



Suzan Pitt
as caricatured
by John Canemaker.

Suzan Pitt

Moving, Changing, and Animating

By JOHN CANEMAKER

The loft is located on Broadway in the soon-to-be-chic Tribeca area of lower Manhattan. *Objets d'art*, a refrigerator, shelving, boxes of drawings, furniture—a couple of antique desks, an oval walnut dinner table and chairs bought in Minnesota years ago when a bargain was a bargain—interrupt the oceanic space or cling timidly to the walls, as if afraid to test the water.

Suzan Pitt sits and talks and smokes yet another cigarette. She is 35 and deceptively fragile. She is small-boned and has very intelligent, very blue eyes that peer coolly out of a white translucent face framed by cascading auburn hair. She gives no outward indication of the passionate forces that have given

form to her nomadic life and would have ruled it were they not tempered by an iron-willed discipline and an equally passionate drive to create art. She has taken a five-year lease on the loft and it is the longest commitment to one place she has ever made in her life, a life that has stretched from Kansas City, Detroit, St. Paul and University, Alabama, to Amsterdam, Boston and now New York, from where she commutes back and forth to Fountain City, Wisconsin, to

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John Canemaker is an independent animator and filmmaker whose articles on *Elfriede Fischinger* and *George Griffin* appeared in earlier issues of *Funnyworld*.

visit her 10-year-old son, Blue, and her ex-husband, Alan Kraning.

"I've let my life get spread out sometimes and I've had to pull it back together," she says calmly. "I haven't been a person who has made a life which is steady or had one place to live—china in the cabinet year after year in a place that I've felt was always my own. I've moved a lot, been unsatisfied with where I was at. Moved and changed, physically and emotionally as well. The film was the thing that was steadfast. It was on-going, no matter where I moved or what I was doing. It was a constant in my life."

"The film" to which Pitt refers is the extraordinary *Asparagus*, one of the most lavish and wonderful animated shorts ever made. The short enjoyed a rare dual debut at two prestigious art galleries in January 1979: the Whitney Museum of American Art (accompanied by an exhibition of 50 paintings and drawings from the film) and a simultaneous screening and exhibition of "constructions" (cels) at the Holly Solomon Gallery in Soho. *Asparagus* is an overwhelming visual experience not easily described. Basically, it is a 19-minute visual poem dealing with a woman artist's creative process and rites of passage. It is not a narrative, but rather a series of episodes full of obsessively detailed, lush, and sensual imagery. The audience becomes hypnotized, voyeurs peeping in on a private dream.

Structurally, *Asparagus* is a giant film loop. "It could well repeat itself over and over," wrote Pitt in the Whitney Museum program notes. (Pitt's experience with looping and alternative methods of exhibiting film includes a show she organized while teaching animation at Harvard in 1976. Called *Loops*, the show was an attempt by Pitt and her students to release animation from its obligations to single-plane illusion by combining real objects and sets with film loops to convert the illusion of discontinuous film time into "real" time.) The circularity of *Asparagus* was extended to its exhibition at the Whitney; there, audiences watched the film screened within the miniature theatre in which parts of it were created. Most of the animation was done on highly rendered cels over detailed surreal watercolor backgrounds; however, the latter part of the film takes place in a three-dimensional 10-foot theatre with 200 tiny seats in which are seated as many restlessly moving clay puppets facing a proscenium containing animated stage illusions. In this sequence, cels were matted into the 3-D set. "I made this film to an object," wrote Pitt. "In exhibiting the film this way I've hoped to create a situation in which people will feel a physical distance...I want the audience to always know the illusions are being made by successive drawings through time—that I'm not trying to make an illusion they can 'believe' in."

Asparagus required four years and three grants to pull together. Judging by the formidable amount of labor and time demanded of the filmmaker (aided by a few loyal assistants), Suzan Pitt would seem to be the world's most patient person. "What I am," she says, "is impatiently persistent. This film was really backbreakingly hard work. Lots of times I wished it was finished but I didn't feel so impatient that I wanted to end it quickly or shortcut it in any way." *Asparagus* is the culmination of a decade of Pitt's

persistent exploration of the medium of animation as a means to realizing her painterly private visions.

