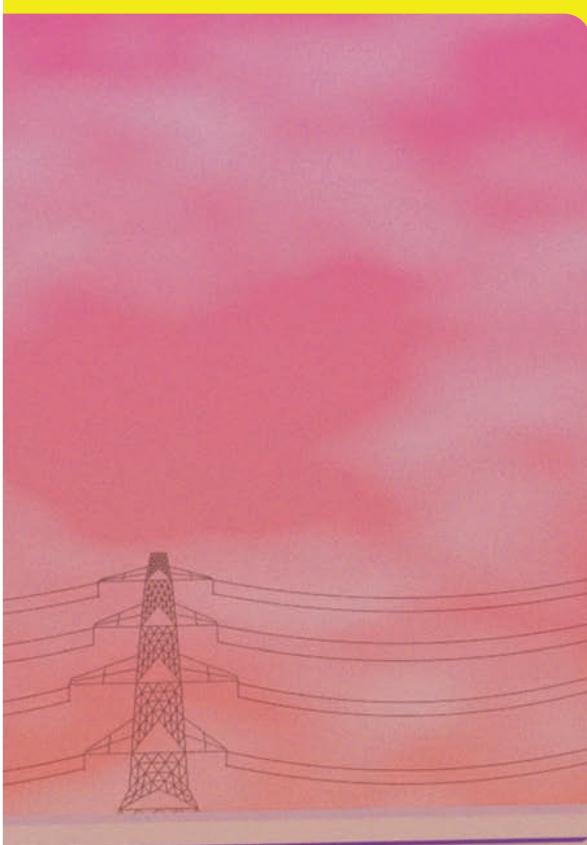
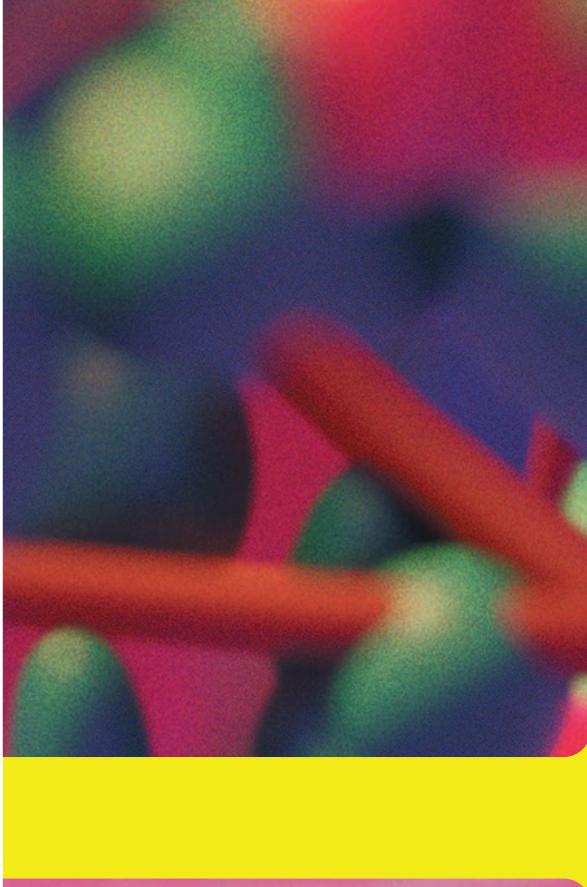




## LINES BEGIN HERE

Caleb Hammond on independent animation's new generation.





Coming up in the animation world in the 2010s, artist Julian Glander identified a clear pipeline for industry success: “An animated short would premiere at a great festival like Sundance, Toronto or Annecy, collect festival laurels for a year, then debut online, get the Vimeo Staff Pick and get covered on a lot of blogs. The happy end to the cycle would be getting the attention of an art director, producer or some powerful person, which could lead to either a commercial animating gig or a job on a TV show. Now, it feels like every single piece of that chain is less powerful than it was.”

A difficult job market, stalled high-profile projects and salary concerns, among other issues, have characterized the animation industry’s last decade, but several avowedly independent animators have succeeded with their truly original feature-length adult animation films. One is Glander, whose debut *Boys Go to Jupiter* is currently in release. “There’s no information you could have given me that would have stopped me from making *Boys Go to Jupiter*, because I had it all,” Glander says. “I knew how bad the conditions were, yet my delusions were stronger.”

