

About Animate Clay's Marc Spess

Written by Marc Spess

Friday, 23 April 2010 17:18 - Last Updated Wednesday, 06 July 2011 16:18

I'm Marc Spess, a stop motion and clay animation film maker. If you are wondering who I am - well really

The first real "Ah Ha!" moment came when I was in second grade and our art teacher gave us some clay

My parents then bought me some clay called Van Aken Modeling clay. Nowadays they call it ClayToon a

At the time I lived in Bayshore New York, and I was known as the creative movie maker on the block. All



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When I turned about 14, our life took a turn. My dad would transfer to Saint Louis' Lambert Airport for his job in a year. TWA "Trans World Airlines" decided he would do best to transfer - and that's what we did. At 15 I found myself in a whole new world. Saint Peters was a lot different than Bayshore, but this move was fateful for me. We moved into a house where I had a large bedroom to set up my own little sculpting area.

At this time I wanted to join ILM "Industrial Light and Magic" and work with Lucas creating films like the latest Star Wars movies. I loved making model ships, planes and sci-fi kits. I also learned about the Games Workshop games and would go to a local shop in down town St. Charles to buy small pewter figures to paint. I could care less for the games, but the tiny sculptures were amazing to me. They had magazines that explained how to make tiny dioramas and how to paint the figures.

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The big thing on TV were the California Raisins - and I quickly started to love how they made the Dominoes Noid and Kentucky Fried Chicken commercials. If you watched any show on television - they would have these commercials after each one. Claymation was HUGE, and all I knew was that I wanted to know how it was done.

After a year or two in Saint Peters Missouri, we got to know the area really well and had settled in. I was making sculptures based off of a VHS tape called Meet the Raisins by [Will Vinton Productions](#). I would freeze the tape of the carrot named Cecil and tried to make an exact copy. The look of the clay puppets mesmerized me. They looked alive, which I later figured out was because of the translucent waxes in the clay. It's the same reason they use wax for the figures in wax museums, and translucent marble was used in Roman times to make portraits. Real skin has the same translucent look.

I was starting to get really good at sculpting by now and had a tiny portfolio of pictures I took of my characters. They all had one thing in common though - they all looked like they were about to fall over because I didn't know how to make proper armatures or any of the technical stuff. It was all hidden under clay in the TV special and commercials I had recorded on tape, so I couldn't reproduce them. I really needed someone to teach me these things, but who?

My Lucky Meeting: Here is where my life got interesting and very lucky. My parents, a counselor I knew "my parents were trying to mend their relationship" and my sister all told me about someone coming to town that I never knew about. They had read an article in a newspaper about a guy called Mike McKinney. Mike was visiting to have a small workshop for kids about the Claymation process. I didn't have a car to drive since I was too young, and so my sisters boyfriend at the time named Dave Spiller offered to drive me to the workshop.

The workshop was at a place called the [Magic House](#). It had a lot of little attractions for kids, like a big glow-in-the-dark wall with a strobe light in front of it so you could freeze your pose. Plus large puzzles and things. I was a bit old for it all, but I went and sat at a table that was set up in a big room. There were lots of parents and kids all around, and Mike quickly showed some videos he bought from Will Vinton Studios to explain the very basics of Claymation.

Then he went around from table to table giving each kid pieces of clay to try and sculpt. I was pretty shy, but Dave told me to show Mike my pictures when he got to me. So I did, and Mike noticed that I was more than just a kid with a fleeting interest in Claymation. He pulled me and Dave aside to a side table where he kept all his props and bags full of puppets, videos and other interesting gadgets. I was ecstatic! Imagine wanting to learn about the California Raisins, and not only being able to hold a real Raisin puppet - but to meet someone who animated them!

So after sitting through a few workshops that Mike gave back-to-back, he finally had time to talk to me. He was extremely generous with his knowledge and taught me all he could in the short period of time that we spent together. He taught me the basics of how the armatures were

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constructed, how the eyes were made out of acrylic white balls - and how the puppets were animated one frame at a time. They were simple tricks, but at the time - since I didn't know anything at all, it was like opening a treasure chest full of \$1000.00 bills. A real dream come true.

Mike then asked us to help him get his bags ready to leave as he departed to another destination on his US tour about Claymation. It turns out that Mike was trying to get by and support his family with these tours in-between jobs at the studio. I would later join him in Portland Oregon after he invited me there to put on a workshop with him as a helper. In this time period he taught me many more tricks, and he also invited me to visit Will Vinton Studios itself.

I told him I heard about a guy named John Ashlee from a magazine I had called [World Magazine](#)

The magazine had done a story about Claymation during their 1986 Christmas special and John was shown in a picture animating Santa's elves. It also showed Kyle Bell sculpting a small Christmas tree and another sculptor creating the bell characters for a segment in the film. Mike told me that yes he knew John personally, and asked me if I would like to meet him? I said - yes of course! And that's when he left me with John at the studio during Johns lunch break on a weekend. John was a real workaholic but this gave me the chance to really look at everything in detail without getting in the way of the employees.

John gave me a tour of each floor, allowing me to take as many pictures as I wanted of all the characters, armatures and tables where everyone worked. I was out of my mind, asking tons of questions that John patiently answered. How to mix clay colors, creating armatures and showing me his personal project he was working on. It was of an old wizard who lived in a sort of cathedral with stained glass windows and lit from the inside. He later took me to a studio apartment they had rented where other artists often rented to play music and animate films. This is where John sat me down to explain the intricacies of animating the faces of clay puppets. How to cut the faces with knives and how to re-shape them between frames. But that came later that week during my stay

Deciding my Fate: Before we left Will Vinton studios, John took me upstairs to a place where I wasn't allowed to take pictures. There was a top secret project going on that he promised was going to big! We walked to the end of the studio and walked up to the top floor on some rickety stairs. Once I made it to the top, the room was light. It was high up above the other near by buildings on the south side. There were rows of windows on the left, and tables next to them with various sculptures of some of the most amazing puppets. Then to my right there was what John called " [the Amazing Wall of Puppets](#) ".

