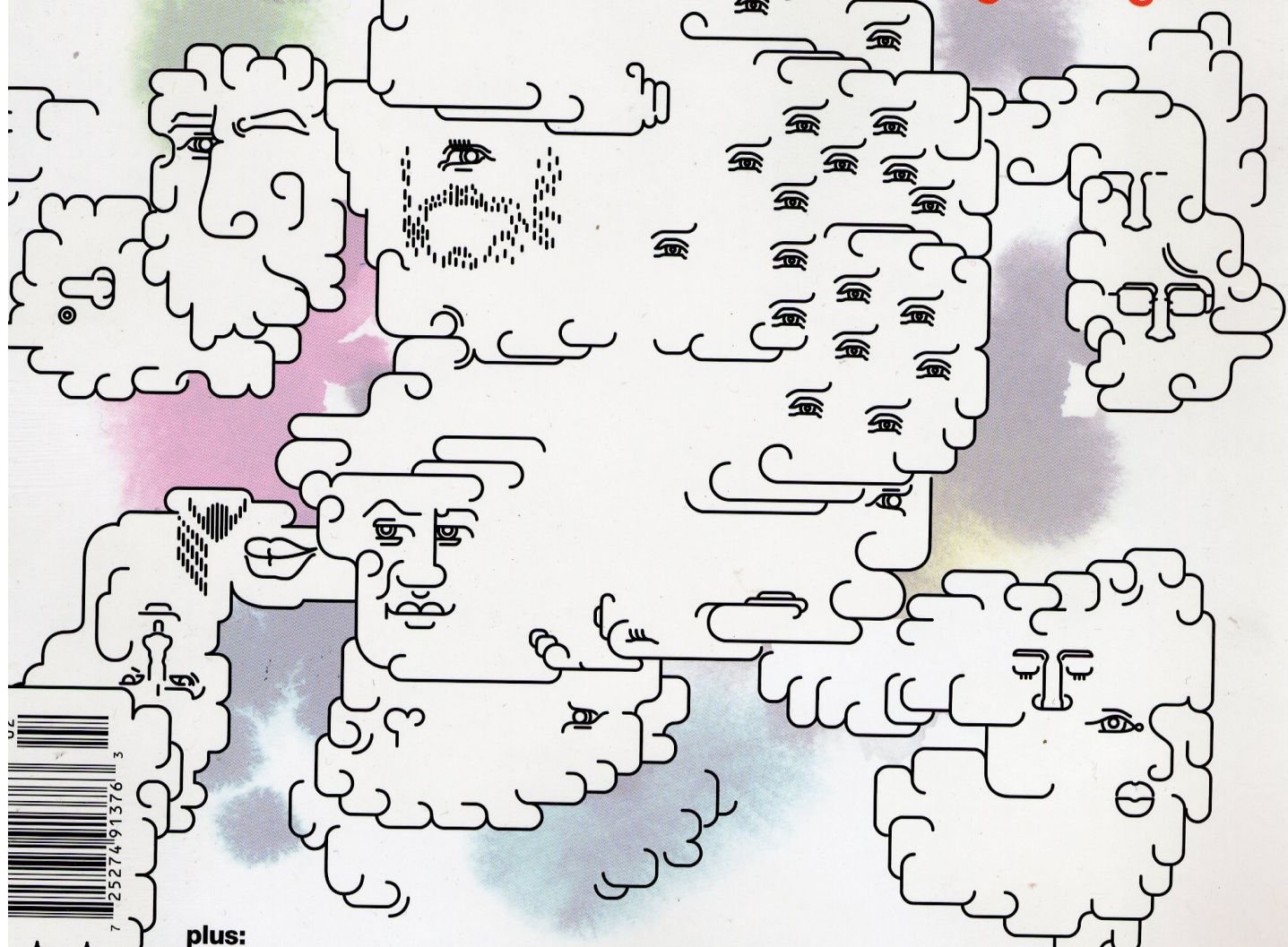


 **res**

**going
places:
10 creators
to watch
in 2006**

dougal wilson
takagi masakatsu
martin de thurah
fluorescent hill
eclectic method
impactist
ghislain poirier
marina zurkow
nash edgerton
keita takahashi



plus:

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martha colburn

art school confidential

pink mountaintops

squeak e. clean



master of puppets: martha colburn's handmade revolution

Words: Sue Apfelbaum
Photo: Mark Mahaney

Martha Colburn is still adapting to life in New York, but in a good way. After five years in Amsterdam, the 34-year-old animator returned to the States last June. Her new digs, in a loft building in Long Island City's Queensbridge section, are a little piece of heaven. She's only been there a few months and the neighborhood can be rough (she says she's been mistaken for a hooker), but her new home is an oasis for a working artist. The space has no shortage of eclectic history and bizarre energy; in the early '30s it was a Democratic Party headquarters (there's still a red-and-blue-mirrored Art Deco bar) and at the end of the '70s it was the punk club Exile (an old flyer for a Klaus Nomi show remains). Like Colburn herself, it's anachronistic and edgy, the perfect environment for her self-styled technique of making cut-out and hand-painted animation and manipulating found footage.