Leaving Brooklyn for Pittsburgh in 2019 for quality-of-life reasons, Glander set out to animate *Boys Go to Jupiter* by himself using Blender, the free animation software thrust into the spotlight last year as what little-indie-that-could *Flow* was made with. But whereas *Flow*, with an estimated budget of \$3.7 million, is a traditional low-budget feature, *Boys Go to Jupiter* is a true microbudget film made on a much smaller scale. Carrying over his colorful, 3D polygon aesthetic from his art practice, Glander sees “*Boys Go to Jupiter* as a 90-minute-long animated GIF in some ways.”

Joe Pera, Tavi Gevinson, Eva Victor, Julio Torres and more lend voice work to the film, many reached via Instagram. He was inspired to approach name actors by Dash Shaw’s 2016 indie animated feature *My Entire High School Sinking into the Sea*, which featured Jason Schwartzman, Susan Sarandon and Maya Rudolph. Glander considers Shaw a mentor, and their paths share key similarities. Both departed New York for cities far from any bustling animation scene, with Shaw moving to Richmond, Virginia, in 2016.

Shaw is in the enviable position of having made two independent animat-

ed features that had strong festival premieres and secured traditional distribution. *My Entire High School Sinking into the Sea* played TIFF and the New York Film Festival and was released by distribution giant GKIDS, which handles the North American releases of Hayao Miyazaki’s movies. His follow up, *Cryptozoo*, was consciously more “adult” in all facets; a Sundance premiere, it was released by Magnolia Pictures.

Contracting students from the local arts college to work on his projects and co-founding the Richmond Animation Festival, Shaw has carved out a nice life for himself and his family in Richmond, but he’s not naïve about how the city’s remoteness has cost him opportunities. “I definitely feel like not being in L.A. has hurt me,” he says. “Despite *High School* having seemingly everything going right for it, one of the main agencies didn’t want to represent me as a director. If I lived in L.A. and was able to take more meetings, they would have been more into it.” But what would that life in L.A. actually look like for Shaw? “Maybe I would just spend all my time making lookbooks for things that don’t get made,” he considers, recalling talented friends who seemed to disappear after going to work at large L.A. animation studios.

Shaw makes a living mostly through the optioning of his comics, which he describes as “the absolute best way to get money because you don’t have to do anything.” Because none of these options have been produced yet, Shaw has “never had the experience of one of them getting made and being terrible.” Looking to return to feature filmmaking, he’s teasing an announcement in the coming months regarding a new project.

A professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chris Sullivan made *Consuming Spirits*, a partly autobiographical work set at a small-town newspaper, over 15 years, leading to a Tribeca Film Festival premiere in 2012. Sullivan prefers feature filmmaking over shorts because “as a cultural object, a feature is doing battle with popular culture in a way that a short never does.” Sullivan’s work feels like it’s made by an artist not exclusively influenced by animation, one who first went to college for painting and ceramics and is also a performance artist. When Sullivan found himself with



120 pages for his next feature, he wondered what he had gotten himself into again. After many more years of work, he's putting the finishing touches on *The Orbit of Minor Satellites*, looking to premiere at a major festival next year. He was inspired to make something less heavy than *Consuming Spirits*: "I realized that *Consuming Spirits* has all this emotional frustration, all these candles that blew out, and I decided I wanted some things to blossom." While "bad shit" certainly happens in the new film, he says that this comes with "healing." Whereas "people are left in the rubble" in *Consuming Spirits*, in *The Orbit*, Sullivan allows his characters to "walk out of the rubble." Reflecting on making both, he says, "I don't know that I recommend this path because, if you fail, it can have that feeling of, 'Oh, I just wasted 10 years of my life,' which is different from wasting a year on a short."

