

PROFILE / JEFF SCHER
BY STEVEN HELLER

Animator Jeff Scher uses dense, unorthodox techniques to make his highly original, image-rich films

Animation
Drawing
Experimental films
Found footage
Painting
Super 8



THE ALCHEMIST

1. (opposite) *Milk of Amnesia*, 1992. Watercolour on paper, filmed in 16mm. This is an animated montage of a brain memory catalogue of the intimate and forgotten moments of a life. Made with the support of the Jerome Foundation.
2. A glimpse of Jeff Scher's 100 sq ft studio.

Rivalling the maddest mad scientist's laboratory, the dingy lower Manhattan studio of underground filmmaker and commercial director Jeff Scher where he experiments with drawing, painting, photography, animation and live action film, is a hothouse of comic visions that rattle the eyes and jerk the senses. Madness permeates the 100 sq ft room, excruciatingly crammed from floor to ceiling with uncounted Standard 8, Super 8 and 16mm cameras, projectors, reel-to-reel editing decks and rusty canisters of vintage film stock. Watching Scher [no relation to Paula Scher but married to Bonnie Siegler of the New York design firm Number 17, see *Eye* no. 39 vol. 10] painstakingly operate his custom-designed rotoscope, made partly from tin coffee cans sitting on a tiny platform encrusted with decades of dried watercolour paint (without a computer in sight), is further evidence the 51-year-old artist is a throwback not only to legendary cineastes but to mythical alchemists. In these otherwise gloomy surroundings, he transforms silver nitrate into golden imagery, magically capturing gleeful lights, staggering abstractions and startling visual effects with vintage machinery and obsolete

technologies. When synchronised to toe-tapping music the ludicrously jumbled juxtapositions that make up Scher's intensely graphic films can't help but cajole joy from even the most blasé viewer.

How can one not smile – or laugh out loud for that matter – at the absurdity of *Still Loaf with Guitar?* I mean, whoever heard of an animated still life? But in Scher's cinematic netherworld the implausible is *de rigueur*. *Still Loaf*, one of dozens of two- and three-minute shorts he has produced over the past two decades, is made from hundreds of variously hued drawings that slightly jiggle as colours and textures change. The film asks the hitherto unasked (and therefore unanswered) question: why can't a piece of animation be as static as a painting and still be animated? After all, one can stare at a Cézanne bowl of fruit for hours without so much as a hint of movement, so what is wrong with watching animation that only subtly shifts its shape?

While *Still Loaf* loafs on the screen, most of Scher's witty cerebral films are as frenzied as strobe lights on a dance floor. His *Rotoscope Trilogy*, including the kinetically souped-up *Reasons To Be Glad*, *Milk of Amnesia* and



3. *Still Leaf with Guitar*, 2003. Watercolour on paper, filmed in 16mm. The gag was to flip the normal animation process: where the drawings are slightly different the illusion of motion is created, while the colours are as consistent as possible in order to create the illusion of continuity. The accumulation of collisions of colour creates the illusion of motion.
4. From *Tick-Tock*, 2006, watercolour on paper, filmed in 16mm (work in progress). This film is a collection of twenty years of compulsive watercolour painting. The paintings represent a sort of time-lapse-like evolution of Scher's style and taste.

'I relate to the way in which painters working in film thought about film. I'm not sure if I'm a painter who makes films or a filmmaker who paints – or both.'

Garden of Regrets, tests the viewer's capacity to process swiftly colliding, subliminal visual data. In *Reasons to be Glad*, Scher created the illusion of a conventional narrative through the speed and momentum of quick shots he painted, spliced with actual clips from (or what he calls the 'flavours' of) adventure and espionage theatrical films. 'It feels like a story, except you can't follow it at all,' he explains, with the sly grin of one who knows something the audience does not. In fact, one of the reasons for making his faux-narratives is to enable viewers to invent their own stories, and he is overjoyed when it happens. 'At a gallery show one time a woman from India told me she'd spent an hour watching this three-minute film and that she had finally figured out the story,' Scher recalls. 'Then she told me this incredible Bollywood-like melodramatic narrative involving kidnapping, sacred cows and mad love. I was fascinated that she could connect the dots of my shots and come up with her wild story. It was like she used the film as a linear Rorschach test.'

