proposal and it passed the thesis committee with the stipulation that I pare it down. I completely agreed. I didn't really want to make a typical story structure - I wanted more of a stream of conscience feel, more of a poem than a story. I cut all the back-story and made it a story about a wild boy and his dog friend who live in the woods until one day they stumble upon a farm where they are not welcome. I felt that I had enough of a story to go on at this point and now I wanted to see the sets and characters.

Concept and Design

My influences for this film came from a huge variety of sources. I was constantly looking for inspiration. I searched through thousand of images for reference. For the most part I would search for a certain image, say a crocodile, I'd narrow it down to 20 or so images, study those, do drawings and rough sculpts, then I'd get rid of all my reference and make what I remembered, or wanted.

The book "Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A history of Feral Children" by Michael Newton was a great inspiration while I was writing the story. I also read "The Wild Boy of Burundi: A study of an outcast child" by Harlan Lane and Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book". I also watched the film "The Wild Child" by Francios Truffaut to get an idea what had already been done on this subject. But Nicolas Refn's movie "Bronson" was more of an inspiration to me then any movies about feral children. Although the subject of "Bronson" was very different I think our themes have a lot of parallels.

As far as the medium of stop motion, the Russian animation director, Garri Bardin had a big impact on me. His 1985 film "Break" made me much more confident in the textural style. Seeing the animator's hand in the work was a look I really enjoyed.

Production

Character and set design began in fall of 2009. I drew a few sketches of the kid to get a basic idea of his build. He was skinny, lean, naked and had long hair, all of that was pretty much a given. I played around with his shape. Really cartoony and abstract figures, didn't really fit the mood of the piece. I then sculpted a bunch of rough head shapes and armatures. I narrowed it down to about 5 of each. I switched them around a bit, asked a few friends' opinions and landed on a final character design relatively quickly. I played with a few color palettes, knowing most of the scenes would be at night. I played with the idea of having them look like shadows slinking through the woods, but the white character with black hair photographed well and eventually I decided I might as well have the work I was putting in seen on screen.

After the kid was pretty much developed I started working on his dog friend. Originally the dog was a wolf, but I ended up making him more of a dingo. Honestly, looking back, I don't think I made the right choice with the dog. He should have been better crafted. I wish I'd used one of the earlier sculptures. By the time I realized I didn't like the dog's design I already had too many shots completed with him in them. I thought about having the red in his fur come off when he got out of the water, but decided that might be confusing. I also wish I had made the dog slightly bigger in relation to the kid.

After the two main characters were designed I set out to make a forest, something I had wanted to make for a long time but never had the space, time, or money to do. For my first trees I rolled chicken wire up into a cylinder for the trunk, then split it on both ends for branches and roots. Then I wrapped them with galvanized steel wire for the individual branches. Most of them used 100 feet or more. After I had a rough shape I liked, I cut foam board insulation and glued it to the wire base to add bulk. Next I coated the whole thing with caulking for texture. There were 22 trees in total. After creating about six I started using actual tree branches instead of chicken wire and adding branches where I needed.

Painting the trees set the color palette for the whole film, whether I knew it at the time or not. I began by priming them all matte black. Their rough texture made them very difficult to cover completely, each tree took a few coats of paint. Then I painted them all blue with orange, red and white highlights. When I went to photograph them I learned two important lessons, the first being never paint 22 of something without photographing one of them first or always test before the application of intense labor, the other being that matte paint still reflects light. You need to use a matte medium or dull coat if you don't want hot spots everywhere. I got some matte medium and painted all but one black again, then I painted eight different tree different color schemes. After photographing them all I picked the red tree and painted them all to match that one.

For the backdrop I bought a bunch of different fabrics I thought might work and photographed them. I didn't like any of them, but did use a black curtain for

some of the later shots. The old ladies at JoAnn's gave me quite a hard time but in the end, thankfully, they let me return the fabrics. After that nightmare I bought some 2x4s and 16 feet of rolled canvas. With the help of some friends in the paint department I stretched the canvas. Then, with some more help, I got the canvas into the animation studio and onto the wall and ceiling. I must have thought I was going to have a bunch of low shots looking up and that was why I needed the back drop to cover the whole ceiling, but after two days of smoothing all the gaps between the different canvass it didn't make a bit of difference and never showed up in a shot.

