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## Drawn and quartered

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Dysfunction is the law of the land in "Nine Nation Animation"



Construction workers face an existential crisis in the animated short *Deconstruction Workers*.

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**FILM** "I am not a cartoon cat," she wrote.

I had shared a link to David O'Reilly's devastatingly brilliant, computer-animated short film, *Please Say Something* (2008), the plot of which involves a cat and a mouse living together in an emotionally abusive relationship. The setup is *Tom and Jerry*, but the characters lead fully anthropomorphized lives: he's a writer mouse, and most of the time he ignores her to work, even when she buys a new blue scarf. They fight, there's yelling (or squeaking; the animal talk is subtitled.) The sad relationship is projected into the future, regretfully, with slight potential to go another way. When my girlfriend at the time watched it, I guess it came a little too close for comfort.

Being an animator is as terrible as being a writer. Working for Pixar aside, it's an isolating process, requiring one to devote hours unending to solitary work (with the additional tedium of repetitiously rendering variations of the same image over and over to create just a few seconds of movement). Misanthropic masochists, with pens and tablets.

That's most likely a gross stereotype. But watching the Irish-German *Please Say Something* and

the eight other shorts that are part of "Nine Nation Animation," a showcase for the world's best recent animated work, I was struck by what seemed to be a shared sensibility, a dysfunctional relationship with the world.

The Belgian short film *Flatlife* (2004) extends the difficulty of getting along with just one person to all of one's neighbors. A two-dimensional cutaway view of an apartment building reveals the relationship between the occupants of adjacent units. Set to a staccato drum soundtrack, the animators involve the characters in a chain of events where every decision of one person complicates the life of another.

In Norway's *Deconstruction Workers* (2008), a laborer discusses the lack of meaning in life with a coworker. It's depressing and deadpan, as you would expect, but placed in a comic background: the revolution literally happens without them, they remain utterly oblivious to social upheaval while hanging from beams in a bit from a Harold Lloyd picture.

According to programmer Jonathan Howell, "the intention of the program is to give viewers a sample of techniques and styles of animation from around the world." There's no theme, but "as they're chosen by a selection committee of one, the films inevitably reflect matter that I find interesting." And it's true, there are more shorts in the program that aren't specifically about a social malaise, and have their appeal in other areas. Some are lighter, and some are totally bleak.

As a showcase, "Nine Nation Animation" may be a "mature," not-for-kids program, but it illustrates the most provocative characteristic of all animation: the ability to approach the darkest of subjects with levity and amusement. How else would you laugh at two people running around hitting each other with frying pans?

## NINE NATION ANIMATION

**Nov. 19–25, \$5–\$9.75**

**Roxie**

**3117 16th St., SF**

**(415) 863-1087**

**[www.roxie.com](http://www.roxie.com)** <sup>[2]</sup>

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