She was born in Kansas City, the daughter of a local tire company owner. The only "artist" in the family before Suzan came along in 1943 was her grandmother, who in the late nineteen-thirties "made beautiful hats in her own little shop." Suzan had always drawn as a child: "It was something I had a feeling for, felt I could do well. The thing I would do when everything seemed like it went wrong. If I felt hurt or like closing myself in, I would go upstairs and lock the door and make pictures. It was really an escape."

Pitt elaborates on the familiar theme of the sensitive child protecting itself from a bruising reality through art: "It's so hard to talk about. As an adult it sounds neurotic to say I'm afraid of real life. But as children we take objects and move them around. Inanimate objects seem to have life. Do you remember playing with your fingers? I did it really a lot. Played with my doll house, toys out in the back yard. Making arrangements, making them talk and do things. Then as you grow up you're expected to take all that and make it disappear in the closet. What happens to that impulse, that drive to transfer what you see around you into playthings?"

Luckily, Suzan's drive to make visual order out of life through painting was encouraged, both at home and various schools, including Cranbrook Academy and the University of Alabama, where a teacher recognized her special talent and allowed her to have her "own space at college with a key." Pitt, working in oils, created large figurative paintings "this side of pop art." She made prints, created books, and painted objects; she was "impressed" by Richard Lindner, David Hockney, and Francis Bacon, "to some extent," for 1965 was a "hot period for British painters."

She is not sure from where the impulse came, but from 1968 on she was "making images through animation." Her paintings, she notes, had always appeared to be shapes "arrested in time." She also remembers a period at school in Alabama where she made a clear choice to paint instead of becoming an actress. "I discovered I was a ham," she says. "I have a feeling for drama and the stage—for *the show!*" Somehow these factors and others led her to read books on the techniques of bringing static images to life on film. She experimented in 8mm film with almost 400 drawings for six weeks. She found that although her highly rendered individual drawings "would take forever" to complete, full paintings could easily be moved under the camera frame-by-frame to achieve the effects she wanted.

Pitt was by this time married to Alan Kraning, an artist and filmmaker, who was teaching sculpture at the University of Minnesota. Pitt held several teaching jobs: at the Bloomfield Hills Art Association, St. Paul Art Center, Walker Art Center and eventually the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where she changed her drawing/painting classes to animation classes and included the rental of a 16mm movie camera in the school budget. She now experimented in earnest and in 1969 completed *Bowl Theatre Garden Marble Game*, an early film that displays most of the stylistic trademarks evident in her



From *Asparagus*.

later work. There is the patient slow timing of the well-drawn cut-out graphics, the use of repetition, and images of vegetables, parts of the human anatomy, and the theatre. There is also the sensuality factor: a strong sexuality that emerges through naive and explicit graphic metaphors. Even Pitt's very first film experiments in 8mm dealt with symbols of bodily functions, sex, and birth—a bag contorts suggestively and releases an egg.

In *Crocus*, a film Pitt completed in 1971, a man with an erection that would be the envy of Priapus makes love to a woman (assumed to be his wife). Their bodies are hidden demurely under a blanket, while “love metaphors” of roses, butterflies, birds, a Christmas tree, cucumbers, and so on float in and out of doors and windows until interrupted by the cries of a child in another room. The lovers then give their attention and love of another kind to the child.