Canvases in varying stages of completion line the floor along one wall. As with much of Colburn's art, whether moving image or still, the work is layered and textured, making it hard to tell when something is finished. Reminiscent of Richard Prince's *Nurse Paintings*, they're portraits of vintage advertising models, grinning faces warped by decay. These paintings are from Colburn's first 35mm short, *Cosmetic Emergency* (2005), which she made on a Dutch film grant and is featured in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. A mixture of pop culture, political commentary and cynical humor infuses the pictures, as it does much of her work. "Most of my imagery is coming from life and from my environment [more] than from specific source material," Colburn admits. "Except that I do have an interest in - here's an art term - cultural detritus. Like the flotsam of audiovisual stuff that is part of my culture [and] part of my history as well, growing up in the '70s and '80s."

For *Cosmetic Emergency*, Colburn took inspiration from an article about the US military's policy of offering free cosmetic surgery to all personnel and their family members. Plastic surgery as we know it originated for reconstructive purposes for wounded soldiers, but now applies also to liposuction and breast augmentations (it's even been speculated that recruiters are using the policy as a lure). It's the kind of bizarre juxtaposition Colburn's approach is particularly well suited for. "How can you mix that visually?" she asks. "You can actually illustrate a theory that you can't film. Animation has been used traditionally to animate things you can't see, [such as] microscopic things or a how a machine works. I do the same thing but with bigger ideas. It's like a vent."

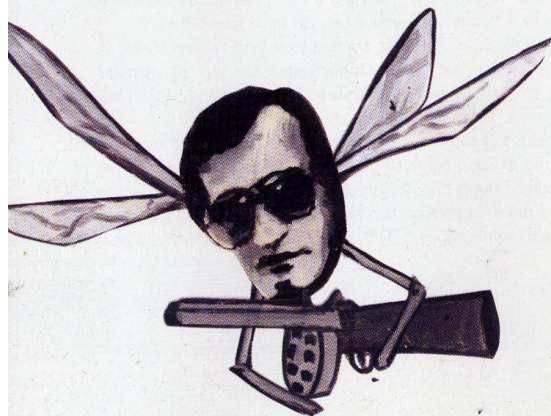
Raised near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Colburn grew up surrounded by virtually nothing. "We had a self-sufficient setup and animals out the wazoo,"



she recalls. "It was in the mountains, lower end of the Appalachians. It wasn't a town." Always a prolific artist, even in childhood, Colburn made drawings and sculpture inspired by the four-legged creatures she grew up with and TV news stories about famine in Ethiopia. In 1990 she escaped to Baltimore, the nearest big city, to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art - "an extremely poor art school experience," in her words. So bad, she says, it was "enough to even discourage me as an artist, after being a successful one until my teens. Art school sort of devastated my vision, whatever I had."

Colburn finished school in '94 and rediscovered her vision while living with a crusty group of poets and musicians in a rundown warehouse. After buying some old films and a projector from a city surplus dump, she started making found footage films "where you take each frame and cut it up individually and tape it back together." A fine artist until that point, Colburn immersed herself in the new medium. "Eventually someone gave me a Super 8 and I started filming, because you don't have to have photographic knowledge." At the same time, she taught herself how to manipulate celluloid. "I figured out how to hand scratch something that's 8x8mm and how to hand color that frame by frame... You sharpen a toothpick, you get the right safety pin that works for you to scratch with. I think people would be more likely to pick up a computer today."

Indeed, Colburn has little use for formal education, being self-taught in every creative form she's pursued, including music. During the same warehouse period, she also played in a band called the Dramatics. "I would play everything from kazoo to piano to trumpet to drums," she says. "But I don't really know how to play anything." This experimental mindset proved enormously fruitful. "I would make found footage films to this music. And I was like, well, the song has a title, therefore I should animate a title [since] I couldn't scratch [that small]. You can't fit the words [on a frame]. So I had to film it. Animating a title is actually what sparked my interest in making a whole film, because it was so easy. Animation seemed so simple, and then I could work visual elements into it." >>



POP CULTURE PROJECTOR: (OPPOSITE PAGE) MARTHA COLBURN IN HER LONG ISLAND CITY HOME, JANUARY 2006. (THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) 2-D PUPPETS FROM *CATS AMORÉ* (2002), *SKELEHELLAVISION* (2001) AND *BIG BUG ATTACK* (2002).



One of Colburn's most accomplished early films is *Persecution in Paradise* (1997), a departure from her found footage techniques that instead lets all the action unfold with flat "puppets" (Colburn's term for the signature two-dimensional cutouts she makes and manipulates on film). Featuring dancing crabs, limb-tearing female wrestlers, hula dancers and Half Japanese founder and frequent musical inspiration Jad Fair on a bucking bronco, *Persecution* is entirely painted and shot on 8mm. According to Colburn, she made this film as proof to the world that "I'm not a collage artist," but she allows, "I collaged the sound, [by cutting] certain excerpts of Jad's music to fit the scenes."

