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The art world has always been so varied and diverse, there is certainly something for everyone—even hardcore horror fans. For them, that something has come in the form of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: REANIMATED.

This project is a mixed-media installment wherein various artistic styles, contributed by over 100 artists from a variety of different disciplines, are utilized to recreate scenes from George A. Romero’s seminal NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, threaded together by the film’s audio and narrative. The media include everything from illustration, cartoon animation, computer imaging and rotoscoping to stop-motion, claymation and puppetry (yes, that’s right: zombie puppets). The result is a quite imaginative amalgam of creative forces unlike anything you’re liable to see elsewhere.

The experience of viewing NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: REANIMATED is rather unique. While the production generally maintains the thrill of the original film, much of it strikes entirely different emotional chords as well, with inclusions such as sock-puppet newscasters, undead Furbies and animated sequences in which the living humans are depicted as mice while the ghouls are cats. This artistic fusion culminates in a distinctive and exceptional presentation sure to enthrall all viewers familiar with the source material.

After viewing the feature, Fango was lucky enough to discuss the project with its conceptualist and curator, Mike Schneider.

FANGORIA: NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: REANIMATED is described on its official website as “an art show hung on the cult classic’s timeline…the original narrative serves as the theme that holds the show together.” What made NIGHT ideal for a project like this?

MIKE SCHNEIDER: Reanimation, as defined by animator Winsor McCay, is the process of giving something a new life through artwork. He argued that artists had the potential to bring something to a project which goes beyond what can be seen—a feeling, an impression, perspective. Apart from the obvious pun on the word “reanimated,” this project is all about the new rising up to consume the old. And isn’t that what NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD is all about? In effect this is not just an animated version of Romero’s film, it’s the story turned onto itself as this horde of individuals slowly moves in, rips the film to pieces and finally recreates it in their own image.

FANG: Outside of conceiving the concept and acting as curator for the material, as an artist in your own right, what hands-on involvement did you have in the feature?

SCHNEIDER: I was very active throughout the production of REANIMATED. Beyond the concept, I wrote most of the copy, drafted the prospectus, acted as the go-between for different artists, designed the websites, edited the trailers, designed the posters, designed the cover art, edited the project—including all the camera movement—taught some artists how to animate, assisted others in animating their segments, helped some of the press writers with coordinating/editing mass interviews, coordinated/scheduled most of the screenings, wrote the updates and releases, and of course created my own submissions to the timeline. My own segments include still illustrations, rotoscoping, hand-drawn animation, stop-motion and photo puppetry.

Of all the segments I submitted to the project, one of my favorites is the hand-drawn scene where Barbara shouts, “I screamed, ‘Johnny, Johnny, help me.’ ” This was done by projecting the original footage onto a pillow form and then drawing each portrait freehand with conte crayons, much like one would if drawing from a live model.

FANG: Incorporating such a wide variety of artistic styles and media, with NIGHT’s audio and narrative serving as a thread, gives viewers an entirely different aesthetic response than they do from simply watching Romero’s feature. Tell me a little about that.

SCHNEIDER: I’ve done workshops and art programs, and one of the first things you learn is that you must show multiple examples when presenting a new project. Show a class a single piece, they’ll view it as an absolute instead of an instance. It isn’t until they have a range of

varied examples put in front of them that they’re really asked to consider where their vision would fall within that range. This is active observation, and it will make for a more flexible audience. Give a man an answer and he’s entertained for a moment; teach a man to question and he’s occupied for a lifetime.

FANG: When you first conceived the project, did you ever expect to see such a wide variety of styles to be incorporated? Were you surprised by the wonderfully outside-the-box takes each artist applied, utilizing each medium?

SCHNEIDER: As a conceptual artist, I enter a project knowing what it’s going to be about and an idea of how I hope it will function, without putting any thought into how it will look. As abstract as that may sound, without such expectations, there are far fewer assumptions made, and I’m more open to other people coming in and really making it their own. My personal animated works have employed everything from eggs on an electric skillet to insects following trails of sugar water, so I know how flexible this media can be under the right circumstances. So the old thinking-outside-the-box model really presumed that there is such a box in the first place.

That said, I loved every work that came in, and the thrill of seeing what the next piece would be really motivated us all to keep going and keep playing. What really surprised me was the people. Beyond their talented hands, these are passionate, wonderful individuals who have put their work and community ahead of themselves time and time again. By comparison, it’s far easier to make good art than it is to be a good artist.

