

Adam Lewis Jacob's *Wildcat*

by Herb Shellenberger

Adam Lewis Jacob is an artist based in Glasgow, UK primarily working in video and installation. His works are invested in creating collaborative dialogues that problematize the notion of singular authorship. As such, his unconventional animations have incorporated various types of found materials and borrowed sound; and installations often move beyond screen-based media to include objects, information, images and performance.

A portrait of writer and cartoonist Donald Room (born 1928 in Bradford, UK), Adam's 2017 film *Wildcat* reanimates Room's long-running anarchist comic strip of the same name while leading to different trajectories and courses of inquiry. The Revolting Pussycat, the same "wildcat" of the comic's title (presumably named after a wildcat strike, an action taken by unionized workers without their union leadership's approval) jumps off the page, stepping outside of Room's comics and into the real world in various two- and three-dimensional forms, becoming a catalyst for discussion of topics like social justice, performance, the politics of music and the place of anarchism in contemporary society.

Like Adam's previous film *Can't See the Trees for the Wood* (2015), *Wildcat* plays with animation conceptually, creating a pared-down style that emphasizes stasis, rather than fluid motion. The Revolting Pussycat is given several keyframes which he fluctuates between in sequence, rubbing up against panels of the comic strip that loom like wheat-pasted posters behind his attitude-filled walk. The film flips between interviews with Room (never shown directly on camera) and sequences which are lifted from the comic strip, transformed by a different type of focus on their drawing and writing, and aided by a soundtrack of anarchist punk rock, free jazz, contemporary electronic and experimental music. Rather than "animating" the characters of *Wildcat* into some type of cartoon, Adam shifts them more subtly through music and editing while preserving the original drawings and the texture of ink on paper.

The film succinctly details how Donald Room's political and personal philosophies crystallized within the *Wildcat* comic strip. Room details his upbringing and early interest in anarchism and how this was affected by direct political action, particularly in the episode of his life for which he is potentially best known: as the person who exposed corrupt police officer Harold Challenor in 1964. While marching at a protest in London in 1963, Room was hit on the head by a police officer and arrested. After arrest, Officer Challenor placed a half-brick among his possessions and alleged Room was carrying this in his jacket pocket as a weapon during the protest. Having recently been acquainted with forensic science, Room requested his jacket be tested for residue from an alleged brick in his pocket. When no brick dust or wear could be found, a judge ruled that Officer Challenor had acted in a corrupt manner and Room was acquitted. The Challenor Case, as it was referred, became a landmark case in exposing police corruption and was widely publicized.

This episode in Rooum's life illustrates the tension that he plays out between the two characters in his comic strip: "the Revolting Pussycat is impulsive and bad tempered, the Free-Range Egghead wants anarchism to be intellectually respectable." This duality, the difference between the anarchist who actually is willing to smash the state with a brick and the other who would rather think about things theoretically, sets up the humorous scenes that the comic strip depicts. With this, Rooum seems to argue that direct action and intellectual acumen work best in some combination, while stressing just one or the other can lead to situations which are brash, ineffective or—in the case of his comic strip—humorous.

To this point, Adam's film toes this same line between rigorous theory and playfulness. Texts from Rooum's book *What is Anarchism? An Introduction* are recited over scenes which initially bear little resemblance. For example, an essay on property by 19th century French politician Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the "father of anarchism," is recited by a narrator over images of hands opening multiple postal letters containing patches, stickers and other small objects emblazoned with the circle-A symbol of anarchism. Proudhon's extract, sloganized as "property is theft!", seems at odds with the cartoonish and commoditized objects we see on screen, in which anarchism is shown as a brand which can be bastardized and sold by anyone, even if it directly contradicts its main tenets.

The film's strength is in the way that it transforms and translates Donald Rooum's *Wildcat* comic strips into extremely lively and relevant contemporary documents, both literally and figuratively "animating" these static materials. Adam occasionally sets off Rooum's drawings against white backgrounds, divorcing them from their space on the page yet still allowing them to be read as hand-created artworks. Rather than emphasizing their age, this sets them into a different and less contextual space, especially complicated by the music that punctuates these sequences. Glasgow electronic band LAPS are heard in the opening sequence of the film. Their bass-heavy, minimalist dance track "Who Me?", with echoing vocals spoken in French and English, is heard over *Wildcat* panels showing a pompous intellectual speaking in favor of eroding personal freedoms in exchange for state governance. The use of LAPS in this context, or of the experimental Swedish group Position Normal, illustrate a shift away from music traditionally associated with anarchism (folk and punk rock with polemical lyrics) to sounds that are more idiosyncratic and personally expressive.

The final sequences of the film show Donald Rooum describing some pragmatic hope for a society with less bosses and government, a first step towards anarchy. A text by 19th century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin is recited as the viewer sees a baby crawling toward a plush doll of the Revolting Pussycat. The camera pulls back to show the baby and doll actually on a monitor, then scans around the room which contains objects and artwork previously seen in the film. All the while, abstract sounds are being built up around Bakunin's words. With the camera zooming out of and into different monitors, the sound crescendos leading to a final sequence of the *Wildcat* doll distorted in a flatbed scanner,

with stroboscopic images shown in rhythm to an abstract electronic beat. These moments of abstraction and atmosphere allow Adam Lewis Jacob to open up a more contemplative space inside Rooum's work and biography, creating a portrait open to interpretation and affect, which augments and complicates the two-dimensionality of the *Wildcat* comic. Like the *Revoltin' Pussycat*, shown both inside of and apart from the comics, the film transforms Rooum's vision into new realms, providing a richer and more complicated interpretation of it.

Written for the exhibition British Film and Video at Studio 55, Seoul, South Korea from 1–21 December 2017. Featured artists: Adam Lewis Jacob, Rachel Maclean and Phillip Warnell. Exhibition organized by Ian (Eyeball Media Art Webzine) and artists selected by Emily Butler (Whitechapel Gallery), Andrea Lissoni (Tate Modern) and Herb Shellenberger (Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival).