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Nine Nation Animation

First-rate compilation offers a filling multicourse meal for the discerning grownup toon fan.

By DENNIS HARVEY

First-rate compilation "Nine Nation Animation" sprawls not just in terms of geography but technique, theme, style and tone, offering a filling multicourse meal for the discerning grownup toon fan. Package has been playing runs of various length in U.S. rep houses, cinematheques, museums and other venues since late September; bookings should stretch well into the new year, presaging transition into home-format sales.

Distributed and curated by Gotham nonprofit the World According to Shorts (named after annual programs commenced a decade ago at the Brooklyn Academy of Music), "Nine" reps that org's first all-animation collection.

It starts off on a raffish note with Kajsa Naess' Norwegian "Deconstruction Workers," in which two hard hats (played by animate stills of two actors) debate the meaning of life -- or whether there is any -- while oblivious to society collapsing around them and their own mortal peril. Using a somewhat similar media mix to different ends is Robert Bradbrook's Brit entry "Home Road Movies," which starts out as a nostalgic look back at driving vacations that seemed wonderful in childhood, then turned a little sad as the kids grew old enough to realize the less-than-wondrous shortcomings of their aging dad (Bill Paterson, a live figure amid vintage advertising imagery).

Also ambitious in narrative terms are Patrick Pleutin's French "Bamiyan," which tells the history of Afghanistan's Taliban-destroyed giant Buddha statues in rich, oil-painterly abstractions; and Jonas Odell's 15-minute closer "Never Like the First Time!" in which four Swedish interviewees recall their first sexual experiences -- by turns boastful, disappointing, traumatic and tenderly romantic -- which are illustrated in four distinctly different ways, from willfully crude line drawings to collage.

Disparate as they are, these are all delights. Likelier to divide viewers are Turkish toon "Average 40 Matches," a computer-animation vignette set to piano-roll Paganini that feels thin even at just three minutes; South Africa's "The Tale of How," an eccentric mix of Bosch-like graphics and classical chorale narrating a nonsense story that's a good deal closer to Lewis Carroll than Tim Burton's recent stab; and Croatian entry "She Who Measures," whose grotesque landscape of futuristic conformism recalls the Zagreb school of the '60s. That's not a bad thing, although the slaves-of-consumer-marketing parable feels equally old and tired.

The two funniest works are back-to-back in the middle of the omnibus. Jonas Geirnaert's Cannes prizewinner "Flatlife" is a Tati-like orchestration of slapstick destruction by a quartet of adjacent apartment dwellers. Its drawing style and military-percussion soundtrack are both perfectly simple and simply perfect.

There's wilder fun in David O'Reilly's Irish-German short "Please Say Something" (winner of a Golden Bear at Berlin), which chronicles stormy domestic relations over the long haul between an office-drone cat and its mercurial mouse spouse. Designed (sound included) like a primitive videogame, with the characters' gibberish translated into subtitles, pic mixes neurotic modern-life banality and anarchic, sci-fi-tinged absurdity in a way that feels so brilliantly fresh, viewers might well wish for an immediate second viewing.

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