

David Daniels:

(Interview taken from animundi.com blog – 2011 animation festival)

When he turned eight, David Daniels had an insight as he and his sisters played with modeling clay: while cutting a block of clay with a sharp knife, he was enchanted by the forms that appeared in each slice. He carried that impression with him for fourteen years, until he went to study at CalArts and produced his final project film, *Buzz Box*, in the technique he named *Strata Cut*. The images fuse together and transform into other images in a rhythmic frenzy, as if they were moving oil paintings. From then on, David began perfecting and expanding his technique and the art of telling stories through slices of modeling clay filmed frame by frame. He applied this technique to several of his works, such as the *Pee Wee's Playhouse* television series, Peter Gabriel's award winning music video, *Big Time*, and ABC's retrospective on Michael Jackson, *Moonwalker*. In 2002, David opened *Bent Image Lab* with Chel White, an award winning independent studio, known for its films and spots created with mixed media animation. In 2006, Tsui Ling Toomer joined the company, of which the Brazilian director Nando Costa also became an associate in 2009.

1. What aspects of your life converged to make the creation of the strata-cut technique possible?

When I was a small child, I paid a lot of attention to very small details and textural things. I was given the time just to look, think, and amuse myself without too much interference, and I spent long stretches very focused in my own world. My adult life is so cluttered it's hard to have time for truly original thoughts, but as a kid, I could stare at light hitting lint balls on the carpet with my face sideways to the ground for half an hour. My mother allowed me almost unlimited to 'play with clay' from the age of five, along with my two sisters, Shelley and Cary. She let us use a dedicated room and table to just this ... a play room whose only purpose was to sit and create clay sculpture. The table this all took place we named 'Claytown.' Stories and imagination were of course a great deal of what came out of that time, but my fascination with how things are sculpturally shaped was 'in my blood' from my earliest memories. The germ of 'Strata Cut' came to me in an instant one birthday when I was eight years old. I don't think it was my birthday, I can't remember. We had the party, then went back to Claytown and made a crude cake out of modeling clay in imitation of the party cake. When my sister sliced open a piece of clay, and all the buried colors and shapes were still inside ... that instant was a moment frozen in time for me. The cut made the image so fresh. It wasn't dull, or blurry. It was magically clean, and clear, and precise. We went on to experiment with a clay hard boiled egg (with the hidden yellow yolk) and sure enough the slice revealed everything buried again. I knew this was special. I did not have any idea how to 'use it' at that age, but I filed it away forever as something I vowed to 'return to.' This revelation was something never to let go of and always to remember. So nothing was done at that moment, but the insight and determination to do something that became *Strata Cut* was absolutely born from that experience. I also had a young interest in architecture until I realized I could make all the building shapes I wanted, but they would just sit there and never really change or move or do anything. I dropped architecture around age 11, and when I was given a super 8 camera by my mother as a birthday present. I began to make stop motion

movies, and one of them was good enough to win several awards when I was 13. This brought me some decent prize money when I had little, and an all expenses paid trip to New York, which definitely opened my eyes. I was impressed. I think I realized I a living could be made in this thing they call 'animation,' and have gravitated back to that feeling of adventure ever since. Animation = travel and running around money is the equation that formed my life. I worked on a lot of my own stop motion and low end live action shorts for the next nine or ten years, but never forgot 'to go back to it.' I vowed to always go back to those sliced images and really discover their secret. The time finally happened the summer before I went to Cal Arts, when I was 22. I had waited fourteen patient years when everything clicked. I was supported for expenses by my family and rent by my girlfriend for this entire summer. This is when I sat down and methodically sculpted and cut, and angled and sliced clay every which way, trying to develop a set of rules, a vocabulary for the use of this technique. It was all figured out by trial and error over 6 weeks. Without this lucky circumstance of free time without other school or job obligations, I don't know that I ever would have followed up on my 8 year old insight. I was very lucky to have the time and the skills at that point to finally re examine the insight of hidden sculptural images. In my years at Cal Arts, I was given a massive studio space, the so called 'phone closet' to work in. No other student was given a space so large. This was in fact a hellishly noisy area that no one else wanted to work in, but the room was enormous. I could spread out and really paint with strata cut (Van Gogh style clay) and experiment with the emerging style demands and evolving look of things and everything about it. I was very lucky to have this circumstance, since it took several years to develop create and execute Buzz Box during the night, while doing my normal class work during the day. The constant extreme background noise of this environment drove me somewhat crazy, and accounts for some of the extra bit of angst expressed in the already visually aggressive movie. I was lucky that Drew Neumann did the sound for my first strata cut, and developed a cutting edge musical and sampling style (remember this was 1984) that fit the kind of happy/horror visual madness of the piece so perfectly. The soundtrack supports the uniqueness of the images that just any score would not have done. Since that time, I think I've developed an immense understanding and control of strata cut that never existed before I took up a fascination with time sculpting, and controlling the predictable outcome of the buried shapes that reveal hidden animation. In the years after Buzz Box, someone pointed out Oskar Fischinger to me ... I knew his general work, but not about his abstract wax cutting machine. It's a giant blade cutting a frame at a time, but it's not what I would call strata cut. It's mechanical abstraction without any of the controlled animation, the precise motion design or time sculpting language that I developed. 10 years ago, I somehow saw a few seconds of a silent movie Russian wax cut from the 20's that was earlier than his abstractions. This clip was a simple figurative extrusion, I think it was of a cat or horse silhouette, but I don't know who did it, and I have been unable to find it since. The abstract idea of cutting a clean surface pattern with a blade has been with us for thousands of years. The example of 'Millefiori' is an ancient sliced pottery pattern technique similar to 'Fimo' beads. Controlling the animation within a sliced substance to create narrative storytelling events at the level I do, is a whole other ballgame. Developing that ability to structure figurative animation as pre built extrusion blocks, and naming this new thing 'strata cut' has

defined my unusual journey through life.

