

# Indelible celluloid etches

Over my twelve years involvement with animation, I have had the opportunity to see many films. Some have struck me and continue to remain in my psyche leaving an indelible imprint, growing ever more intense with every opportunity I have to view the films again. Each time I see these films I discover greater detail, subtle nuances that I hadn't noticed earlier, and a heightened awareness of the intensity of the medium that is animation. To my mind the great painstaking labour involved with making animation cannot go unrecognized – the more intense the process of making, the more powerful the film.

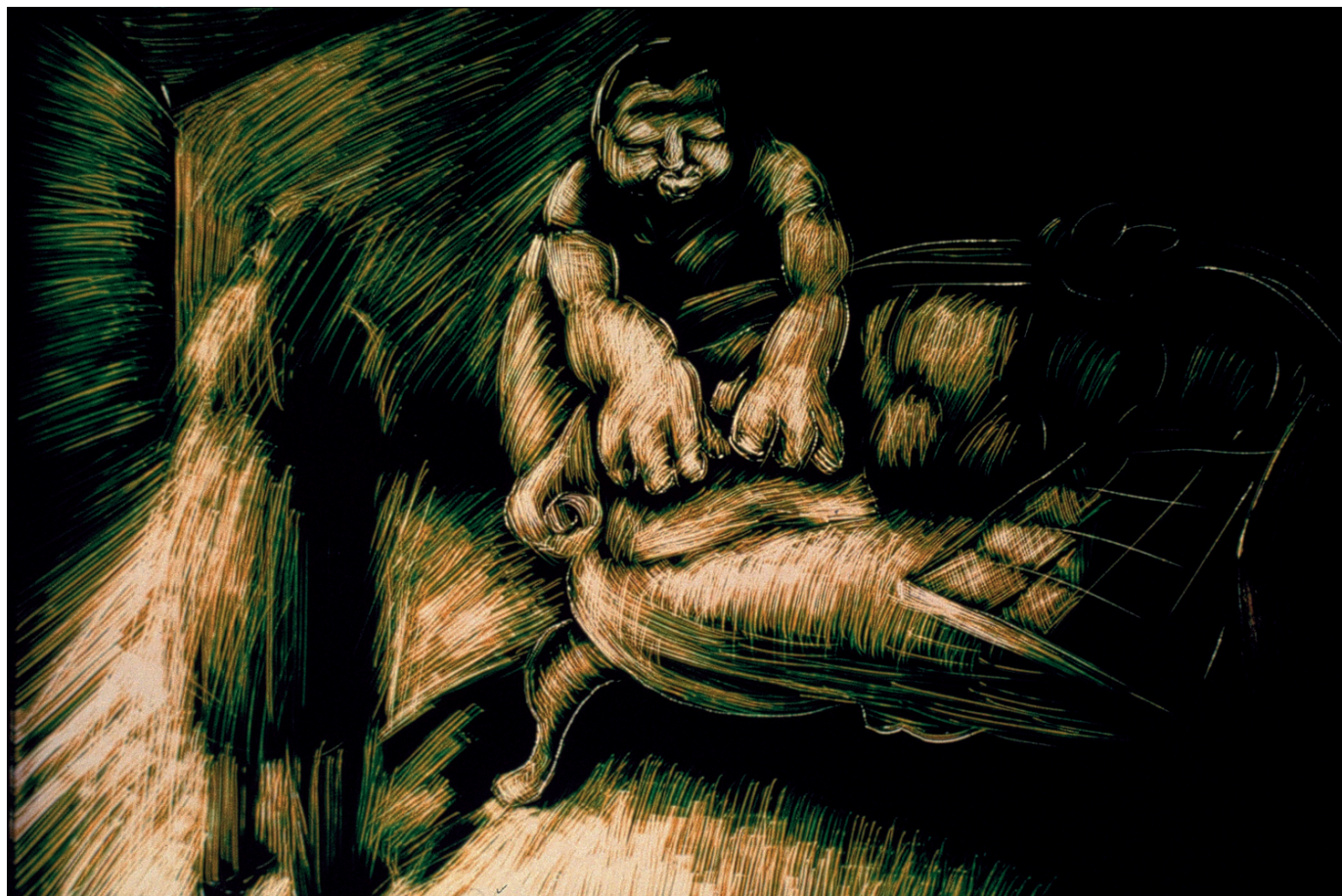
Caroline Leaf's film *Two Sisters* is one such astounding film. The plot is simple – Marie and Viola live alone locked in a house on an island. Viola, of the disfigured face, writes books and Marie ostensibly takes care of

