

when she flees Damascus—but because her father taught her how to draw when she was young, she memorializes Syria through her own art. One of the high-schoolers working for the project created charcoal drawings of Damascus based on the interviewee's descriptions. To display the woman's memories of violence, Mak and her colleagues chose to use a 20-minute stop-motion sequence of these draw-

ings, starting with the woman's school, the tree that grew outside her family's farm—and ending with the bombings that reduced much of the city to rubble. "We didn't want to actually recreate realistically what was happening," Mak says. "It was more important to show the journey that she and her family had been on."

In 2015, Mak wrote an "artist manifesto" that she keeps posted on her website.

"Make art that isn't afraid to stare down what the rest of the world is afraid to look at," it reads in part. "Be desperately in love with the world, with everything that is right about it and everything that is wrong about it." This insistence on loving the world, even while uncovering and displaying its flaws, is unmistakable in the work that Mak brings to life on-stage: horrifying, gritty, hopeful, beautiful.

"Kind of Dark and Scary"

Animator Renee Zhan finds self-discovery in strange landscapes.

by S.I. ROSENBAUM

RENE ZHAN '16 was hiking along a humid mountain trail in Japan when she looked down to discover that her legs and feet were covered with more than 50 leeches. "True terror is what I felt," she recalled in a recent interview. "I spent maybe 30 minutes just picking them all off."

But as an animator, Zhan has long been interested in the disgusting and the visceral. Her short films often feature things that eat each other—and themselves. In her latest, "Reneeoptosis", three versions of herself go hiking through the humid folds of her own body, and their quest ends in an auto-cannibalistic feast.

There's something grossly satisfying about the way Zhan animates. The figures,

only vaguely human-shaped, plop and ooze through the landscape in a way that makes you think of body fluids. It's unlike any other animation you've ever seen.

Born in Texas to two scientists—her father is a geophysicist, her mother a geneticist—Zhan loved cartoons. "It was always sort of something I thought was almost like magic," she explained. She watched Disney movies, but also "weird old Chinese cartoons my mother showed me," like the classic 1965 *Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven*. Adapted from the Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West*, originally published around 1592, "It was kind of dark and scary," Zhan recalls. "Sometimes it talked about punishment and repentance...there were a lot of weird themes in there that you don't really

get in Western animation." It fascinated her.

But it wasn't until she started college in 2012 that she took her first animation class, a freshman seminar with Ruth Lingford, a senior lecturer in visual and environmental studies and an accomplished animator whose own work uses poems, fairy tales, and biblical stories to ask questions about sexuality, violence, aging, death, and identity. Zhan was hooked from the initial assignment: "The first time I saw something I had drawn move, it was so exciting," she said. "I wanted to keep doing it, despite the amount of work it took." Even today, she animates by drawing each image by hand on paper—about 12 of them make one second of film—and using watercolors for the backgrounds.

Her first animated short "was very lovely and sweet," she recalls, before adding, "I think my work has gone on a different trajectory since then." Indeed. Things got dark

In "Reneeoptosis," by animator Renee Zhan, three versions of the artist go on a quest for God, traversing an unfamiliar terrain that turns out to be her own body.



MARCO ABRAM



Zhan draws each image by hand on paper, using watercolors to create backgrounds.

very fast: her next film was about an aquarium of neglected and starved fish who eat first their lead-laced tank decorations and then, inevitably, each other (“The stench of cannibalism was overwhelming,” reads one of the film’s title cards).

An introvert and only child, Zhan took well to the isolation of an animator’s life. She tried making documentaries during a Harvard summer-school session in Berlin, but they were unpredictable, and “having to talk to people in the world was exactly the opposite of what I wanted to do,” she said. With animation, “I can just make the film at my desk and not talk to anyone, and I have control over everything that happens on the screen, and the limitless possibility of it is what I found so attractive.”

Nonetheless, she also joined the Harvard Lampoon, and a dark sense of humor emerged in her work. She made a film about a suicidal pigeon, “Pidge,” and the avian theme carried over into her thesis film, “Hold Me (Ca Caw Ca Caw),” about a man and a bird in a co-dependent relationship. There’s a lot of man/bird sex, and, of course, someone ends up getting eaten. (Several of Zhan’s short films, including this one—as well as a trailer for “Reneeoptosis”—can be streamed online at Vimeo.com)

“Reneeoptosis” was the first film she made after graduation, but—like “Hold Me”—there’s nothing amateur about it. Zhan animated it while on a postgraduate traveling fellowship in Japan. “The fellowship afforded a lot of freedom, which was amazing—exactly what I needed,” she said. “I did a lot of hiking and spent a lot of time alone, which is where the new film came from. It’s about a bunch of Renees who go on a quest to find God, who’s also me.”

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The film explores the ideas of loneliness and growth and self-discovery. Its title is adapted from “apoptosis,” the programmed cell death that occurs as a normal part of an organism’s growth and development. At first, she said, she was “quite embarrassed” about the film. “I have no idea what I just made,” she thought. “If no one likes it, I’ll bury it forever.”

Eventually she worked up the nerve to

show it to Lingford. “She seemed to like it,” Zhan said, “so I was encouraged”—and in January, the film took the top prize for animated shorts at this year’s Sundance Film Festival. *CineVue* critic Christopher Machell, reviewing its appearance at the Toronto International Film Festival, called it “strange and charming in equal measure...an often beautiful and funny journey through the landscape of self-discovery.”

Currently Zhan is studying at the National Film and Television School in London. It’s likely that the themes she’s been working on will be those she continues to explore. “[‘Hold Me’] started out a much larger film—there was this whole narrative where the bird goes to a bird club and there’s a bird rave,” she said. “I’m writing a feature now, and the bird club is back in there.”

Toward the Negotiated City

In the history of urban renewal, a glimmer of the possibilities of social policy today

by ANN FORSYTH

HOW TO ENSURE that everyone can live a life with opportunity and meaning is an enduring question. It is also a question related in part to where people live. Are homes and neighborhoods vibrant, safe, affordable, and nurturing? Do they support different kinds of people living different kinds of dreams? What are the roles of the private sector, individuals, and experts in building these good communities? What roles do governments have in making places healthy, supporting local initiatives and preferences,

and creating a framework so that everyone contributes toward the common good? At a time when such questions are barely being asked, at least at a national level, an historical perspective is especially valuable.

In *Saving America’s Cities*, Lizabeth Cohen—dean emerita of the Radcliffe Institute and Jones professor of American studies—addresses these larger questions about what people owe each other in society. She uses the life of “top city saver,” “Mr. Urban Renewal,” and “master rebuilders” Ed Logue to tell the story of urban policy in the United States

from the 1950s to the 1980s. Like Winston Groom’s *Forrest Gump* or Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Logue during his working life found himself in the center of a series of major federal and state approaches to revitalizing urban areas. A controversial figure who died in 2000, he was very active in taking advantage of programs and creating new opportunities, using his skills as a negotiator to capture funds from newly approved programs and his capacity as an innovator to launch additional policy and program initiatives in three cities. Focusing

Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$35)

The redeveloped Government Center, Boston, 1971, and surrounding private buildings; development czar Ed Logue



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