In 2000 she was accepted to a two-year artist residency program at Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (Royal College of Art) in Amsterdam. With even more free reign to realize her strange inner visions and further develop her aggressive visual language, Colburn created such films as *Skelehellavision*, for which she painted skeletons over softcore pornography, adding a horror soundtrack of her own creation; *Cats Amore*, in which her puppets are lingerie-clad women with feline heads chased by drooling dog men; and *Big Bug Attack*, a music film of centipede-people set to a manic electro track by Hamburg artist Felix Kubin. To watch several of her films in a row is to be simultaneously amused, disturbed and claustrophobic. You might think about things differently, but you also wonder how haunting it would be to constantly imagine life in such a Goya-esque way.

While festivals like Sundance and Cannes have screened her films, film-making cooperatives have archived them, and distinguished institutions like the Museum of Modern Art have honored them, Colburn has gained most of her exposure through alternative means. "My exhibition of my work [has been largely through] touring playing music and touring showing films, and has not been in art venues," she asserts. Her relationship with music introduces her to such interesting characters as Kubin and Coco Solid, an Auckland, New Zealand rapper whom Colburn commissioned to write a song for *Cosmetic Emergency*.

In fact, Colburn spends much of our interview wrestling with a rented 16mm projector, which she needs for a weeklong tour with West Coast art-rockers Deerhoof. She directed the collage video for the band's "Wrong Time Capsule"



last year, and now as part of a series of unusual warm-up acts (which also includes a modern dance troupe) she is screening a number of her short films ("It's like reliving the old days," she says). She refuses to go digital, so everything she does requires manual labor and attention to detail; what many people take for granted now Colburn wouldn't hear of simplifying. In fact, she's defiantly analog. "I never have used a computer to animate. This is just how my work developed, using real film and real tools.

"Many of my colleagues... they're 60, 70, 80 years old," she continues. "Because they're working the same way I'm working. You know, I'm not going to hang out with a computer animator and have a lot to talk about. I'm on the tail end of that asteroid that's burning to a dead light. There are still people doing it, but mostly you're dealing with older gentlemen. To keep the equipment going and to keep the tech going, it helps to be hanging out in that world." Some of those elder colleagues include George Kuchar and Jonas Mekas, founder of NYC's Anthology Film Archives. Colburn regards him as "incredible," while Mekas in turn has praised her work as "film songs" and "naked testimonials of our times."

Colburn's asteroid might burn a bit longer, as she's also been teaching her methods to a younger generation. In 2004 she was invited to Nanjing Arts Institute for three weeks and taught animation to Chinese university students. Colburn was sent there by a Dutch school that she insists wouldn't let her teach in the Netherlands but was happy to send her to China. "These students were just dying to do something," she says. "And everyone seemed to really like drinking – a lot – so we made a film called *Drunken Globalization*." The students cut up magazine pictures of political figures and painted underwear on them. She's also taught students in the more familiar territory of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where she spent a week helping a high school class make a film called *Baby's Bottle*, "with Jack Daniels and babies getting drunk." Two films by kids about booze? Colburn claims the students only made films about what interested them. "When you teach animation, especially [to] teenagers, they'll take the most mischievous thing they can express," she explains. "Or they'll take their secret pleasure. It's an instantly personal medium."

Colburn seems to be experiencing a moment right now, as many of her projects come to fruition simultaneously. This month, in addition to the Whitney screening, a six-second clip of her animation appears in Joel Feuerzeig's newly released film *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, the James River Film Festival in Virginia is honoring her work alongside one of her idols, Ray Harryhausen, and a solo exhibition of her films, installations and transparencies called *Fuk Our Mutt* wraps up at Chelsea's Stux Gallery. What Colburn is most looking forward to is a live film-jockeying event with Detroit-based musician and multimedia artist Perspectives, and Warhol legend, poet and fellow Biennial artist Taylor Mead. "When I was in Europe, because VJ culture is really big there, I developed my own kind of FJ – film jockey – [technique] where I would have four different projectors [playing] my films, found films, some slides, and I'd just try to outdo any VJ stuff I ever saw," she says. Opportunities like the "playground of FJ-ing" excite her far more than being honored by the Whitney.



And the constant desire to keep conveying the abstractions of her imagination keeps Colburn inspired to keep producing as much work as she can, to the best of her tools' ability. "Don't they say that perfection is doing the best you can?" she asks. "The material sets certain boundaries for me, but then I get to do as much as I can within those." ■■

> www.marthacolburn.com

SCARY MONSTERS: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) CUTOUTS FROM *PERSECUTION IN PARADISE* (1997), *BIG BUG ATTACK* AND *SKELEHELLAVISION*.