{youtube}rMbosVn_ZDc{/youtube}

FANG: Did any of the pieces or sequences stand out for you in particular, upon viewing the full and finished product? Do you have any favorites?

SCHNEIDER: Even though they’re all viewed within the same project, it’s hard to compare them to one another. My favorite moments are when two extremely different works are juxtaposed next to each other.

If you take a photo of children in a playground, you can send it to a parenting magazine, and if you take a photo of lions in a savannah, you can send it to National Geographic. But if you mix those images together, say by putting a lion in a playground full of children, well, then, you’ve got a story.

FANG: Sadly, outside of Japanese anime, and perhaps a handful of Ralph Bakshi flicks from the ’70s and ’80s, there hasn’t been a great deal of animation geared toward an adult audience. Would you like to aid in changing this trend here in the States?

SCHNEIDER: I’d argue that adult animation is not rare at all. Apart from the case that all film and video stems from animation, and the fact that when you total up props, rigs, miniatures, cutaways, frame/theme sequences, credits and digital graphics/FX, that animation is a predominant force that carries many films, one can still argue that there is a wealth of adult-geared animation to be uncovered.

The trick is realizing that animation, when done right, is time-consuming and labor-intensive, and that means it’s typically done in shorter formats. If we look back, LIQUID TELEVISION—which to many is still seen as a crowning achievement in adult-oriented animation—would feature numerous short animations within the framework of a single broadcast. Reviewing Adult Swim’s current lineup, one will note that more and more of their programming is following in the traditions of MTV’s ODDITIES and switching to 15-minute slots. With themes, credits, bumps and commercials, the average 15-minute show only sports about six minutes of original animation. And even that is produced by an entire team of animators.

Because the nature of the form caters to a shorter format, DVD distribution can be difficult until there are enough shorts to package them as a collection. Many independent animators either turn toward the Net, hosting them on their own pages or posting them to YouTube, etc., or they submit them to festivals specifically geared toward short animation for adults, such as SPIKE AND MIKE and THE ANIMATION SHOW, which frequently put out festival compilation DVDs. In relation to these trends, REANIMATED poses an alternative model for assembling a collection of short animated segments together.

FANG: NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD is a rather significant piece of popular culture, having considerable influence over the 40-plus years since its initial release. How well does a film with such a strong cultural hold work as a springboard for a project such as this? Do you believe this added difficult challenges for the artists who participated in the project, or simply spurred them

on, using the film’s popularity to further alter and warp viewers’ expectations?

SCHNEIDER: Artists throughout the ages have responded to the world around them. I, for one, have spent more time watching NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD than looking out over a majestic landscape or sitting in front of a rotting bowl of fruit. As an artist, you can’t avoid doodling and thinking about the things that peak your interest. So the fact that NIGHT is so much a part of our culture is at least partially to thank for why there are so many artists who have been touched by it and were excited by the opportunity to celebrate it through their artwork. The fact that the audience is familiar with the original movie grants the artists a lot of freedom in how they present it. Still, all freedom has its price.

There is a natural challenge to working with any notable subject. It’s almost like doing an art piece on racism, sexism, religion or abortion. Whereas these themes may be a part of your life, you must accept the reality, as the artist, that they are also a part of your audience’s lives, and for many of them, your work will be judged based on their beliefs and expectations, not on how successfully it meets your goals. That said, there is nothing quite like getting someone to look past all that and see something they know and care about in a new way, so as long as you can develop a thick skin, this isn’t something that should deter you from a subject you’re passionate about.

FANG: Have you always been a fan of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD and Romero’s overall work?

SCHNEIDER: Sadly, the uterus had horrible reception [*laughs*], but some of my first memories are of watching old horror movies. I honestly can’t remember a time before I had seen that film. Apart from the DEAD trilogy and TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE, I hadn’t seen Romero’s other works until high schoo,l when IRC and Internet databases changed how I looked at and for movies. Though I’m not a DEAD-only Romero fan, NIGHT is still my favorite of his movies.

FANG: Would you recommend this feature to new audiences not familiar with NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, or should viewing the movie be a prerequisite?