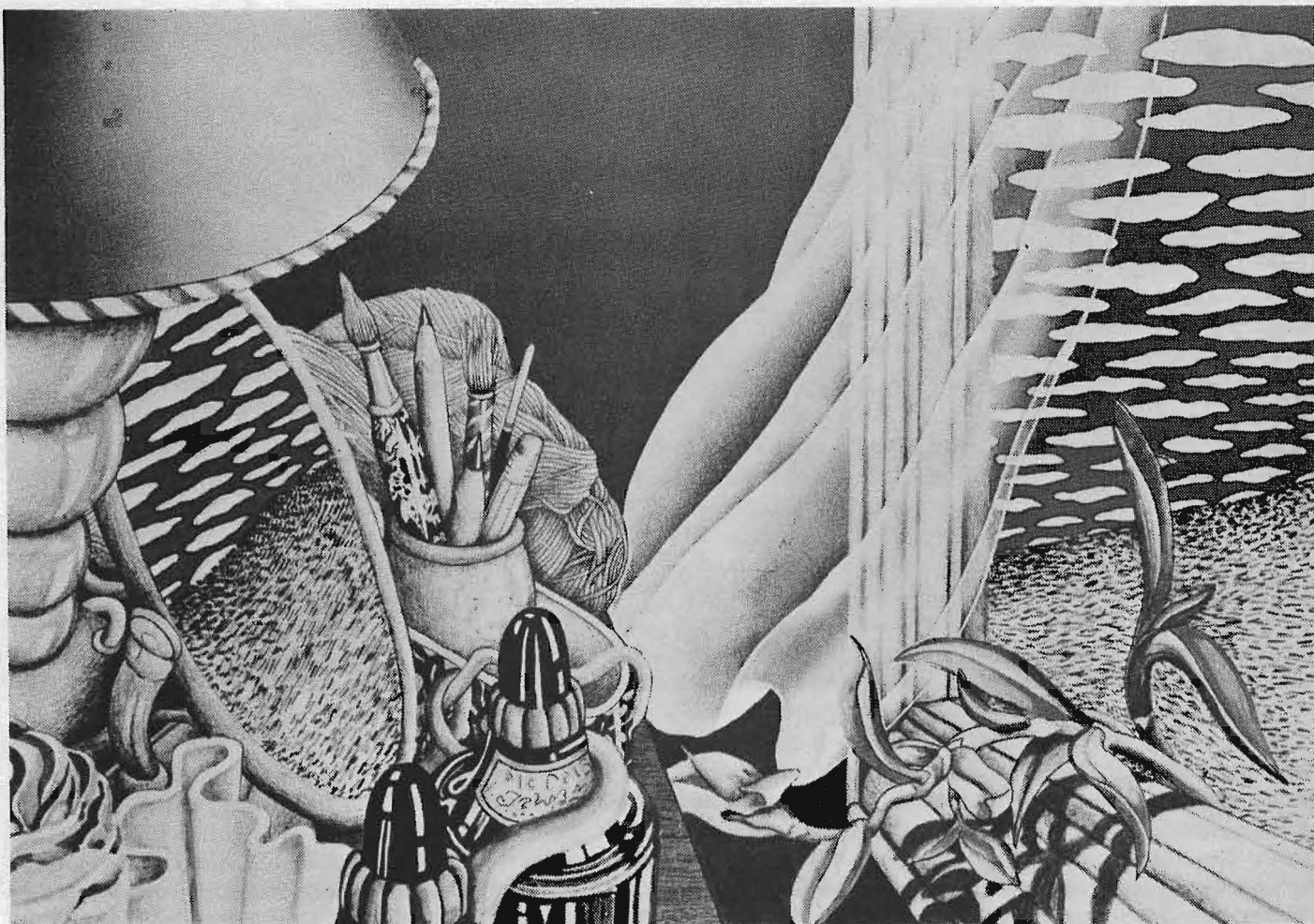
There is a libidinous sensibility in all of Pitt's work, a playful feeling of “naughty” daring and perhaps an attempt to astonish (or shock) us while hedging the titillation by using sexual symbols. Pitt recalls a strict Kansas upbringing where sex was not discussed; when Suzan first showed her family *Crocus*, her mother's reaction was shocked disapproval (“How *could* you do something like that?”). Years later, after a sort of reconciliation had been made between the filmmaker and her mother, the entire Pitt family (except for Suzan's father, who had died a few months before) turned up for the opening of *Asparagus* in New York. “I think the excitement from the audience helped my mother to see, well, look at all these people. They're really responding to this film. They're not embarrassed. I felt a response from her. She said, ‘I don't know where all those things come from inside you. I can't myself trace it, but I'm really impressed. It's great!’” In the film, the asparagus represents “some sort of creative source”

to Pitt. It is first defecated by the film's female character into a toilet and flushed away into the “watery past.” In a thick exotic garden, the vegetable grows like erect phalli and the woman strokes it. “She wants so much to touch it, to embrace it, to make contact with it, to understand it,” wrote Pitt in the Whitney notes. Later in the film the asparagus is sucked by the woman and is transformed between her lips into a waterfall, fireworks, steel filings, and sensual associations.