2. What have you been working on these days?

For almost thirty years, I have made my living as an animator/cameraman, then as a commercial director for character and mixed media Live/Animation work. I developed and helped launch the M & M candy characters for CG, and I directed their animation spots for several years. I still do a lot of commercial character work as a result of that. The past decade, I have been consumed with fostering my own animation production company. This is collaboration with several partners, and a great group of talented artists and producers who make up Bent Image Lab. Along with my family, this intense creative clubhouse takes most of my time. Sometimes I do a little directing as I used to do, but just as often my time is a blend of art, people, and business development. I prepare and pitch a lot of jobs, and I help others who are directing or working on projects. This can be exciting, but it is hard to explain and impossible to show as any result. During these years, I still have creative whims that end up as visionary feature scripts that never seem to get finished or filmed, and sculptures or paintings that I never mount at any gallery. I always seem to run out of time to do more personal work, before my kids and my job come back and take over. There is one pet project that shows some promise. I am closer to getting a proper program to do good CG strata cut than I have ever been. One of my sons is a budding programmer, and he is helping me realize this software, and currently test it out with several interested CG art students who are helping us part time. CG strata cut demands the same 'mental muscle' and it fits my way of thinking. It has much wider possibilities than clay, yet very different artistic restrictions and constraints. You can tell all kinds of extruded live action stories which would be impossible in clay, but if you allow things to seem too finished, people will feel it's just computer generated, so there is no 'magic' in the mind of the viewer. Storytelling in such a strange and weird world is both daunting and thrilling. The technical obstacles are enormous, and they still slow everything to a crawl. CG Strata Cut has 3d animated texture blocks that run through the entire sculpture, so the need for RAM is immense. The results looks interesting so far, but it will be awhile before I have a real show piece. CG time extrusion animation demands a really different artistic sense, with different visual rules, and therefore demands I come up with different results and different storytelling than the analog primitive narrative from I originated. It's also expensive, and requires a team, which is hard to keep when there is no money in it yet. I think I'll finally have something worth presenting this time next year. I've been thinking I want to do a stereoscopic conventional clay strata piece, but one that has more character storytelling, as well as more mixed media. I think caves, valleys, open clay design with mixed objects, and radical timing changes is a very interesting way to keep progressing with basic hand made clay strata cut. I also want to stop 'the fuse' more often. Stop the progression of cutting, and do other things, before the cutting begins. Cutting at strange angles is also something to explore more ... to vary the speed and angle of the knife to make an 'animated' blade, and not be consistent. There are more surprises still ahead, should I get the time to enjoy making them. I also want to someday do a short stereo pixilation piece. I believe stereoscopic viewing allows humans

animated one frame at a time to become a whole new vivid re-invention of traditional Pixilation.

3. What artists inspire you?

Peter Jansen: Brilliant. Gregory Barsamian: Genius. Jan Van Holleben: Great. Ron Mueck: Astonishing. Julian Beaver: Get's to blow minds while working outdoors. In common, they sweep away all preconceived expectations of spatial and temporal convention, and bring a level of private dream out into the daytime. They do this with excellence, panache, and fresh insight. They all possess a grace and flair to their work that goes beyond the technical magnificence that sits on the surface idea. I'm truly inspired by dozens of other artists every year. Some of those who do work for my studio have inspired me like Pascal Champion, Carlos Lascano, Colin Batty, and Portland's own Brett Superstar who deserves a wider following than he get's now, and has a look that will be discovered. I also love several of the Brazilian motion graphics gurus like Guilherme Marcondes and Nando Costa.

4. Have you been to Brazil before? How do you imagine Anima Mundi to be like?

No. I have visited both Argentina and Uruguay, but never yet Brazil. I have been all over the world and each time I am in some fresh new place very different from where I grew up, or where I live, I feel the experience to be a kind of revelation for me. I enjoy the excitement and thrill of new culture, geography and history (I really enjoy history) so I greatly look forward to this, as a great country with such a different story to tell. Brazil is something I should already have done a long time ago, but now I get the chance. Anima Mundi is one of the biggest and best festivals of great animation in the world. I am greatly honored to be a part of 2011. It brings an inspired focus to the artistic trust we keep in each other, but don't always open up about. We are fellow travelers who share a common fascination with designed motion. One of the greatest joy's I feel, is the reaction of other people who have gotten something special from my work. I hope to see that wonder in a few new faces who are unaware of what I do, and that will give me a chance to smile back, knowing their reactions are what make the whole trip worthwhile. I very seldom have time to visit festivals or get out from my work, so this is a rare occasion I passionately look forward to.