

# DISQUIET AMERICAN

## The Animated Collage Films of Martha Colburn

Due to their shape-shifting qualities, it is no easy feat getting to grips with Martha Colburn's animated collage films in one sitting. The ambiguous tension between the comical presentation of her handmade figurines and the deadpan thematic seriousness of the films themselves allows Colburn's work to transcend the extreme and the ridiculous into something more truthful and spell-binding. At the center of her work lies a restless observer who understands art as a strategy for inner catharsis.

Born in 1971 between Gettysburg and Harrisburg in rural Pennsylvania (just north of the Mason-Dixon line, a symbol of the American Civil War's racial segregation) Colburn identifies her filmic expression as both biographical and autobiographical. Her cinema is metamorphical by nature and can be grouped into stages, both historically and formally.

Colburn's animation is both technically intricate and visually demanding. Offering a plethora of abrasive, confrontational imagery, her work displays a virtuoso use of jump cuts, sonic distortion, found footage, collage and direct manipulation of the film stock by means of scratching and painting over it. Historical cornerstones have inscribed themselves not only into her own soul but also in the form of *pars pro toto*, offering an artistic reflection on imperialism and the corroding effect of capitalism on social cohesion in the United States. Colburn presents the destiny to succeed and rule as a curse, and lays reality and fiction next to each other to reveal the paradoxes; the old and the new, the pre- and the post-animated. Thus, her practice simultaneously looks back and forth in a physical sense, through assembling and reassembling the materials used in her films to tell a story that focuses equally on histories past and present. In Colburn's universe, the world is two-faced.

Colburn's films should always be considered alongside the music she integrates into them. Her use of music for inspiration, such as with lo-fi rock pioneer Jad Fair or her own band The Dramatics, with its chaotic, abrasive, noise psychedelia, agitating drum patterns and outer space electronic squeaks and voice samples, underlines the restless power and energy of her early films.

This program is the result of Eye's long-term commitment to safeguarding and promoting artists' films. A selection of Martha Colburn's works has already been made available digitally and distributed through the Short Film Pool. This compilation program will be offered both in analogue and digital form and comprises new restorations and digitizations.

For this program we would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Anthology Film Archives.



What's on, 1997

### What's on

1997, 16mm / DCP, color, sound, 2 min, new print

This film is set to the chaos-poetry of New York poet 99 Hooker. It is a hyper-speed rant on the evils and absurdities of American television, an over-the-top tumble in a TV mindscape in which we see attacking baboons, a mutating Michael Jackson, gameshows based on body parts and more. *What's On?* is a flat puppet-collage-paint and hand colored animation.

### Groscher Lausangriff: Big Bug Attack

2001, 16mm / DCP, color, sound, 3 min, new print

This film was made to accompany musician Felix Kubin's song *Groscher Lausangriff*, which is itself a play on words. Felix describes it thus: "The correct pronunciation would be 'Grosser Lauschangriff' which is a technical term for a widespread political action of bugging people's telephones. I swapped the 'sch' and the 's', so now it is 'Lausangriff', and 'Laus' means "louse". A lice attack.



Groscher Lausangriff: Big Bug Attack, 2001



Cat's Amore, 2000

The funny thing is that in English the word 'bug' has this double meaning of an insect and spying on people's telephones." The animated music video features insects with faces of famous German spies flying about, with a montage of telephone tapping and ear-bugging techniques within a fluttering rhythmic edit. It also stars Felix Kubin.

### Cat's Amore

2000, 16mm / DCP, color, sound, 2 min, new print

A film revealing our animal instincts in a hot display of gyrating half-human female cats and hungry-for-love dogs. Half naked/ half furry cats bump and grind their hips and transform into human-like manifestations with their abundance of make-up and sexy clothes. Meanwhile, panting, obsessed dogs look onto these scenes of seduction with drooling mouths and popping eyes. This film uses flat collage animated puppets and the film is hand colored. The



Cat's Amore, 2000



Skelehellavision, 2002

soundtrack is a French version of *I Wanna Be Your Dog* by Jac Berrocal and friends.

### Skelehellavision

2002, 16mm / DCP, color, sound, 8 min, new print

This is a film exploiting inventive techniques of animation in an attempt to realize the world that may await us after death. Using found pornography and literally scratching skeletons over the footage frame-by-frame we see into a lust-filled Hell. Ass-licking bats, seething snakes, dancing lizards, and frightful females are but a few of the stars of this movie, exploring the über-heated depths of the afterlife. Winner of Best Animated Film, New York Underground Film Festival (2003), the soundtrack by Martha Colburn is a carnivalesque cut-and-paste of sounds and spooky movie sound track singing.