#### ONLINE PLATFORMS

Meanwhile, a host of young animators are forging their own paths, often directly interfacing with an online audience. In 2018, while at CalArts in the character animation program, Victoria Vincent (known online as vewn) was consistently putting her work on YouTube but getting few views. One day, her short film *floatland* unexpectedly ended up on the front page of Reddit. The attention saw her follower count skyrocket from a few hundred to more than 100,000. Her YouTube subscriber count now sits at more than 1.5 million; this past March, Los Angeles Filmforum hosted a program of her work, and her Adult Swim Smalls short *SNOOZE QUEST* premiered online.

Taking inspiration from comic book artists' use of Patreon in 2019, Jonni Peppers was an early adopter of the platform for animation. At the time, she says filmmaker Don Hertzfeldt (*It's Such a Beautiful Day*) seemed to be the lone animator finding success outside the studio system. In the years since, she's exceeded her modest goal of reaching a place where her Patreon paid her rent, and she's been able to crowdfund independent animated features. Her latest, *Take Off the Blindfold, Adjust Your Eyes, Look in the Mirror, See the Face of Your Mother*, premiered at the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival this past spring.

All of Peppers' work is set within a shared universe she calls "the Blindfold series." Peppers used to throw her work on YouTube for free, which led to some film festival programming snafus, but recently migrated all of it behind a paywall on Gumroad. Peppers estimates that while she was previously making around \$100 in AdSense revenue every five months through YouTube, Gumroad garners her anywhere between \$100 and \$300 per month. "Even though I'm not rich, enough has worked out for me where I am successful in that I have been able to do exactly what I want for years," Peppers reflects.

#### TV

Some animators are mixed on this online-driven ecosystem. Maddie Brewer says she personally finds the expectation that "directors interface with the internet" a little frustrating: "I don't really want that to be an extra part of my job because it's already hard enough to make shit."

Brewer moved to New York City after graduating from RISD and was riding high, working at *VICE* and at Nick Jr. doing boards for a show. When the pandemic hit, she was fired from both on the same day. Devastated, she left for Los Angeles and has since found the animation scene there creatively stimulating and full of opportunity. Brewer cites the Animation Guild's presence in Los Angeles—animation work in the city pays more as a result. She says, "It is easier to navigate the difficulties of pitching if you are surrounded by a community of people who are also doing the same thing." Animator Sean Buckelew, who studied under Sullivan in Chicago, concurs: "If you're pitching shows, you have to be in L.A."

Buckelew co-founded Green Street Pictures in 2020 alongside Joe Bennett, James Merrill and Benji Brooke. The company has found recent success with two critically acclaimed animated TV series: HBO Max's sci-fi series *Scavengers Reign* and Adult Swim's *Common Side Effects*, the latter co-produced with Bandera Entertainment, Mike Judge's company (Judge also voices a character in the show). Buckelew says Green Street isn't content to remain in television: "We want to do features really bad. That's coming."