One newspaper film critic felt that feminists might find fault with *Asparagus*, with its woman placed in a service-oriented position to the symbol of masculinity and potency. Pitt disagrees: “I did think that making that kind of sensual erotic analogy might have been also nice in reverse—a feminine-looking shape being adored, touched or wondered at. But that's intellectual reasoning on my part. What I was saying was well said the way I was saying it!

“Besides, I'm basically a heterosexual woman and that's my experience: a man with a woman and my being a woman. That's what I see. Someone with a different sexual experience would say it in a different way perhaps. I've always felt I had this strong mixture of masculine/feminine traits. A lot of artists do. Some people take on extreme masculine or feminine characteristics. I always felt I was a mixture. Sometimes I've even felt I was a third sex. I don't see an asparagus as purely phallic. I love the way it looks when its coming out of the ground because it's completely formed, it stands up, looks ancient and yet fresh at the same time. But as it goes through its metamorphosis it grows up to become this beautiful, ethereal, wafting-in-the-wind fern, which is more feminine.”

It was *Crocus* that brought Suzan Pitt to the attention of



From *Asparagus*.

the Whitney museum and its then-developing independent filmmakers program. The Whitney featured the film in a program of shorts and commissioned Pitt to make a film commercial requesting funding for the Museum's Film Department.

In 1973 Pitt completed *Jefferson Circus Songs*, a pixillation film made with a cast of children who were her students at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. This mysterious, often puzzling bit of film whimsy contains elaborately costumed kids in bizarre three-dimensional settings performing Kabuki-like ceremonies. Pitt fills the screen with color, motion, and wonderfully rich images, like a magician pulling yet another astonishment from a bottomless hat. It is a miniature Fellini extravaganza—Cocteau on an acid trip.

As Pitt's film artistry was developing and gaining strength with each new film, her personal life was about to take a sharp turn. Two weeks after finishing *Jefferson Circus Songs*, she moved to the southern part of Holland. "I was in love with someone. I went there to live with him," she explains simply. The relationship proved to be "a total disaster" and after three months she left the man. For 13 months Pitt remained in Holland, a woman with a four-year-old son (she had brought Blue with her from the midwest) in a foreign country, without friends or means of support. "It was the real low point of my life," she says. "It took me a long time to get over getting a

divorce (in 1974) and trying to straighten out my own life. Trying to find my own way without being stooped in loneliness and depression and feeling lost. I was down."

Slowly she began to meet people in Holland and made friends with a few artists and experimental filmmakers. She showed her films at America House in Berlin; she heard of an available grant, met the committee in charge, showed them her films and drawings (the genesis of *Asparagus*) and won the grant, which involved a residency in Germany (eventually completed in 1978). "Things got better. They got a little worse," she says quietly. She went back to Fountain City, where her ex-husband was residing. "I have very good relations with Alan," Pitt says. "In fact it gets better all the time. We're still very close, supportive. We share bringing up Blue. It was worth the added pain to me in trying to stay close, in touch with each other, and readjust to new separate single lives. When you have a child with someone they're a key person in your life. It'll always be that way."

It was a production grant from the American Film Institute that allowed Pitt to start in on animating *Asparagus*. Then came an offer to teach for a year at Harvard, to be followed the next year there by a research fellowship. By the time she moved to Cambridge in 1975 she had the first section

of the film drawn. "I shot tests on the school Oxberry the summer before I started teaching. Eric Martin and Jim Shook literally showed me everything about the Oxberry camera including how to shoot bi-pack for the theatre scenes."