### A Little Dutch Thrill

2005, Super8 to DCP, color, sound, 2 min, new digital restoration

Created as a music video (Super 8) for the Rotterdam-based Scottish/Swiss/Dutch trio Lianna Flu Winks, *A Little Dutch Thrill* features cut-ups and paint animations that mutate and collage the erotic Belgian Magazine *Gandalf*. The film contains odd and erotic subjects that are both explicit and exposed (flesh and bone). The surreal sexuality humorously presented in the magazine resonates in the film, animating the pulsing erotica into a grotesque circus of sorts.



XXX Amsterdam, 2005

### XXX Amsterdam

2005, Super8 to DCP color, sound, 3 min, new digital restoration

XXX Amsterdam is a stop-motion animated film that explodes with the energy of Amsterdam, national politics, overcrowding and the lifestyle of Amsterdammers, set to the electronic music of Hilary Jeffery. Bubbling with energetic editing and a cast of characters ranging from politicians to porn stars and a catastrophic pile-up of traffic, the film also takes a swipes at gentrification as bricks fill canal boats. The film was made for the Dutch Government to settle a disputed water bill while the filmmaker was living in the neighborhood known as the 'Baarsjes'.

### Cosmetic Emergency

2005, 35mm, color, sound, 8 min, new print

Cosmetic Emergency explores the idea of beauty through a collage of lyrical animations and live action. A film essay on the current trend of cosmetic obsession and the immortal quality of painting, the film searches for "what's on the inside". Topical news stories (such as the US military offer of free cosmetic surgery) and musical film sequences are created using paint-on-glass animation, found footage and documentary techniques. The commissioned soundtrack was created by New Zealand Hip-Hop artist Coco Solid, Half Japanese founder Jad Fair, British radio artist Mick Hobbs and trombonist Hilary Jeffery. Also included is a rare appearance by the Dutch Ambassador of Cosmetic Surgery, Marijke Helwegen.



Myth Labs, 2008

### Myth Labs

2008, Super8 to DCP, color, sound, 8 min

Myth Labs interweaves Puritan visions, folk art, religious allegories and victims of the current Methamphetamine epidemic. A film about fear, paranoia, faith and salvation, Myth Labs takes place in the wilderness of the American frontier. As it did for the meth addicts of rural America, the wilderness represented a place of damnation and ultimate resurrection for the Puritans. Overly fervent faith and its flip-side addiction can change one from a mere mortal to Superman to a scarecrow. Like a 'wolf in sheep's clothing' these two vices (or devices) of salvation can have devastating consequences.

### Dolls versus Dictators

2011, DCP, color, sound, 11 min

A stop-motion animated film commissioned by the Museum of Moving Image in Queens NY which features ten top dictators and a group of US TV/ movie star dolls, with a soundtrack by



Dolls versus Dictators, 2011

Greg Saunier. The 'doll-versions' of these television stars were made for merchandising – the television industry's own form of propaganda. They use their 'powers' to eradicate several contemporary dictators, from the notorious to the obscure. Hand-to-hand combat is used to defeat the dictators, using feathers, pipe cleaners and pom-poms as weaponry.

### Triumph of the Wild

2009, 35mm, color, sound, 5 min, new print

This film explores the impulse of hunting and the resilience of people and animals in times of battle, and covers over 400 years of history in ten minutes using stop-motion animation. Paintings and puzzles in the film evolve from animal form to human, from hunted to hunter and from war zone to wilderness.

### Day of the Dutch

2015, DCP, color, sound, 5 min

Animated video following the life of two young girls in Amsterdam, as they live through a 'Dead



Triumph of the Wild, 2009

Life', with a soundtrack by Felix Kubin and live composition by Felipe Waller and SDH. In Day of the Dutch we follow a day in the life of a living skeleton family within a Dutch home environment. The film shows events from the daily life of a modern (deceased) family. In short, Day of the Dutch is about the idea that death is part of life. The film follows a young girl protagonist proceeding from life to death to life. Or vice versa. The film is made from boxes, dolls, toys, sculptures and both painted paper and collage.



Day of the Dutch, 2015

Program curated by Marius Hrdy and Simona Monizza  
Program notes by Marius Hrdy and Martha Colburn  
Total running time of the program: 58 minutes

For more information about the program and bookings:  
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presents: a Martha  
Colburn program

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