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This Wall of Puppets is what inspired me more than anything I ever laid my eyes on. Each puppet was sculpted by a man named Gary "Gairy was his art name" Bialke. He was an illustrator of comical characters and one of the best sculptors in the studio. The film project was called the Frog Prince, based on the original story that you read as a kid. Unfortunately I could take no pictures, but when I saw these puppets I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I held the pictures in my head from this experience, always trying to be as good as Gary, but I don't think that is really possible since he was in my mind one of the best for that style of sculpture.

By the time I went home from my trip, my mind was full of new information. I was extremely inspired to go out and get a job making commercials - or to work at a studio. Mike McKinney and I kept in touch and he told me about a place called [John Lemmon Films](#) in North Carolina where there was a job opening. I called John and scheduled to meet him. My parents were going to visit the same area, so I told John that maybe I could try out. Mike put in a good word about me to John, and they agreed to meet.

Before I went, I sculpted a puppet and mounted it on a piece of wood with a plastic top. It turned out great, and I knew that if I gave it to the studio they would have to see it every day. How could they forget me? So that's what the plan was. When my taxi arrived at the studio, John and Mike Rosinski greeted me and chatted with me for a bit. I then gave them my Mad Man character and told them it was for them. They insisted I take it back, but I refused.

Mike took me to their back shed area and gave me a 2-D clay on glass head that Joel Brinkerhoff sculpted and he asked me to try to sculpt it. It took me about 15 minutes to do. John and Mike both said it was good and decided to hire me. I ended up working with them for around 4 months or so making sets, doing simple animation and sculpting for the Henry Cycle project. Tom Smith did the main animation and lighting, but I had my foot in the door finally. They hired me a few times, even to work on some Cartoon Network "no brainer afternoon" commercials.

While at the studio I saw the demo reel of [Webster Colcord](#) and became friends with him over the phone - which lead me to work with him later back in Portland on some [Warner Brothers Latin America commercials](#)

[Mark Kendrick](#)

and

[John Ashlee](#)

also worked with Webster, so I was able to learn almost everything about all the techniques over this period of time. I even met

[Chuck Duke](#)

briefly, another great artist at the studio. But it was only for a drive in his van with his hyper dog that ended up licking me on the mouth - yuck!...but that's another story. Outside of meeting my wife and getting married, these memories are some of the best I have in my life. But unfortunately Will Vinton Studios decided not to create Claymation films any more after the Frog

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Prices funding dried up. John Lemmon Films stopped getting work and I had to find local work where I lived to get by.

I worked for five years in the jewelry industry creating wax pendants, rings and nick-nacks that we cast in gold and silver for [Paul Stuart Jewelry](#) . I also worked for a company called [Natoli Engineering](#) in St. Charles Missouri, sculpting characters for the Disney Sweet Tart candy line, the WWF "wrestling", various Japanese candies and Mexican gum products. But my true love was stop motion and clay animation, and there was nowhere to go.

The Internet: A Place to Create: That's when the Internet was just taking off. YouTube and Google didn't exist, but AOL had free web sites you could build. I decided to create one, and it didn't even have a domain name. It was just like userpages/aol/clayanimation. It was a one page site with the very basics of creating clay puppets. The site was wildly popular and it was one of the first ones to be created. The Yahoo Claymation group was what stopmotionanimation.com is today, and I would regularly post each day with other animators.

That's when I decided to write my first book called Secrets of Clay Animation Revealed around the year 2000. It was self published through Minute Man Press in St. Peters. I provided lots of pictures that Will Vinton Studios gave me the rights to use, as well as Bruce Bickford and guys like Josh Jennings who went on to work in California on Robot Chicken. Unfortunately for me Minute Man Press went out of business before our deal of a lowered price on the 2nd batch of prints didn't work out and I lost a lot of money. The good news was every printed book sold out fast, and I knew that there was a chance to get some income through teaching others this amazing art.

Over the years since then I have introduced millions of people to clay animation and how they can make their own stop motion films. I also write news several times per month about exciting current events in this very lucrative industry.

I also have another website called Zombie Pirates at <http://www.zombie-pirates.com/> . It is where I can express my own art and show others how I'm creating the production on my own. It's on hold for now since getting married and having a son, but will resume in the future.

One of my most crowning achievements was when the software we offer on our site called Anasazi "written by Penn Taylor" was featured on TechTV as a free animation capture software to anyone interested in making their own films. Ever since then Animate Clay has expanded, selling even more helpful information products that I've made for my visitors. That includes DVD's on sculpting, animating, armature design, videos on smoothing clay, sculpting hair and making aluminum wire armatures. I have also collaborated with armature designers to periodically offer armature kits for those who have bigger projects.

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What's great is to see people utilizing the techniques in our [DVD's, videos, kits and e-books](#) and really making much nicer films as a result. Being able to reveal solutions to problems that I once had to work so hard to learn is really rewarding. With the Internet everything is available to everyone when it was once a secret craft. There are more animated films being made now thanks to the Internet and technology. Its great to be a part of it!

If you would like to learn more about clay and stop motion animation, make sure to bookmark this site. We have a free newsletter, products in the store to help you learn the tricks to better film making and news which is updated each week.

View a Belorussian translation of [this page here](#) by Galina Miklosic.