

Unearthing Bruce Bickford

Two local documentarians bring a legendary underground animator back into the light

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The animated films unspool an idiosyncratic vision. It's also one that's more than occasionally reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch. In an ongoing battle of uncertain aims, armies made of clay stab at one another. The human body stays in grotesque flux throughout: heads keep changing shape, eyeballs keep falling out. A cranium sliced open reveals the ineffable matter within to be nothing more than ground-up meat.

The animation is painstakingly precise, the work of a phenomenally skilled artisan. It is also the product of a distant and mysterious imagination, one that refuses to conform to the traditional demands of exposition, conflict and resolution.

Meet Bruce Bickford, a legendary underground animator whose closest brush with fame came in his 1970s collaborations with Frank Zappa. At this writing, Zappa's 1979 *Baby Snakes* is virtually the only work in which his animation remains commercially available.

Since then, Bickford's gone even further underground, in more than one sense of the term. Working with both clay and drawings, Bickford labors in the basement of his Seattle home. Once it's finished, his work sits on a shelf, and is never seen.

But if Durham filmmaking stalwarts Brett Ingram and Jim Haverkamp have their way, his film will once more reach a wider audience. The two are hard at work on a documentary about Bickford called *Monster Road*. Presently they're knee-deep in footage shot over the last three years in multiple trips to Seattle and San Francisco.

This Saturday, Ingram and Haverkamp will host a screening of Bickford's work at N.C. State's Witherspoon Student Center auditorium. Bickford himself will be in attendance. The program will consist of his rarely seen work, intercut with footage from the documentary in progress. The footage will be accompanied by Chapel Hill art-rock combo Shark Quest, which has composed songs specifically for the occasion.

The screening's a tacit acknowledgment by Ingram and Haverkamp that they've reached a point of no return. *Monster Road* represents the duo's bid for the big time. They've set fall of 2003 as their deadline to finish the work, in time to submit it first to Sundance, and later, Durham's Full Frame Documentary Film Festival.

Haverkamp notes they've also "made a blood oath" not to take on any new commitments as they buckle down to assemble their film. For Haverkamp, a current Indies Arts Award recipient (Ingram won the same award last year), this meant relinquishing Carrboro's popular bimonthly film series Flicker to current curator Jen Ashlock. His partner, meanwhile, is swearing off outside work except the minimum needed to cover his bills.

Ingram first met Bickford at a Greensboro film festival in 1992 when the animator was invited to be a judge, and Ingram, then a UNC-G film student,

was asked to look after him. "I was fascinated by him," he recalls. "He lives in an incredibly original world, but he's really hard to talk to--there's never a wasted word."

The young student and the middle-aged artist became friends, and in 1995, Ingram featured Bickford in his MFA thesis film, a 24-minute 16mm project called *The Clay Spirit*. Ingram then embarked on an idiosyncratic and versatile film career that has included industrial films, freelance sound gigs for major television networks, and collaborations with Haverkamp. He has also made his own films, including *Panic Attack*, an energetically subjective study of anxiety disorder that won him a place at the 2001 DoubleTake Documentary Film Festival. Along the way, he's received a grant from the N.C. Arts Council. While pursuing his other muses, Ingram stayed in touch with Bickford.

When Ingram convinced Haverkamp that Bickford should be the subject of their feature documentary, the animator gave his full cooperation. As project instigator, Ingram's been the director, and Haverkamp has been co-producer and co-editor.

With Bickford, the two filmmakers continue their explorations in obsessive and compulsive creativity, sometimes tinged with an obscure spiritual fervor. Their last joint effort, last year's *Armor of God*, was a study of Scotty Irving, a Triangle noise artist whose homemade cacophony-generators serve as tools of his religious expression.

In contrast, the subject of *Monster Road* seems to draw his varieties of religious experience from the capacious universe in his head, rather than any external divine presence. The use of clay, in particular, seems to be ideal for his excursions into his own imagination.

In his films, the human head is a constant, obsessive source of wonder. Heads keep changing shape, usually into something horrific. Bickford's obsession recalls the scene in *Hamlet*, when the prince kicks at the anonymous bones in the graveyard, wondering, "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

Though Bickford brings the secrets of his imagination to life with his figures, the very act of molding and destroying shapes acknowledges that the human

form is little more than a piece of solid flesh doomed to melt into dust, dirt and clay.

Aside from the artistic merit of his work, the awe that Bickford inspires among the cognoscenti is also due to the Herculean effort required for a single person to achieve such nuanced animation effects. Commercial animated films like *Chicken Run* and *Spirited Away* employ dozens of specialized artists. Bickford works entirely alone: according to Haverkamp, 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

"He's super-obsessive," Haverkamp says. "He does 24 pictures per second [of film]. Typical animators shoot in twos and threes." Shooting in two and threes means that the same image is shot for two or three frames, thus necessitating only eight to 12 distinct images per second, in a film projected at the normal rate of 24 frames per second.

Since each frame generally takes at least 10 minutes to prepare, Bickford's 12-hour days yield about two seconds of film per day. A month of work will produce one animated minute. It's no wonder that he's a legend. "Bickford's stuff is what professional animators put in their VCR at the end of the day," says Haverkamp. "They grab a beer, watch Bickford's films and go, 'What the fuck?'"

Such single-minded devotion could also be the sign of obsessive-compulsive disorder. That simply goes with the territory, according to Ingram. "If you ask any animator if they've got obsessive-compulsive tendencies," he notes, "they're going to say 'yes.'"

But why does an artist so gifted stay so low to ground? Ingram believes Bickford is too devoted to his work to figure out how to find an audience. "He's so busy making the films that he can't make even the feeblest effort to market himself," Ingram says. He also admires Bickford's complete indifference to the marketplace: "He's either incapable of, or unwilling to, compromise."

The threads in the films that have inspired Haverkamp and Ingram provide a clue to their current subject. Haverkamp's favorites, *Crumb* and *American Movie*, and Ingram's picks, *Vernon, Florida* and *Being There*, all deal with

idiosyncratic outsiders persevering in the face of public indifference. They also address the sometimes arbitrary distinctions between geniuses and fools.

"I'm interested in [Bickford] as an outsider artist, or folk artist, whatever you want to call it," Ingram concludes. "He's probably the only folk artist who's ever worked in film." Ingram finds great inspiration in Bickford's relentlessness, saying that even after all these years, Bickford is "still optimistic--he'd love to have his own studio with people working under him."