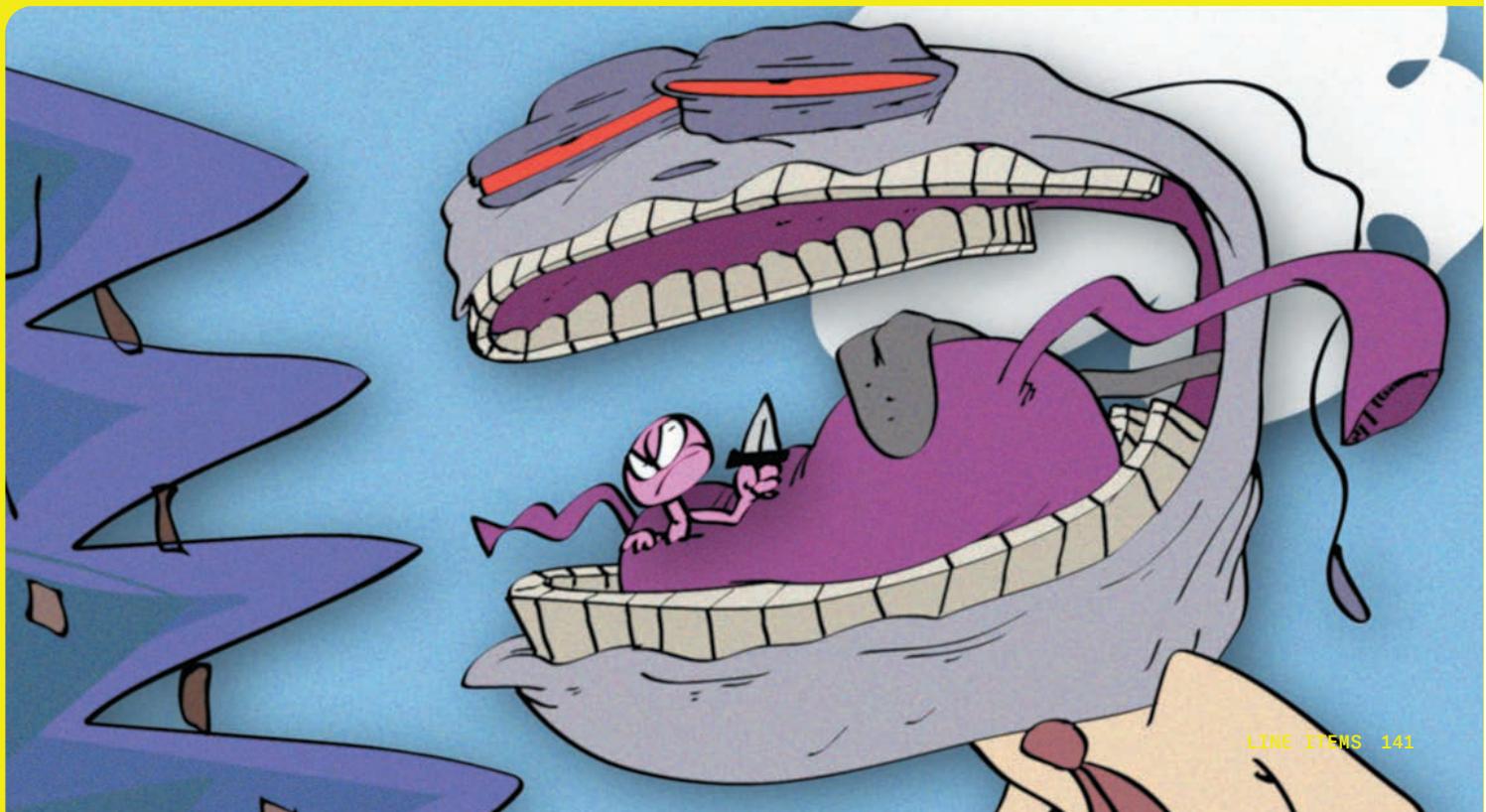




Animator Sean Solomon dropped out of CalArts in 2012 after being recruited by the FOX network during a campus event called Portfolio Day. At that time, the network was mounting *ADHD*, its answer to Adult Swim, and in search of young talent. A job offer was promptly amended to an internship once FOX learned just how young Solomon was. But Solomon was offered a job post-internship and, since then, has had five different animated TV shows picked up. None made it to air, and the reasons he lists are com-

monplace: mergers, executives getting fired, "some of them were just not good." Solomon tries not to take the rejection personally but says, "I don't know that the executives understand how emotional it is for an artist to create something and then just be told that it's going to be thrown away. I cry for a week. I'm devastated." This scenario has taught him to prioritize his own animation and music, but in the meantime, he has taken a job at Illumination, where he punches up jokes and helps break stories on their feature films.

Self-described "company man" Dave Hughes has had the fortune of only working for two companies his entire career. He started at MTV in the 1990s working on *Beavis and Butt-Head* and now runs two Adult Swim programs from its Atlanta studio, "Off the Air" and "Adult Swim Smalls." Started in 2018 by Hughes, Smalls is a talent incubator that doles out small budgets to independent animators, with the idea that these commissioned shorts will be developed into TV series at Adult Swim. Smalls shorts used to trend



more experimental, and the program's pivot to TV development feeder is born from all the mergers and acquisitions that parent company Warner Bros. Discovery has gone through in recent years. "It's easier for the creative and development executives to go to the higher-ups and say, 'Hey, look at all these views,'" Brewer explains, regarding the shorts' performance on the Adult Swim Smalls site. "Look at all these comments. People love this thing. Let's give this the green light." One success story, *Haha You Clowns*, from rising star Joe Cappa, began as a series of seven two-minute Smalls shorts and will debut as an Adult Swim TV program this fall, with some notable voice talent attached. Following three earnest himbos who, in Cappa's words, "just really adore their dad," Cappa's work toes a delicate line, poking fun at the characters without ever being mean-spirited, drawing to mind Judge's sensibility.