After I had the backdrop and the trees I found two oversized tables and mapped out the basic flow of the land with wood. I screwed everything down, then rounded off all the edges and filled in the gaps with foam. I textured the landscape with plaster and joint compound, being careful not to get any on the trees. I had about 20 or 30 minutes of work time with each bucket full to get the texture I wanted. It took a lot of material and number of applications, but it worked very well. I primed the ground black and filled in any cracks or hard to reach places with black plasticine. I then painted the ground many shades of blue.

At this point I showed Tom Gasek the set. Tom gave me some good advice on lighting and hooked me up with some gels. The set was big enough and random enough to be almost limitless in the number of shots I could find. I was able to make a 4x8 foot set look like a 1000 acre forest.

With the first set constructed I began animating. I had done a few

animation tests while I was preparing the set, a few in flash and a few with a generic wire armature. I had a basic idea of how the main characters would move. I knew early on I wanted the kid's movement to be somewhere between that of a frog like and that of a dog. I cut out most of the really complicated action sequences and decided that all the two main characters needed to do was run around and eat other animals. I wanted enough animals in the forest to make it seem full of life. I chose the animals I did based mainly of the want they represent in dreams. Frogs were chosen for change and the unexpected, the bison skulls for danger, the heron for self-reliance and so on.

The first animal I decide to have live in this forest was the crocodile. I have long been fascinated with crocodiles and often dream about them. Crocodiles symbolize freedom and power, but they also forewarn of danger, which was perfect for my film. They have antibiotics in their blood; they can learn patterns and tricks, yet they are fierce and unpredictable.

To make the crocodile I cut a piece of wood to roughly the size I wanted him to be. I made a stand so I could sculpt him in the round. Then I covered it in plasticine and spent approximately 40 hours sculpting in all the texture. When I had a gotten it to a place I was happy with I hit "save" by making a mold of him. I made a simple two part mold with a brush of silicon flexible rubber with a hard shell to support it. Being the first time I'd ever made something like this I learned quite a bit. If I had to do it over again I'd cast the legs and tail separately.

However the mold did work very well. I even cast a couple in wax, which I

used to create a cast iron sculpture that took first place at an art show in Rochester. This first casting lead to a border line obsession with casting that took up most of my time for the next two years, and will most likely last the rest of my life...but that's a totally different story.

I originally intended to use an elaborate ball and socket armature that I had crafted in the jewelry class at RIT, and I was planning to make the final puppet out of silicon or latex, but after pouring a few in plasticine I decided replacements were the way to go. I kept him in the water for most of the shots so he didn't need an armature at all.

The water in the film was just plasticine that was smeared slightly from frame to frame. It was a technique similar to the one I had discovered while making my two-quarter film. Many stop motion films shy away from water, in favor of computer generated particle effects; I really wanted to do it practically because I loved the look of it. I'm particularly proud of the reflection on the water in the shot where the dog is coming out of the water with a fish in his mouth.

After two quarters spent shooting in the stop motion studio I had still not shot anywhere near what I wanted to shoot. Working full time and taking a full class load didn't leave me a great deal of time or energy to spend on this project. RIT was not set up for shooting a stop motion film and I now had nowhere to finish my film. Not to mention I was not able to use lights or a camera. To say it was a struggle to make this film would be an understatement.

That summer I crashed on couches, got a job roofing houses, and saved

up enough money to get a camera and some lights. I came back in the fall and started working in the dean's office of CIAS full time, and only went to school part time. During the time I was unable to shoot I sculpted pieces that could both be in my film and stand alone as sculptures. I made three different size pigs for the farm scene and a bunch of bison skulls that were to be used in the transitional scene between the forest and the farm. I really liked the cast iron skulls, but after a conversation with Tom realized the use of material doesn't translate from sculpture to filmmaking. Luckily I had made a rubber mold of the skull and was able to make a dozen or so in plastic, which do appear in the film.