Speaking of which, behaviourists Hermann Rorschach and Ivan Pavlov are presences in Scher's films insofar as he routinely hides images within

images – viewable for a fraction of a millisecond – designed to scar the retina and trigger residual responses like a mental cookie. Watching a film like the aptly titled *Milk of Amnesia*, which challenges the audience to recall hundreds of bizarre visual references flashing before their eyes at breakneck speed, is a perceptual game: 'The technical goal of *Milk of Amnesia* was to see what happened to the viewer's [equilibrium] when sequential images were painted in different styles and colours,' he explains. 'My theory was that the figurative continuity of the action would rise above all the textural collisions of style.'

DIY SENSIBILITY

Scher is endlessly fascinated by the way animation gives him the option of drawing lots of pictures and playing with style from drawing to drawing. The 'figurative continuity is strong glue that unites the most disparate sequences of styles,' he says. And here's where mad science comes in: 'I was also interested in exploring that nervous sort of highway of how the brain handled all the conflicting information of such dense and percussive montage. On the narrative level,



5. *Woman on the Beach*, 2005, watercolour, collage on paper, filmed in 16mm and digital video. This film is a simple motion study of a woman running. It's a left-handed reference to the master of motion Eadward Muybridge.

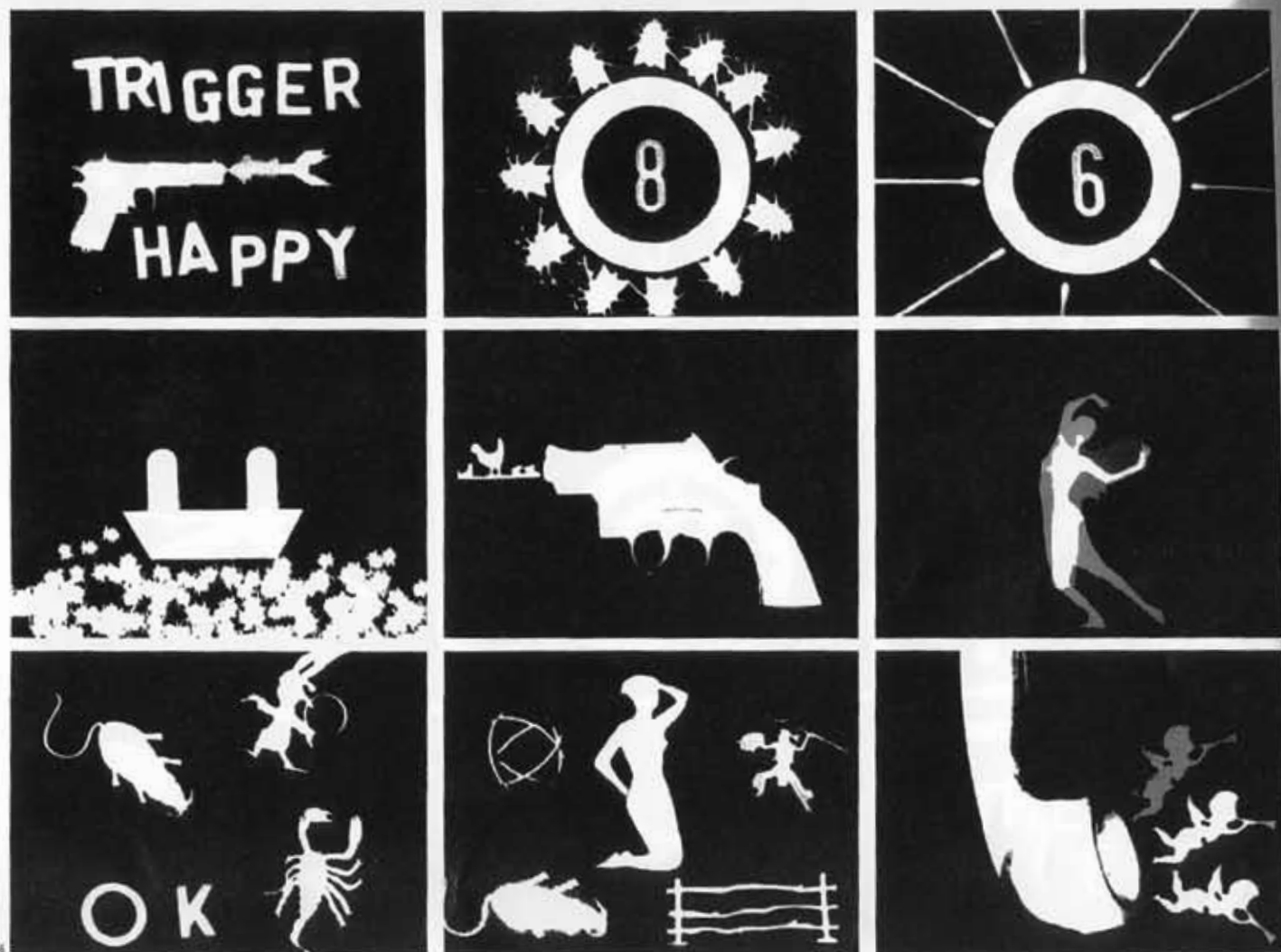
Milk of Amnesia was about memory and the kinds of links one makes in one's own head-brain-catalogue of life. How the past is never far from the now and how it's all a kind of pachinko machine of images and emotions.'

These intellectual justifications sometimes belie the fact that on a basic level Scher's films are simply fun to watch. The drawings are at times stunning, with colours and shapes that are hypnotically mesmerising. But to appreciate his creative madness, the viewer must be totally invested, giving each film more than just a superficial glance. In fact, owing to their respective densities, many viewings are required not only to decipher the fusion of graphic information and visual detritus he has buried into each frame, but to comprehend the subtexts, which are meant to alter the way people cognitively receive film.

Given his DIY sensibility, Scher leans more towards primitive than the polished, and more expressive than rational (although he can astutely rationalise every frame). His expressive primitivism stems from an interest in early experimental film and animation masters such as Oskar Fischinger (see p.33), Hans Richter and

Warren Sonbert, among others. 'They were interested less in storytelling, and more in exploring time, rhythm and montage,' says Scher. Bring up those nascent days of experimental film and he will happily wax on about how artists from other mediums plunged into motion to re-invent what cinema was all about. 'I find the work of Richter, Fischinger, Man Ray, Léger, and René Clair particularly exciting, because I relate to the sense and spirit of mischief in their films. You can still smell the fun. I also relate to the way in which painters working in film thought about film, because I'm never sure if I'm a painter who makes films or a filmmaker who paints – or if I'm both.'

Jeffery Noyes Scher, born on Christmas Eve 1954, graduated from Bard College, a fount of experimental film, in 1976. 'I was pre-med and film, but film won out,' he says about his studies with experimentalists Adolfo Mekas, Bruce Baillie and Peter Kubelka. He also took up painting in a loose expressionistic manner and sought ways to integrate them into film. But his first experiments were a series of tiny two-frame films: 'You dropped them with tweezers into a running projector and sometimes they would catch, run through the



mechanism and get projected, but more often they would get chewed up. It was kind of theatre and movie. They all had wise-guy titles like *Beautiful Bridgeport* (a two-frame travelogue) and so on. I wrote to the *Guinness Book of World Records* and made my case for having made the world's shortest films. Something like ten years later I got a reply that they had considered my claim, but had decided that two frames was an absolute in that there could be no shorter films (a single frame would simply be a still) and they preferred things that were competitive.'