Cappa taught himself animation in Adobe Photoshop after reading *The Animator's Survival Kit* by Richard Williams, a classic text for aspiring animators. This led to the 10-minute short *Ghost Dogs*, which premiered at Sundance in 2021. When that didn't lead to industry opportunities, Cappa threw himself into animating while living in Denver. An online community took notice of his unique comic sensibility and art style as he churned out short-form content for talent incubators like Smalls, GIPHY and Bento Box's A Studio Digital.

Founded in 2021, A Studio Digital commissions "microshorts" aimed to "introduce a community of emerging independent creators to the wider animation community," says founder Sierra Martin-Persi. Shorts are posted daily on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, and the account's substantial follower counts ensures lots of eyeballs. Unlike Smalls's TV development goals, Martin-Persi says A Studio Digital is more about creating "a place to play and try out ideas. We aren't looking to chase virality or create IP. We're looking for strong original voices."

Echoing A Studio Digital's approach, Buckelew's advice to recent animation graduates is "to make work that's vertical and optimized for TikTok and Instagram. Make it under 60 seconds." When staffing up for a production at Green Street, Buckelew never looks at

a resume, instead browsing a candidate's social media to view their work directly. "It's all in the work, which is a good thing, because you can come from anywhere," he says. "You just have to raise the flag of what your work looks like, where previously you had to go to a school like CalArts, or people were looking to mine talent from Sundance. I think that has gone away." Now working in TV, Buckelew is angling to make feature films soon.

*BurgerWorld*, directed by Brewer, was A Studio Digital's first foray away from microshorts into a festival-length short and premiered at Sundance in 2023. Brewer noticed a difference while back in town pitching as a Sundance alum: "The pitch is exactly the same, I'm exactly the same, my work is exactly the same, but it's like a stamp [of endorsement] is on you." Next up for Brewer, her three-part Smalls series *"Chips,"* which promises a protagonist capable of "unspeakable violence" and airs in September.

## SCREENING SERIES

Across the country, long-running screening series regularly bring animators together to celebrate one another's work in a public space. Once a month at El Cid bar in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, around 200 people congregate to watch Silver Lake Shorts, a curated program launched in 2019. While live-action shorts are screened, animation is prioritized, as evidenced by event sponsors like Sony Pictures Animation, Titmouse and Starburns Industries. When Cappa made the move from Denver to Los Angeles, he was encouraged to submit his work there right away. "It gave me my social circle," he says. "Everybody looks forward to hanging out each month." Silver Lake Shorts director Jared Corwin says that the bar backdrop helps keep the proceedings relaxed. "You can sit and watch every single film, but you can also pop out, have a beer, cigarette or joint and catch up with a friend," he says. "No one thinks you're rude for doing that. We want people to feel at home. It's a party, a celebration of people's work." For the second year in a row, Silver Lake Shorts will give out five \$5,000 grants to indie filmmakers to make shorts, which can be either live action or animated.

Instead of Silver Lake Shorts' industry focus, Animation Clubhouse's

L.A. screening event is DIY and animator-centric. Taking place in a home in Studio City, it carries an intimate feel. Capacity maxes out around 80, but co-founder Sam Lane notes that there is a wait list to ensure as many possible get into each event. On the experimental side, Animation Brüt, run by Sam Gurry, acts as, per its mission statement, "a rejection of conventional storytelling and image making." Such experimental modes of animation are aided by CalArts' experimental animation program in nearby Valencia.

The Midwest is well represented among animation screening events. Hellavision Television began in Minneapolis in 2017 and is unique in that each "episode" revolves around a specific theme, which animators then create a microshort about. Founder Peter Steineck perceives "Hellavision as more of an animated zine than anything else" and often makes actual zines to give out free at the event. The Cylinder-themed episode screened at Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2021, and Hellavision's L.A. ambassador Brewer programmed the "Cunt-A-Vision" episode, which toured extensively, playing London, Atlanta, Toronto and more.