Unfortunately, the pigs make nice ironwork, but they didn't make it into the film. I experimented with form cover in latex and plasticine and got some neat effects, but nothing that looked consistent with the film. They ended up being too big to get an armature that would animate properly while still supporting the puppet - probably the most common puppet problem in all of stop motion. So I cut the size and made the armature much simpler, which also gave me another crack at designing pigs that fit the film better.

I tried to always be working on props and sets for the next shot while I was shooting, that way if I was having trouble with whatever shot I was working on I could take a step back and see where the film was going. As I was working on the forest scenes I was making the jail and as I was shooting the jail scenes I was working on the farmhouse and barn. I shot starting at the beginning, skipped ahead to the end, and then went back and filled in as much of the middle as I

could.

During this time I received an opportunity to work on a stop motion feature that Laika was producing. It was very short notice, but an opportunity that I could not pass up. So during the middle of the year I broke my sets down and moved out to Oregon. It took a few months to get settled, but once I did it was business as usual; work all day and rush home at night and work until I collapse. Eventually I hit the seven-year limit for my MFA and screened what I had at that point. Like they say a work of art is never done, only abandoned.

Animation

Being stop motion all the animation was done straight ahead. Most shots I roughly blocked out as I was lighting the scene. Even though the film took me forever I seemed to always be in a hurry for one reason or another. If I had taken the time to rehearse every shot the animation would surely have improved dramatically. I tried to implement the principles of animation, but I still cringe when I watch some of the earlier shots. I decided early on to worry about consistency of the animation. Obviously I was going to get better at animating as time went on, and that was the whole point of the thing, it would be crazy to hold back just because some earlier shots were animated poorly. So the animation gets better as the film goes on. I even changed the armature in for the kid's hair three quarters of the way through the film to make its easier to animate.

The hardest part of animating for me was constantly fighting the rig. The support rig I was using was armature wire taped to a weight with a piece of K&S tubing on the end - it definitely led to a few set backs – i.e. temper tantrums, throwing puppets across the room, and random screaming bouts. After seeing the rigs the professionals use it really seemed like chasing Lance Armstrong on a Huffy.

Postproduction

The compositing was done throughout the making of the film. After I had three or four shots completed, or any time I had free time, but was too tired to animate, I'd do some rig removal. I put the raw footage into Adobe After Effects CS3, lined up all the clean plates, masked off what I could and painted out the rest. Rigs and shadows were the majority of what I was removing, but I was also looking for other debris that made its way onto the set. Plus, pixel burn-out was a big problem. I also tried to fix as much of the set shifting and light flicker as I could.

During shooting I took as many clean plates as I could. If a shot went over one session of shooting, which most of them did, atmospheric pressure caused huge set shifts. Once the shots were cleaned up I edited them together in Final Cut and exported them with Quicktime.

Sound

People say sound is anywhere from 50 to 70 percent of a film. Whatever the percentage is, it's undoubtedly very important. I didn't have the time equipment or the know how to tackle the sound track by myself. I enlisted the help of some friends, all professional musicians who said they would mind lending me some of their talent. But for some reason or another I couldn't get any work out of any of them. Maybe it was because I couldn't afford to pay them, maybe I was asking too much, maybe they just didn't like the film, I really couldn't say. All I can say is that I definitely need to work on my ability to ask people for help and get them to follow through. Orchestrating a plan and enlisting the help of others is a huge part of filmmaking. I apparently need to work on getting people excited about projects and happy about pitching in if I want to continue to be an independent filmmaker.

After it was confirmed that I was going to be doing the sound myself opened my film in Soundtrack Pro and got to work. I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted by this point because I'd given the directions to other four times already. I found the background ambience wave tracks on [Freesound.org](https://www.freesound.org). Most of the sound track was going to be foley, with a bit of tribal drumming at the intro and upon the exit of the first act. The forest soundscape was a layering of wildlife sound: frogs, cicadas and crickets chirpings, birds, and water running. The farm

was a recording of a field in the springtime with a few farm sounds added in. The jail sounds came from industrial warehouse, factory kinds of recordings.