{youtube}B4RE_VIYjSY{/youtube}

SCHNEIDER: Every viewer needs a way to enter a piece of art in order to truly appreciate it, so I’d say that they would be doing themselves a disservice to not watch the original film first. Moreover, as a fan of the movie, I’d say they are doing themselves a disservice to not watch NIGHT despite their interest in watching REANIMATED.

FANG: We’re living in a current climate of heightened popularity for the undead. There is a rather palpable zombie phenomenon going on in popular media, ranging from films such as SHAUN OF THE DEAD and ZOMBIELAND to books including PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES as well as WORLD WAR Z. Do you feel your project has a contemporary appeal that is best suited for this day and age, as opposed to a decade or so prior?

SCHNEIDER: I’d take it a step further and question why zombies are on the rise. Many people will refer to the era we are in as postmodern. Postmodernism is what happens when we accept that the rules of things, as we traditionally thought about them, are dead, and so we need to fine new directions to go in or applications for those traditional thoughts. As a result, postmodern works are typically noted by an exploration of the loss of identity, how individuals blend into crowds, the nature of absence—including death and obsolescence—consumptionism/appropriation of culture, what we take in and how we make it our own, primitivism, reverting to simpler approaches to things and our relation to history, how we interact with those who came before us.

The Net, in particular, has put us up against the world and all of its history. When you see yourself as part of such a large system, it’s easy to lose identity, and so we latch on to the choices we make to define us—such as what we consume: movies, music, games, food, etc. As a whole, society is struggling against this collective history and attempting to present it in its own image: remakes, reboots, revivals, revisions, adaptations, covers, mashups. What is all of this but one culture consuming another? In effect, the zombie serves as a perfect poster child for the era.

Much like on-line handles, zombies are faceless representations of people, so they’re safe vehicles to play out a range of ideas and scenarios. In the past, the audience was largely governed by their fear of the unknown, but these days we are so afraid of things that we know about that there’s no point in hesitating before venturing outside. This is likely the impetus for the shift from the eerie contemplative dread to the action-packed thrill ride that we’ve seen in zombie media. In most cases, the ghouls now represent the law, and the heroes are the lawless. It’s like John Wayne or Godzilla; people scream themselves out of sync until there’s a

worse threat and they need to be saved. These days, everyone is more afraid of stagnation than they are of risk, so bring it on.

A decade ago, the audience would have seen a project such as NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: REANIMATED as being too visually wild, and argue the sacrilege of treading on such hallowed ground. After a decade facing an industry so wrapped up in confusion that it is largely afraid to move forward, horror fans are ready to embrace anything that’s a bit different. I’m not saying that everyone will love this project—that’s insane—but I believe many of us are in a place where we’re willing to give new things a try, and with experimental art, that’s all you can really ask for.

FANG: I know the film has circulated through quite a few film festivals. What has the overall reception been so far?

SCHNEIDER: Strong. With the first screenings, we either had people walk out of the theater cursing or come up afterward to thank us for making the project. Every early review repeatedly featured either the word love or hate. As we continued screening the project, we found the response became increasingly positive. I personally feel the reviewers are to thank, because despite how they felt about REANIMATED, they helped others gain a better understanding of it, and from there, our audience appears to have either adjusted their expectations or evaluated their attendance.

FANG: Is there any plan on the part of you, Neoflux or those involved to give other horror favorites similar treatment in the near future? Dare I say RE-ANIMATOR: REANIMATED?

SCHNEIDER: With our next project, UNSEEN HORROR, we will be taking a step further into this line of experiments by turning a similar approach toward animating/illustrating visuals for old-time horror radio dramas. This project will again be a community-generated production, and anyone interested in participating should e-mail mike@unseenhorror.com . I will, however, be releasing my full notes regarding the project through Creative Commons, so if anyone else is interested in reanimating their favorite film, they can start their production off with knowledge of everything I have learned during this process.

In a larger view, I’m working my way back through horror history in hopes of finding an alternative route. I’ve jokingly told some of the artists I’ve been working with that I will eventually

be tweening the cave paintings, but it’s far more likely that I’ll start moving forward again once I reach the silent era. I’m anxious to make my own movies, but I have a lot of assumptions to unlearn first.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: REANIMATED will be released on DVD later this year by Wild Eye, with a commentary track by horror author Jonathan Maberry, as well as about three hours’ worth of other extras.

{youtube}jeUn6CiJtVk{/youtube}

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