Malt Adult began in Columbus, Ohio, in 2016, when illustrator-turned-animator Sarah Schmidt felt an impulse to program animation in a gallery context, putting the cartoony and arthouse in conversation with one another. Schmidt and her partner Ian Ballantyne moved to Chicago in 2022, where they have continued the series and also run animation studio Sunshine Mall. Simple animated loops were one way they got people involved in the shows, and Schmidt reports that barista friends without animation backgrounds have gotten into making them.

Los Angeles-based animator Kat Ball used to relish attending the animation screening event Ghosting, run by Ricky Jonsson Jr. and Kristel Brinshot, which ended in 2018. She began "Loose Frames" to fill that screening void, but as one person with limited time, she is happy to see Silver Lake Shorts, Animation Clubhouse and other events rise up and help carry the load. Ball's "Loose Fables" anthology project recently combined with Hellavision as a "Hell Fables" screening.

Both newcomers to this animation screening boom in some respects and members of the old guard in others,



Mike Plante and Don Hertzfeldt have teamed up to present Hertzfeldt's Animation Mixtape, a theatrical screening tour of a selection of animation shorts. The inaugural 85-minute program pairs the old with the new from a host of different countries. L.A.-based Corrinne James animated hand-drawn interstitials for the program and also scored a never-before-seen Bruce Bickford short film scanned from the legendary animator's archive. A theatrical run took place in August at the IFC Center in New York and is now touring around North America. Hertzfeldt used to run The Animation Show with Mike Judge back in 2003; that wrapped in 2008, one reason why Plante reached out to him with this idea. Formerly a shorts programmer at Sundance, Plante now runs The Beverly Theater in downtown Las Vegas, the city's lone indie art house movie theater, which screened the Animation Mixtape in September. Its newly launched distribution arm, Ink Films, is distributing Hertzfeldt's program. Plante's dream is to keep cycling in new works so the tour continues indefinitely. He also hopes it inspires aspiring filmmakers in far flung corners. "If you don't live in a very big city, you might be worried about, 'Can I be a filmmaker?' Of course you can!" Plante says. "Hopefully, we can be a part of that, and we can help find folks."

"All these different shorts programs are becoming just as impactful for independent animators as any major festivals," says James Belfer, Cartuna's founder and CEO. "If a festival's chief benefit is community building and finding like-minded filmmakers and collaborators who can watch your work, then the benefit of something like Silver Lake Shorts versus a festival is it doesn't cost you thousands of dollars to attend." Buckelew agrees: "There's enough of a network presence at Silver Lake Shorts that if you had a killer short screen there, I bet you'd get a call from someone at Netflix sooner or later."

Industry consensus slots Annecy International Animation Film Festival in France and Ottawa International Animation Film Festival as the premier animation festivals worldwide. GLAS Animation Festival filled a major void for that type of event stateside, and after a three-year hiatus the festival is back in

person in Los Angeles this December. "Everyone is so stoked," says Belfer about GLAS's return.

## STUDIOS AND DISTRIBUTORS

Belfer began his career as an indie film investor and producer in the live-action space. Around 2013, while surveying the indie film landscape he thought, "None of this makes sense. Everything's doing too well. I have a feeling this is all going to collapse very soon." So, he created a two-year R&D program, which included "documentaries, features, small marketing companies, small distribution companies, you name it." Animation was part of this grab bag, and after producing some short-form animated content as a test, Belfer realized he enjoyed working in the medium as a producer and founded Brooklyn-based animation studio Cartuna with his brother Adam in 2015. The animation studio has since moved from producing short form content to "more traditional television and streaming development." The studio side of their business grew organically. "Because we were working with all of these animators, people started to call us up, asking if they could hire us," he says. "We were like, 'I guess so? Sure.' We never set out to build a services side of the business. We were shocked when we got our first client call." Cartuna now boasts an impressive client list including Nickelodeon, ESPN and Paramount. The company has also ventured into distribution, releasing *Boys Go to Jupiter* as well as launching a new independent feature releasing partnership with Dweck productions, Cartuna x Dweck.