After I had a decent soundscape for the forest, farm and jail I added footsteps, crow sound, barking, splashes, doors opening and closing etc. The sounds I wanted but couldn't seem to come up with were the kids' voice, the fish flopping and the dog shaking dry. All in all the sound wasn't as complete as I had wished, but I think of it more as a scratch track then final audio. In the future I will find a sound engineer willing to do the sound for this film and this first pass at sound will work as great guide.

Critique reception

“Savage” was completed and presented at the SOFA screening on December 15, 2013. Assistant Professor Brian Larson was the respondent. He gave an extremely kind and accurate analysis of the film. The general audience didn’t have a lot of feedback and what was said didn’t come as much of a surprise.

Tom had mentioned earlier that the ending was a little abrupt and that a shot out the window of the crows could tie the film together. The idea made perfect sense and a few of the audience members confirmed such a shot was needed. I still plan on going back and shooting a few more shots before I really call the film complete. I believe those shots will clear up any confusion about what’s going on in the jail. Brian and audience members also agreed that the transition between the farm and the jail need another beat or shot. In the future I will add two more shots to the farm sequence: one shot of the child and the dog attacking the pig and another one of them trying to run after being shot.

Overall the film was well received. The visuals were called stunning and beautiful. The theme was clearly understood. People enjoyed the skill and effort displayed and I was instructed to move on with my life