her, while in actuality, only jealously guarding her own insecurities. Viola, who has been kept away from the world, has an unexpected visitor one day and his visit unsettles the uneasy relationship between the two sisters. Viola finally sees the sunlight and is seen by the admirer. The liberating new connect is abruptly broken by Marie whose dependence on her sister Viola forces them both to go back to living the cloistered life so carefully nurtured by Marie.

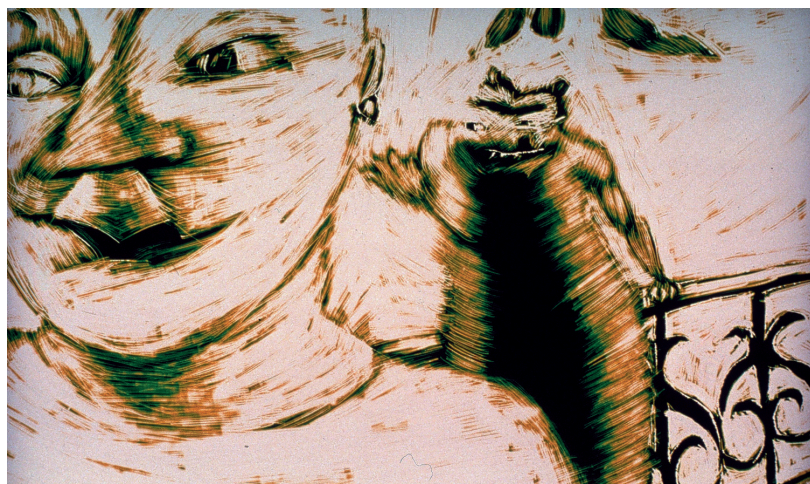
The film makes use of the technique of scratching on exposed film. This exacting technique is achieved by etching images on film, frame by frame, with a sharp needle point to allow light to pass at various depths through the emulsion. Each frame is thus handcrafted with the previous frame as the only reference. The play is that of light and shadow.



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All images from *Two Sisters* are courtesy National Film Board of Canada



The staccato form the animation takes is as unsettling as the images themselves. Sometimes barely fluid and at other times the images hang uncomfortably while the viewer is forced to examine each painfully etched line.

This excruciatingly constructed film is a testimony to how the mind of the animator works. She is at once the artisan, the true artist, the engaging storyteller, forceful image-maker, the giver of life and movement. No effort is spared in the endeavour. And no consideration but the telling of the tale as it should be, even if it means the longest hours of arduous effort. Surprisingly, even though the film is so labour intensive, Leaf never thought it important to underline the amount of work involved in the making of this atmospheric film. It was ultimately only the value that this aspect brought to the film. This then is what keeps the animator going – to bring value to the film the labour becomes only a means to achieving the image in the mind's eye and any amount of work is justifiable, if ultimately the image comes to life.

Stylistically what this technique affords is a dramatic representation of this dark story, where the viewer only sees essential details and is immediately immersed in the oppressive circumstances of the life of the two sisters. Sometimes one can only see hands combing hair, a coffee cup being picked up, feet walking about, one moment on the ground and then suddenly all over the walls and the ceiling, marking both physical and psychological spaces. At other times the camera seems to roll around to accommodate and capture the space within the film frame that the house and characters inhabit.

Yet just as the narrative, image, sound, movement, light form layers of complexity in a film, so do the undiluted hours of work and large time spans involved in achieving the animation, each time giving the viewer a strongly felt sense of the energies coiled and concentrated and contained in this classic artifact.