Eddie Alcazar, one of this magazine's 25 New Faces in 2011, shifted to animation for his latest short, *Bullet Time*. For the ode to retro gaming and old-school '90s cartoons, Alcazar hired *Ren & Stimpy* animator Bob Jaques as animation director and paired him with some contemporary animators he admired; Danny Elfman composed the score. After his black-and-white sci-fi feature *Divinity* premiered at Sundance in 2023, Alcazar was disappointed when the excitement of the film's premiere dissipated by the time it was released by Utopia Distribution in October of that year. So, *Bullet Time* premiered at Fantasia in July, traveled to Comic Con in San Diego and premiered on YouTube in a matter of days.



Blender, Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator—the accessibility of these tools is fueling the current optimism around independent animation. But an availability of tools can't solve an overall lackluster job market and other challenges facing animators working professionally today. "Fair pay for work," is one such challenge, says Belfer. He recalls that "so many times, even us as a big studio, we have a conversation with a record label or some ad agency, and they come at us with rates that are just shocking. It ultimately boils down to there not being a proper understanding of just how labor-intensive animation is."

"The jobs animators were hoping and expecting to be there when they graduated are not there the way that it used to be," Schmidt laments. As such, she's happy she didn't follow others to Los Angeles upon graduating. To Schmidt, with Malt Adult and Sunshine Mall, forging her own path on the "independent circuit has been so much more interesting and fulfilling," compared to working on some "sloppy TV show" in L.A.

Chris Pynoski founded animation studio Titmouse with his wife Shannon 25 years ago. What began as a

t-shirt company now has offices in Los Angeles, New York and Vancouver, with one in Paris set to open soon. Pynoski came up in the '90s MTV era, animating the iconic, trippy desert sequence in *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America*—which Hughes edited, coincidentally enough. "I'm 53, so I've been in it for a minute," he says. Entering college in 1990, his instructors told him that there were zero job prospects out there for him and his classmates. And they weren't wrong. "It was very bleak, much bleaker than it is now," he remembers. "Maybe, if you're lucky, you worked on a Saturday morning cartoon that was essentially a toy commercial." But then, Pynoski says three Nickelodeon shows—*Doug*, *The Ren & Stimpy Show* and *Rugrats*—along with *The Simpsons*, "ushered in a whole new era" of "creator-driven shows," which altered the landscape.

In the late '90s, 2D animated features became popular again, and Pynoski says it was common for students to drop out of CalArts because they'd get an offer from Disney "making thousands of dollars a week" working on features. But when this boom ended, those animators were out of work overnight. "There is not a historical lack of work today—work

is historically above average," Pynoski explains. "It's just the last five years has been such an anomaly that it feels bleak, and I understand that it is bleak." Likewise, when I speak with Hughes, he mentions that earlier that day they were saying goodbye to an intern in the office, and he felt the need to encourage her: "It's not all like this. This is a moment in time. There's fun inside this industry. You'll be a part of it." Hughes is optimistic, like Pynoski, but feels that this industrywide "pervasive safeness needs to go away."

While Buckelew has been known to repeat the mantra "Animation is a medium, not a genre," when he surveys the diversity of content within the exploding anime market, he notes that the same anime lover watching *Chainsaw Man* is also watching *Slam Dunk*—two series that couldn't be more different, with only the art form tying them together. "Animation isn't a genre, technically," Buckelew says, but as there are horror fans, "there is an audience that likes animation and turns up for animation almost regardless of what it is." If executives understood this, they might be emboldened to greenlight risky and artful projects, understanding that the audience will be there for its release.

Images: Boys Go to Jupiter (pg. 138), courtesy of Cartuna and Irony Point. Hell Fables screening (left, pg. 140) and Maddie Brewer (right, pg. 140); Common Side Effects (pg. 141, top); Take off the Blindfold, Adjust Your Eyes, Look in the Mirror, See the Face of Your Mother (pg. 141, bottom); an Animation Clubhouse event (pg. 143, top); Bullet Time (pg. 143, bottom); Haha You Clowns (above).