Appendix A

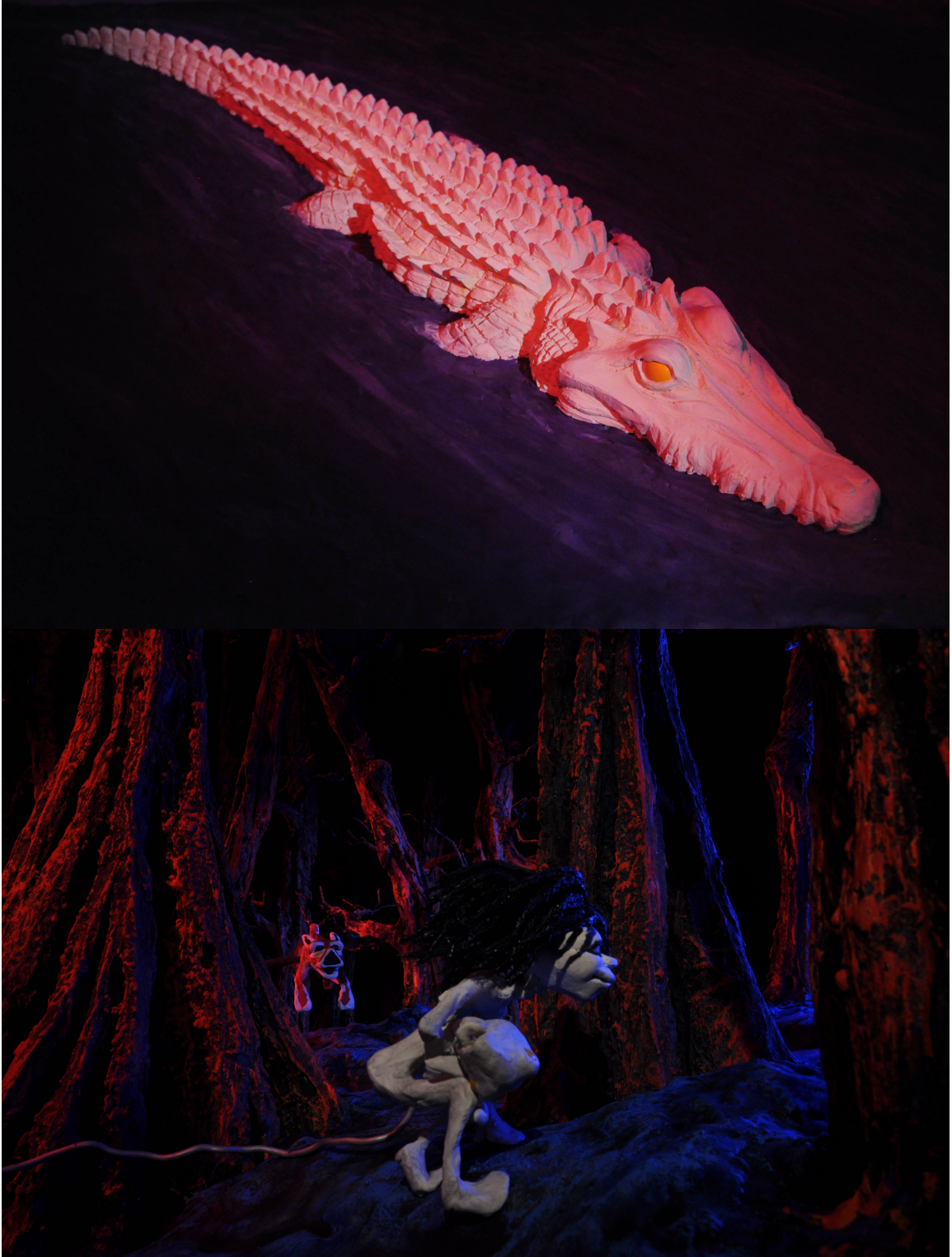
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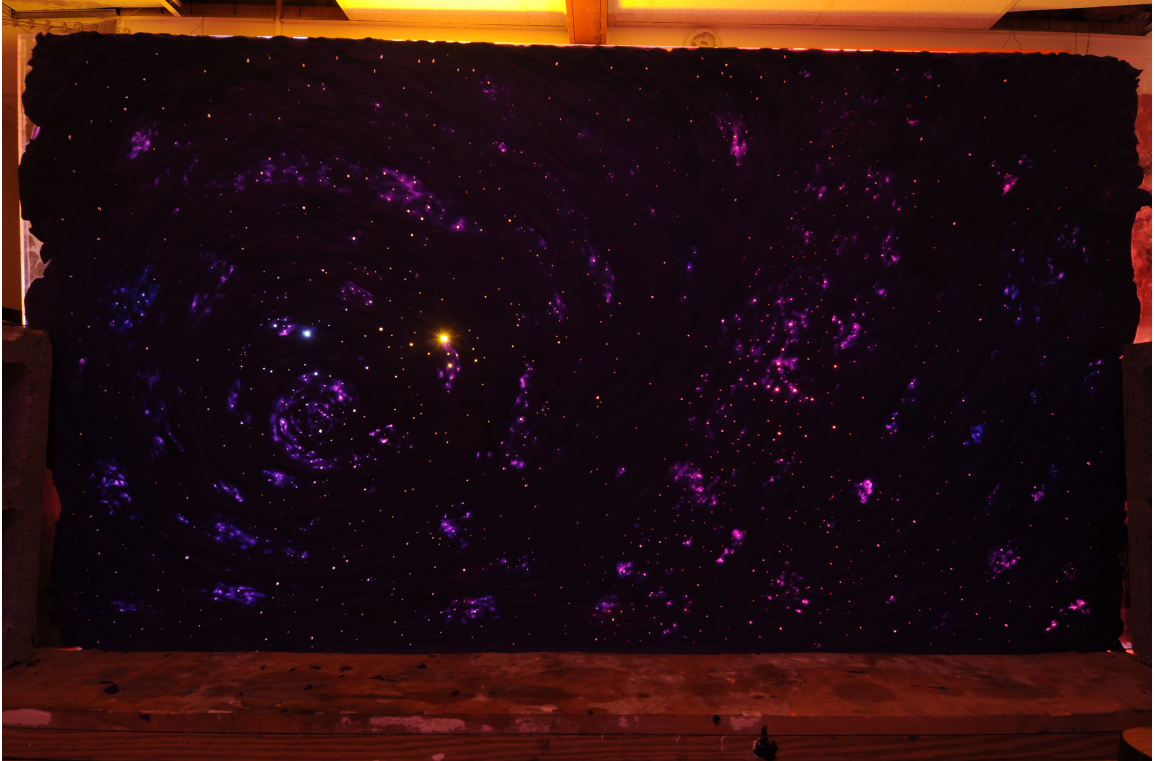
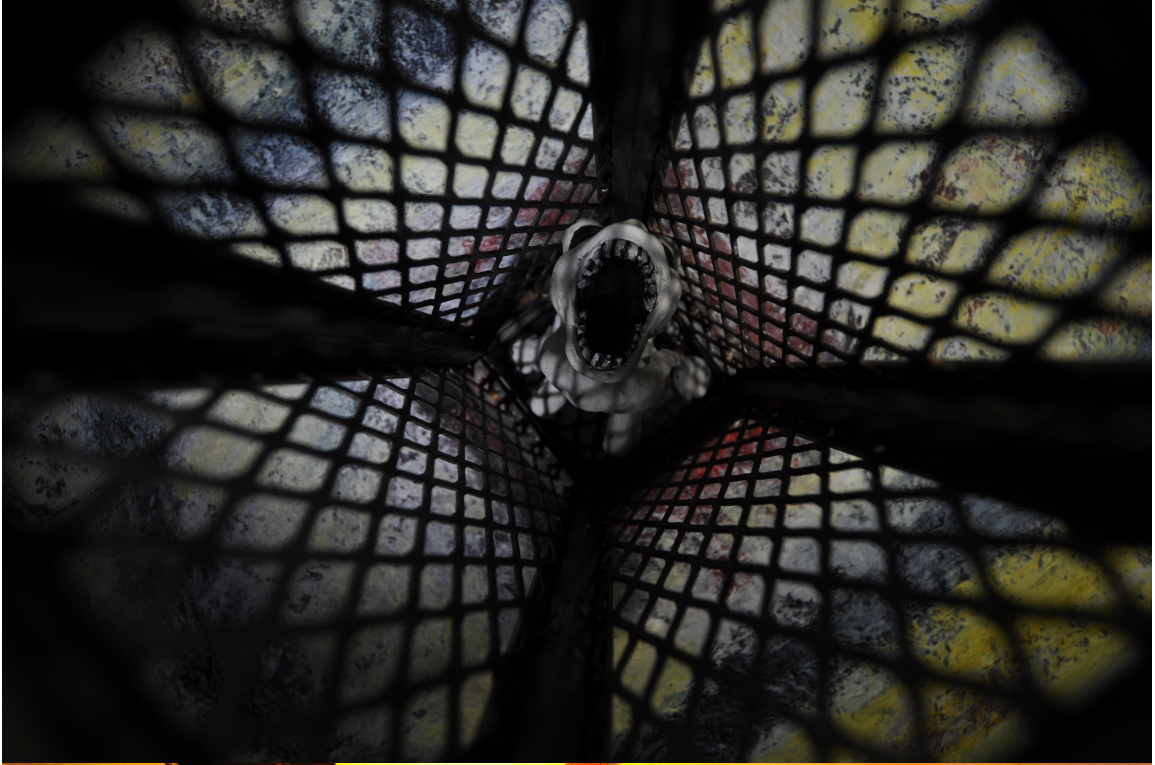












