



An interview by Jake Friedman

Profile: Aaron Augenblick

It appears Aaron Augenblick is the underdog of indie studio animation. Since the birth of Augenblick Studios in 1999 when he was only 24, Augenblick has been hitting the niche market between MTV2's *Wonder Showzen* (season 2 now out on DVD) and the entire run of Comedy Central's *Shorties Watching Shorties*, not to mention several independent films like the hilarious web-series *Golden Age* now hitting the festival circuit (find it online – it's delicious). He's also producing a pilot for Adult Swim called *Super Jail* created by Christy Karacas and Steven Warbrick (the creative minds behind the short film *Barfight*), and you'll see his animated sequence in the upcoming Paul Rudd/Wynona Ryder film *The Ten*. Recently I had the chance to talk with him about his work, his goals, the Fleischers, and 2D animation.

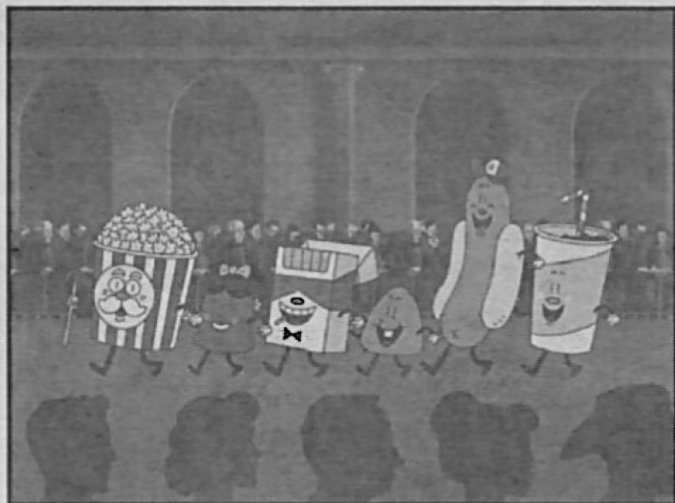
What was the path that you followed to be the head of your own studio?

One thing that helped was complete ignorance of how hard it would be. I got my first job at MTV animation. They had seen my thesis film, *The Midnight Carnival*, which I had created at SVA, and they hired me to work on a pilot and I worked there for about 2 years on *Daria* and

Downtown. I left because I really wanted to keep creating my own independent films, so I got a couple of people that I had met at MTV and we went out and started a studio – at very little to no money. I think we had one computer back then, and we were doing everything traditionally on paper, and basically built up from there. We got a little job here and there all the while funding independent projects that I did along the way, and the jobs ended up getting bigger all the time and I was able to hire more people and take better jobs and be more selective.

If you knew then what you know now, would you do anything differently?

I think I would have prepared more on the business end of things. Artistically and technically I had a



pretty good foundation. But just knowing the ins and outs of running a studio and owning a corporation, I was completely unprepared. We started our studio during the Internet boom, and I know people who started with investors and funding, and we went a completely opposite route, starting everything really, really small and just worked for all of our money.

The first freelance job we did at the studio was for Yvette Kaplan, for *Between the Lions*, and Yvette really helped us out because she was a director at MTV, so when we went off to start our own studio, she took a chance with us. I always strayed away from doing websites because I only wanted to be doing cartoons and animation. I think the first really big break we got was *Shorties Watching Shorties*.

Where do you see the future of your studio?

The whole point of the studio is to keep everything small and handcrafted. I never went into this thinking, "I want to have a huge studio and make millions of dollars," I was always about the work, and doing work that I'm proud of. But I still feel that the studio needs to grow, so I think we're in a position right now where you're going to see the studio grow a bit while maintaining being an artistic studio with a point of view.

Will your job be more business-oriented as the studio gets bigger?

I hope not; that's something I've thought from day one. I try to draw on every project that we do. I don't

want to be solely a producer or a manager. I'm doing this because I like creating animation. I hope that no matter where the studio goes to I'll always have some artistic hand in the project.

How would you define the style of Augenblick Studios?

It all depends on the project. I think that one thing that sets our studio apart, at least stylistically, is everyone at our studio has a very strong appreciation for classic animation, and a lot of old comics, too, like Harvey Kurtzman, EC Comics and MAD Magazine. So we definitely have an appreciation for classic cartooning, and not leaning towards something that is uber-modern or CGI.

I think you can see that the more personal stuff at our studio has a strong Fleischer influence. The Fleischers were always experimenting and reinventing themselves, and



their ingenuity is something I'm constantly blown away by. Jim Jarmusch was also always a role model for me. I really love his films, and he's created some really experimental films in his career and never let himself be compromised.

My goal has always been to take the classic techniques and adapt them to modern technology. I think that has always been our mission. Flash has made it possible for us to keep things hand-crafted and not to send things overseas or enter a CGI world.

Where do you see the future of hand-drawn animation?

I'm not sure – it's possible we're already a dinosaur, but I prefer 2D artwork to 3D films. I think 2D is a technique that people will always gravitate toward. It will probably become more unique and less mainstream; I think it will definitely fall into a niche-type market.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I'd love to do some sort of feature film – that's something that has always been a goal of mine. And doing TV series.

What's the hardest part about your job?

Balancing management with artistic concerns. Can we get this done on time? Can we afford this? Is everyone that's working happy with what we're working on? There are all these business concerns that are, a lot of times, in complete opposition to what you see artistically. So it's always a fine balance, because you don't want to short change yourself on either end.

What's the biggest perk?

Seeing a finished piece of animation played back to you, after you spent all this time drawing every single drawing, and it's better than you even imagined, that it has a life to it that you couldn't even plan for. To this day, it always amazes me.

Why did you choose to do what you're doing?

I think I have strong opinions about how things should be run and how animation should be made. Bigger studios try to create a machine that doesn't allow for fingerprints from anyone who works on the project. I like to choose more interesting projects and do projects that are concepts of my own. That's why I've kept our teams small. We don't have to conform to a faceless project, so everyone here all has input on the ideas. I feel that most of the greatest work in cartooning and art in general is created that way. When Warner Brothers was creating the Looney Tune cartoons, it was just a small team of really talented people who fed on each other's creative energies.

How do I get to be where you are now?

Get a space and start working on your own. The most important thing is to be willing to work hard. As long as you're willing, you can grow a good studio.

Jake Friedman is a NY-based animator and animation journalist. Read his Animation Magazine article on the MoCCA exhibit at www.jakefriedman.net.