But more pertinent to Scher's filmmaking, when he started out, a roll of 16mm or 8mm film with sound ran about two and a half minutes. As a result this became his typical unit of time. 'It's like a canvas of comfortable (but temporal) size,' he rhapsodises. 'It's about the length of an AM radio pop song and the length that Kodak decided home movies should be (if unedited). It's just long enough to engage a viewer and take them on a little trip.' And it remains a perfect length for him because it follows two golden rules of short filmmaking: 'Never overstay your welcome, and always leave them wanting more, not less.' Which

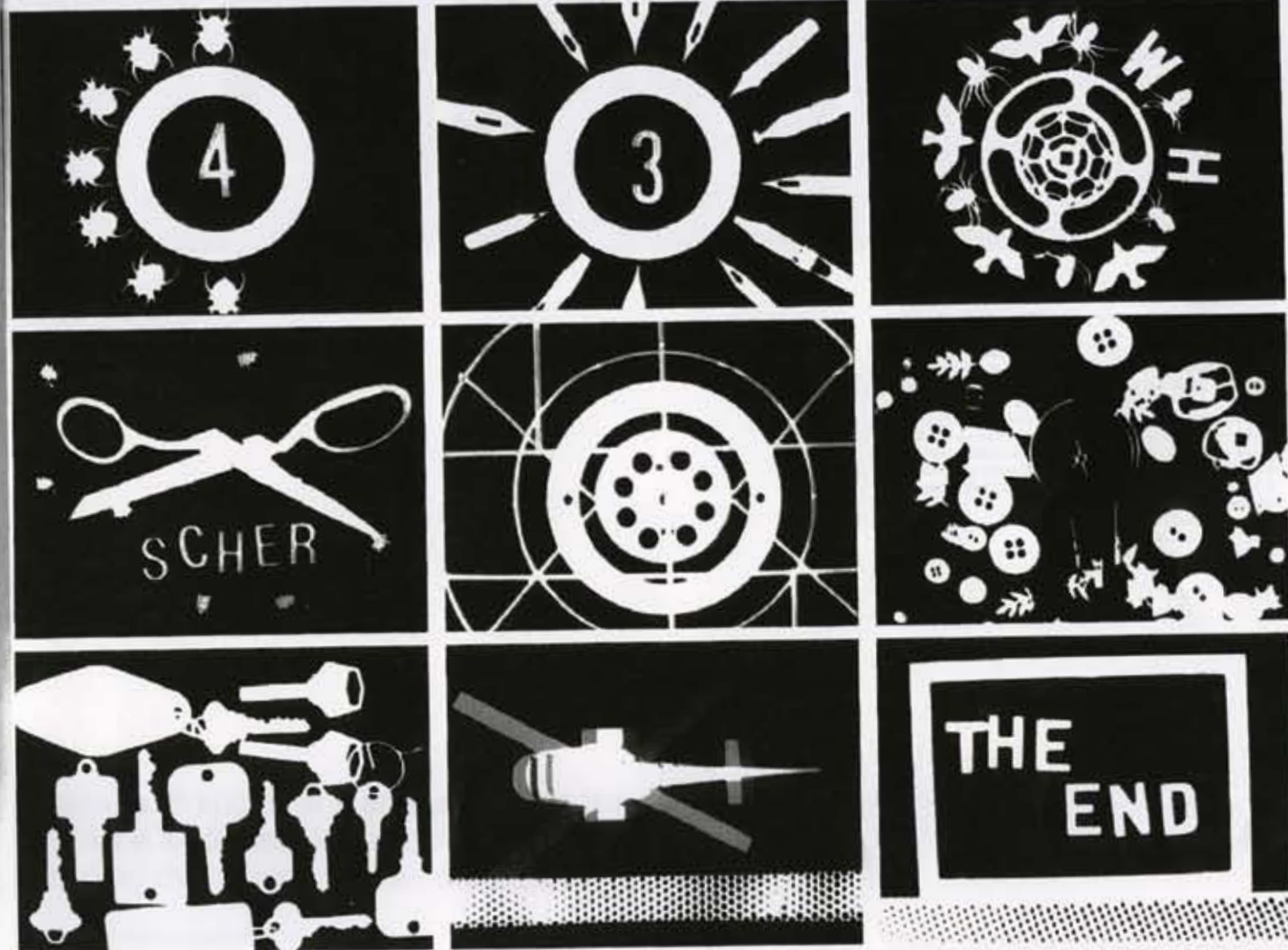
is particularly true for abstract films without a narrative hook, so these experiments are just the right length to 'take ideas on test drives and make structure simple,' says Scher, 'more like a joke or a gag that starts slow and then gets faster and faster and then says goodbye with percussive abruptness.' He adds: 'I love the sound of the echo in a theatre when a loud sound or music track cuts out on a crescendo.'