Appendix B

Thesis Proposal

Feral Child
(Working Title)
By
Andrew Curran

MFA Imaging Arts/Animation
School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York
2009

Approved for Submission By:

Skip Battaglia, Chair
Professor School of Film and Animation
Date:

Synopsis

An 8- minute surreal, visceral, stop-motion, action, horror, adventure film. A wild boy and his dog companion are captured while hunting to close to civilization. They are destroyed by attempts to domesticate them.

Statement

In the west we believe that man is superior to the beasts and nature is fallen. As culture goes into a economic and political phase, spiritual principals are disregarded. Religion in the west has become ethical not mystical. We do not give ourselves to nature and in turn try to correct nature.

As humans separate themselves from the beasts they sacrifice their instincts, freedoms and innocence. As opposed to human society, a primary characteristic of the natural world is amorality; there is no good and evil. This film will examine the exploitation and effect of socially imposed morality on humankind. We will view the violence of the natural world and contrast it with the violence of a civilized society. By viewing the world through the eyes of a feral child, a character in between both worlds, we can explore socially constructed reality, the suppression of natural urges and the demands of social conformity.

Treatment

A wild boy and a dog navigate through the woods at night. Around the trees and through the shadow they move. Circling darting and hiding soon it becomes evident the two are friends and on the hunt. They move through the woods with a gallop, jumping, almost flying along.