At first Pitt thought she could produce the film in one year for \$5,000. "But," she says, "it probably has cost at least \$15,000 and that's just minimal wages for cel painters, construction of the theatre set, film processing, composer's fee, finishing costs. The production time stretched out because I was teaching, moving around, and the idea of the film just grew larger and longer." In September 1977 Pitt had most of the film completed except for the superimposition of the cels over the 3-D theatre set sequence. She moved to new York and from September to December animated the final scenes. "It was exhausting," she recalls. "I'd break to go get something to eat, then come back to the loft and start in working again. I'd catch some sleep and wake up to start working on the film—constantly!"

Early in 1978, she flew to Germany to take advantage of the grant she had received three years before. "It was a generous honorarium, with a studio plus another \$3,000 for finishing funds. It helped tremendously and I couldn't have done it without it. Jim Shook came over from Harvard for two months to paint cels. We went to a studio in Hamburg—Cinegraphic—and spent all of Easter using a 35mm aerial camera doing the superimposition of the cels over the theatre scene. It didn't come out technically as I wanted it to. We decided it was easier for Jim to take the drawings back and shoot them at Harvard, which he did."

Asparagus was finished with filming by September 1978 and Pitt hired composer Richard Teitelbaum, who contributed a hauntingly beautiful score that equals the visual ecstasy. "We never tried for any exact sync of music and picture," says Pitt. "We wanted the Moog synthesizer music to create an atmosphere but not to believe the sounds were coming from the source."

With the film finally completed, Pitt dashed, without a breath, into a headlong promotion and exhibition of the work at the aforementioned galleries, but also in film shows in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and places inbetween. She has recently received another grant, so a new film will be forthcoming, although she has not had the time to formulate any ideas for the project. "I haven't as yet put myself in a private atmosphere to start daydreaming again, which is where all these ideas come from," she will tell you.

She takes a few moments to daydream: "I'd like to spend some time making objects and pictures that don't move. I feel like I've always been painting. I seldom think about live-action. I used to think about it more when the moves and strains of my life were stranger and more powerful than any movie I've ever seen. And I'd think after a particular thing would happen: boy, if I made a film of *that* that would be a great film! I make too impetuous decisions about some things, I'm drawn to unusual people." She drifts back to her upcoming film project. "Maybe I'll do a tighter version of *Loops*. Build a theatre, set it up and take it down after the performance. Combine screens, actors, 3-D theatre pieces. Mechanical devices to move images, maybe not use film at all.

A variety of ways of moving imagery, which all come from in and out of animation.

"And I think about making an animated feature, a truly experimental one. If I could somehow find the funding—in the \$500,000 range. Ideally I'd do it all myself. Or work with two or three other independent animators. That would have a lot of problems, but the result could be good. If I could raise the money and had complete freedom to do exactly what I wanted to do, I want to do it!"

Sales and Rental Distribution Sources of Suzan Pitt Films

Canyon Cinema
Room 220
Industrial Center Bldg.
Sausalito, CA 94965

*Marble Game, Crocus, Cels,
A City Trip, Whitney
Commercial, Jefferson Circus
Songs, Asparagus*

New York Filmmakers
Co-op
175 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10016

Crocus, Jefferson Circus Songs

Serious Business Co.
1609 Jaynes Street
Berkeley, CA 94703

*Crocus, Jefferson Circus
Songs, A City Trip*

New Line Cinema
121 University Place
New York, NY 10003

Crocus (included in 2 programs
of films titled "Best of the New
York Women's Film Festival"
and "The Erotic Cartoon
Carnival")

The American Federa-
tion of Arts
41 East 65th Street
New York, NY 10021

Crocus (included in a program
of films titled "Highlights of the
New American Filmmakers
Series, Whitney Museum,
N.Y.")

Nederlands Filmmuseum
Vondel Park 3
Amsterdam, Netherlands

*Marble Game, Crocus, Cels, A
City Trip, Whitney Commer-
cial, Jefferson Circus Songs*

Cinematation
31 bis rue Jean Lolive
93500 Pantin, France

*Crocus, Whitney Commercial,
Jefferson Circus Songs*

Suzan Pitt
392 Broadway
New York, NY 10013

Asparagus

Picture Start
204½ W. John St.
Champaign, Ill. 61820

Asparagus