Scher's signature rotoscopic technique, projecting film frames on to paper and tracing them by hand, after which the paper images are animated by separately shooting each sheet as a single frame, derives from pioneer animator Max Fleischer (*Betty Boop*) who with his brother patented the basic process in the late 1920s. Scher routinely shoots 8mm or 16mm which he projects and traces on to watercolour paper and renders them with pen or brush, and then frame by frame brings them to life. In this age of digital video, After Effects and Final Cut Pro – and slick Pixar computer-generated animation – Scher's methods may be anachronistic, but he doesn't seem to care. He remains so much in love with early filmmaking techniques that he conducts a workshop

at the School of Visual Arts MFA 'Designer As Author' course entirely devoted to making flip-books, the most rudimentary yet quintessentially expressive means of illusionary motion.

KINETIC PEDESTRIANS

However Scher is no Luddite, either. He owns a Mac (though it doesn't fit in his room) on which he toys with certain effects, and also sends emails. But old-fashioned methods prevail, he says, because there's more satisfaction making illusions the hard way. Nonetheless, animation is not Scher's sole métier. In 1989 he wrote and directed his only full-length, live-action feature film, *Prisoners of Inertia*, starring Amanda Plummer, a delightful comic character study of a husband and wife making their way through a lazy Sunday. He also makes commercials for Nick Jr and Independent Film Channel, among other clients. But Scher prefers making his conceptual shorts, which are no less intensive than larger projects, because he is in total control. For example, his recent *Tick-Tock* (2005) is a stop-frame survey of ten or so years of watercolours and notebooks, an experiment in what Scher calls collision



6. *Trigger Happy*, 1998, 16mm high-contrast film. Thousands of things picked up in the street are made to dance on a light box. The idea was to explore the illusion of motion in the rapid replacement of one object by another.

animation. 'To compress time (all the time it took to make the paintings and the time I'd spend looking at them) into dance (of the spectator type). It's kind of a retro-spectacle.' His 1997 homage to 1940s film, *Yours*, was an experiment in making three movies at once: one in the positive of the film, one in the negative, with the original film as the difference between the other two. 'I picked the vintage footage out of a big reel I found at a flea market because it featured two twin acts (the singers and the featured musicians) and I thought that was another doubling that gave my film invisible glue,' says Scher. A lively example of Scher's interest in visual simultaneity, *Yours* also led to a curious coincidence. After it was shown on the premiere night of the 1998 New York Film Festival opening for Woody Allen's *Celebrity*, Scher received some surprising information: unbeknownst to the filmmaker the composer of the song used in the soundtrack of *Yours* not only shared his last name but was also very possibly related to him. Then he learned that the composer played on a lot of Max Fleischer tracks, including the Popeye theme, 'which means there must be something genetic going on,' Scher muses.

In a different stylistic vein, Scher's noir *Grand Central* (1999), an impressionistic live action film of passers-by walking through New York's historic train terminal, is an experiment in light and dark. Shot on Agfa sr8, a high-contrast positive film stock made for printing optical soundtracks in labs, and which is no longer produced, the film has no grey, which gives it a very sculptural look. 'The good thing about it,' says Scher, 'is that it's free – my lab has given me a lifetime supply of short ends – and it's also incredibly slow,' which means the film is only good in bright light and gets confused with middle grey, leaping from reading it as black to reading it as white. Scher explains this process was a way to 'turn the pedestrian ballet of Grand Central at rush hour into a kind of kinetic graphic. It makes crazy dramatic flips of contrast, like at the end of *Grand Central*, a scene I shot through a scuffed piece of plastic that cars had been driving over on 42nd Street. I also used some Tri-x that was about twenty years out of date.' While many of his materials are past their expiry date, imagery like this has a timeless quality. Scher's films are intimate affairs, and he prefers projecting them at cosy settings such as galleries,



7. *Spaghetti Western*, 2005, 16mm. The idea was to draw with pasta. Surgical tubing with amalfuro wire inside was more forgiving, but the saute - by Ragù - was real. Produced by Number 17 for HBO Family.



8. *Yours*, 1997, 16mm. The idea was to make three films at the same time via a third party film. A Scopitone film was printed in positive and negative, now animation was filmed through each of these elements back on to a new piece of film. The result was one film in the positive, one film in the negative with the third being the difference between the first two.

9 (opposite). *Grand Central*, 1999, 16mm. The opening of a long closed window let light into the building in a way that had not been seen in 50 years. It was a challenge for Scher to use the crowds as 'light modulators' with high-contrast film. The ASA 6 film he used was so slow you can only film light with it. The film felt as if it should look like the last film made in the past century. It was filmed (in part) with the first 16mm Bell & Howell camera ever made, the Flmu 75. Funding: Jerome Foundation.

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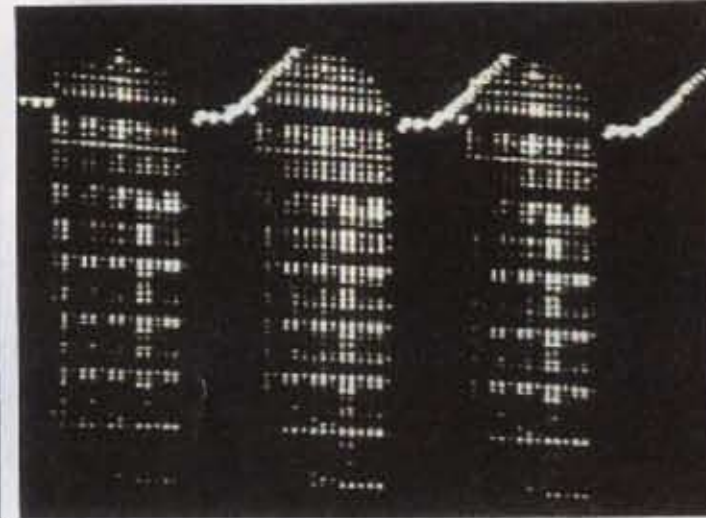
studios and outdoor gatherings on summer nights. For three years he organised the Seeley Creek Film Festival, which was held on an old farm owned by culture critic and radio host Kurt Andersen. The films are, however, only one part of his artistic portfolio. He also exhibits the watercolours and collages that comprise them. At his show at the Maya Stendhal Gallery in New York in September 2005, scores of sequential images used for his films were framed and hung in long rows, becoming 'a movie one can make with one's eyes,' he says of the cinematic experience he wanted the viewer to have while standing in front of static work.

Since all these experiments are time-consuming and costly, commercial work for HBO, Nick Jr, Ameritex and International Film Festival support and nourish his habit. Techniques from one form migrate to the other, yet he is clear about the difference between the two: 'Experimental films are embellished answers to questions,' he says. 'Commercial work is more like building something to fit in a specific place. There's never a due date for finishing an experimental film, while clients are always in a hurry.' The momentum of working fast removes all the

hesitations and procrastinations endemic to the experimental process. 'I sometimes pitch experimental ideas on jobs and gamble on them working. The challenge of delivering an invented technique on a deadline can be suspenseful - but so far I've always found a way to make it work in the end.' One commission, his pun-derived *Spaghetti Western*, where lettering and image were seemingly made entirely out of strands of pasta, was a complete improvisation. His 'Shorts from the Underground' title sequence for The Sundance Channel used a similar motif. Though it was made for an enlightened client Scher admits: 'I was lucky that it worked the first time, because it involved animating strips of curled, coiled loose film, tangled up like a bowl of spaghetti.'

THE LOGIC OF AN ANIMATOR

Scher makes storyboards for commercial jobs where clarity is imperative - 'they are tools of seduction and reassurance for the client' - but does not storyboard his experimental films since notebooks serve a similar function. 'I might draw some things out, but rarely look back at them. Drawing is a thinking exercise for me, not a



remembering one,' he explains. 'On my own films I like to experiment and react to the results. You can't board what you don't know yet. And once you've got it, editing is the way it's assembled; going back to paper at this point would only be for thinking and playing. The "map" aspect of a board is now an actual trip.'

From time to time Scher is asked to make a commercial version of an experimental film. 'I actually like these jobs because it often lets me improve on the original idea,' he says. 'Most of my films are based on long percolating ideas that continue to evolve after a film is made. I also love working with professional people in the commercial world because on my films I rarely have anyone help beyond the lab, sound house and an intern.'

Scher insists that all his films are secretly narrative, at least in his head while he's making them. 'I joke about "animator's logic",' he says, 'the way I connect one bit of abstract business with another, like, okay, you guys (red dots) are taking the bus (a black blob of ink) back to jail (a collage tear of the Times), etc.' He further views this method of montage as an alternative language.

where the range of interpretations is as exciting as the film itself. 'Even when there is no real intentional narrative there is a strong desire in most viewers to find one,' he argues. 'When I'm putting a film together I think more about pace and visual interactions: the visual collisions of edits between shots or frames. That's where the action is. Telling a story forces you to think about the manipulations of storytelling in terms of movie "grammar". I found in shooting narrative that the camera always wants to be in one place for each unit of information and any variation of that angle of greatest articulation is a disservice to most viewers and a kind of betrayal of one's unwritten contract with an audience.'

In recent years Scher has employed some digital media, if only for his commercial work. The digital tools make filmmaking cheaper and faster, Scher says: 'It changes the way one thinks about working as much as it changes the way you work.' He adds: 'It lets you tweak endlessly.'

Scher continues: 'What's missing is the leap of commitment you make in film. And how the *moment* of making counts more because of the money and the time. With film, you don't see what

you shoot as you shoot it, you see it the next day or later. Film is much more beautiful. There is just much more information in every frame. Digital still sucks. It sucks a lot less than it used to, but it's still not the emotional epiphany of the dancing dyes and nitrates on a silver screen.'

Since many of Scher's films demand working with odd processes - such as painting with vinegar over pure Ultramarine pigment ('which you should only try in a well ventilated space,' he cautions) - he rejects most digital effects as too sterile. But for Scher a technical idea is only half the concept for his films. What is more important is the marriage of technique and context. 'I've got a pile of great tech ideas that have not yet found contexts. I keep thinking though.'

Recently, he admitted to once again flirting with the long form, and has several features planned, though from the sound of them they may end up in one of those many unopened film cans. 'One takes place completely in the dark - we only see the characters when they light cigarettes or get things out of the fridge. And another is top secret, but involves mass hypnosis.' Now, isn't that just like a mad alchemist? @