They freeze as a huge crocodile moves through the water. The hound begins to growl and thrash catching the crocodile's attention as the boy slithers into the nest of the huge beast. The dog snaps at the reptile until the boy emerges from the nest laden with eggs and the two rush off into the night to devour their bounty.

The boy and the wolf make the perfect pair; they play together all day and sleep together at night. The canine can track down any meal and the boy can finish off any larger animals with a rock or climb any tree should smaller prey try to escape.

The hot summer, having dried up most of the water in the hills, lets the two companions feast on fish trapped in shallow pools. However, once this bounty has been digested there is no choice for the hungry but to venture in closer to a town.

Their noses lead them to a large pig farm at the edge of town. Villager's hind fearing the devil has come to their town. They lock their doors and windows and send their dogs out to attack. A shot is fired and we fade to black.

The boy awakens in restraints in a cage with old men staring down at him. He rips at his restraints until his wrists and ankles bleed, until fear and anger need to rest. His captors do everything they can to try and civilize him. They cut his hair and struggle to keep him in shoes and make him wear clothes. They invent cruel machines to break the boy's spirit. They take great effort to teach the language and morals. But mostly he is a freak for them to gawk at.

They attempt to wean him off his savage diet of raw meat by increasingly feeding him processed food and food preserved with salt as a result his teeth and nails fall out. Biscuits and cooked meat make him vomit and cough up blood. His health becomes so poor that they rush to have him baptized. Soon he is too sick to eat even his natural diet. He can only chew raw meat and drink warm blood.

One day during routine examinations, one of his captors tries to touch him; the boy beats him with savage strength and escapes from the house. The nurses and doctors chase the boy as he struggles to shake loose from his shoes, when he gets his eyes on the forest and the fresh air in his lungs nothing can stop him. He vanishes into the wilderness like a ghost.

Working Title: Feral Child
Producer: Andrew Curran
Budget: \$500

Start Date: 5/30/09
End Date: 05/20/10
Running Time: 8 minutes
Release Format: DVD

Budget Summary

| Preproduction/Research/Development | Production | Actual |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Character Design | \$1,000 | \$0 |
| Set Design/Concept art | \$10,000 | \$0 |
| Storyboard | \$1,000 | \$0 |
| Animatic | \$1,000 | \$0 |
| Research & Development | \$500 | \$0 |
| Art material | \$1,000 | \$0 |
| Preproduction/Research/Development Subtotal | \$14,500 | |
| \$0 | | |

Production

| | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----|
| Equipment | \$20,000 | \$0 |
| Software | \$1,500 | \$0 |
| Miscellaneous supplies | \$1,000 | \$0 |
| Production Subtotal | \$22,500 | |
| \$0 | | |

Post Production

| | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-----|
| Music rights | \$500 | \$0 |
| Title design | \$500 | \$0 |
| Editing software | \$500 | \$0 |
| Post Production Subtotal | \$1,500 | |
| \$0 | | |

Distribution

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| DVD | \$50 | \$50 |
| Festival entry fee | \$200 | \$200 |
| Postage | \$200 | \$200 |
| Post Production Subtotal | \$450 | \$450 |

Timeline

Working Title: Feral Child
 Producer: Andrew Curran
 Advisor: Battaglia

Start Date: 5/30/10
 End Date: 5/20/11
 Run Time: 8 minutes
 Format: DVD

| | May 10 | Jun 10 | Jul 10 | Aug 10 | Sept 10 | Oct 10 | Nov 10 | Dec 10 | Jan 11 | Feb 11 | Mar 11 | Apr 11 | May 11 |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Script | x | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Storyboards | | x | x | | | | | | | | | | |
| Animatic | | | x | x | | | | | | | | | |
| Characters | | x | x | x | x | x | | | | | | | |
| Armatures | | x | x | x | x | x | x | | | | | | |
| Sets | | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | | | | | |
| Sound | | | | | | | | | | x | x | | |
| Animation | | | | | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Editing | | | | | | | | | | x | x | x | x |
| Compositing | | | | | | | | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Rig removal | | | | | | | | x | x | x | x | x | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |