

Mr. Sporn in the Spotlight

The celebrated New York animator's work is the focus of special shows at Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art. by Jake Friedman

Last month, New York's Museum of Modern Art showcased the films of animator Michael Sporn, creator of award-winning short films and a staple of the New York animation community for more than 25 years.

"My films are based more on human traits than they are on cartoon traits," says Sporn, who may be recognized by his many adaptations of children's books in a drawn and painterly style. Sporn is in a very real sense a 2D animator, relishing the grit and tooth of pen and point on tactile media. His efforts have not gone unrecognized. Besides numerous DVD sales and airings on PBS's *Sesame Street* and on HBO, Sporn garnered an Oscar nom for his take on *Shrek* author William Steig's *Doctor De Soto*. His recent 9/11 children's story, *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, has also gone to win multiple awards worldwide.

The exhibit, installed by MoMA's animation enthusiast Josh Siegel, contained four programs highlighting the 61-year-old animator's career. Three of the programs focused on themes of animal tales, fables and New York City itself. The fourth show, part of the on-going MoMA Monday program, included a live discussion between Sporn and local animation heavyweight John Canemaker.

Canemaker's Oscar-winning animation style is not unlike Sporn's homespun artistry. "Besides John Canemaker interviewing me, I'll also show some new shorts I've done over the summer and part of an animatic for the upcoming feature film *Poe*, which I'm working on right now."

Sporn's most recent projects, which he produced with the assistance of Matthew Clinton, are *Pab's First Burger* and *Gertrude on the Beach*, both about the elite artist community cultivated by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in the 20th century. "The first is about Picasso trying his first hamburger," says Sporn. "It was after Tom Hachtman's art, done in watercolor. The second one is done in crayon."

The animatic for Sporn's feature film in progress, *Poe*, was drawn by seasoned pro Tissa David and takes artistry similarly as seriously. "Poe



Michael Sporn

looks like early Picasso," says Sporn. "The stories themselves are very expressionistic, in an etching style with a lot of scratches and dark lines. It's a rougher, looser style; good illustration, but not a realistic illustration style."

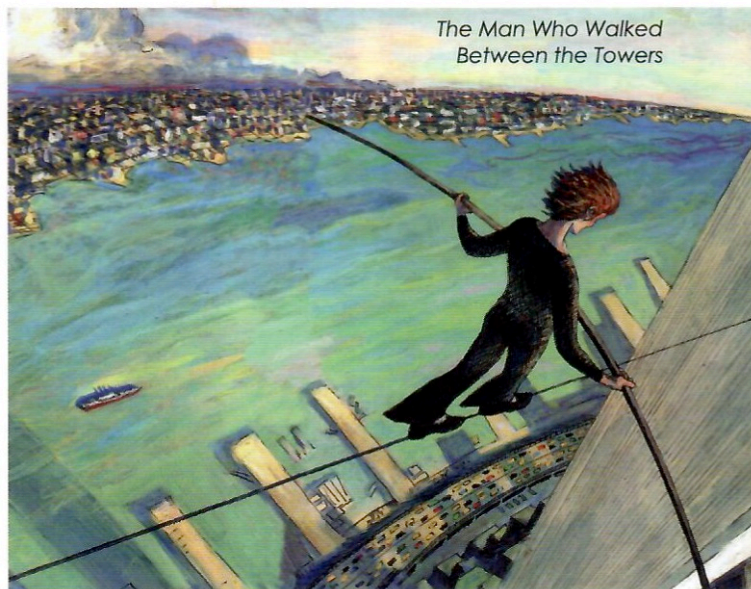
Sporn's approach to animation has been unique in the business, producing films that perhaps speak more to the heart than your average Saturday morning cartoon. "I'm interested in adult themes and social values, and even for films for the youngest possible audience, I still put those values in, whether about homelessness, social integration or ethnicity. I'm not ripping heads off characters or being foul-mouthed; I see no need for that."

It may have been the work of the Hubley Studio that inspired Sporn's style at the start of his career. After studying art at the New York Institute of Technology—before animation courses were offered there—he taught himself everything he needed to know about animation. He recalls, "John Hubley was one of my animation heroes. I was calling the studio almost every week, at the suggestion of the personal assistant there. I had conversations with her for about a year, and then one day I got a call from her to come in. So I was hired for two days, which turned into five years." It was there that Sporn worked on *Everybody Rides the Carousel* and *A Doonesbury Special*, as well as forging a professional relationship with Tissa David. "I worked for a couple of commercial companies in between, and when I found out that Richard Williams was doing *Raggedy Ann & Andy*, Tissa got me a job there. Richard Williams was another hero of mine back in '76."

At Richard Williams' studio, Sporn man-

aged a group of 150 assistants for the good part of a year. In the late '70s Sporn worked with R.O. Blechman pre-Ink Tank, hired to do the one-hour program *Simple Gifts*. However, plenty of time was spent working on commercials, which Sporn found less than desirable. "I was sort of running the studio; there weren't many people there at the time, and I realized that I could do this for myself. So I left Blechman in 1980 to form my own company."

Working in the New York indie scene has had its ups and downs for Sporn. "Norm McLaren once said that his suggestion to all independent filmmakers was to have their budgets cut in half; striving for something will



give them more of an objective need to fight to make the film better. I agree with that." Sporn adds, "Unless you're clever and agile, money will be a major problem all the time. I would say 60 percent of my job is worrying about finances. You also have to be able to get your work seen and shown off."

Sporn's films have been shown internationally, a fact that he coughs up to his high values. "I like intelligent and adult work. I like a pencil dragging across a piece of paper and the problems you get with that. It's beautiful." ■

Jake Friedman is a New York-based animator and journalist. You can find out more about him at www.jakefriedman.net.