

JUNE

Munro Ferguson

September 18 – October 23, 2021

Joyce Wieland (1930-1998) and Munro Ferguson (b. 1960) became important figures in each other's lives, beginning in the 1960s when the young Munro and his filmmaker-parents were living in New York City, and so too was Joyce, a close family friend. The mid-1960s were a tremendously productive period for Wieland, as she transitioned from being primarily a painter to a more expansive artistic identity, ceaselessly experimenting with materials, media, technologies and genres. From the start of their friendship Joyce was clearly charmed by Munro's imagination and personality, and she featured the boy in her creative projects: there is a photo of him in the plastic assemblage *Space of the Lama* (1966), for instance, while he is one of the tribe of children ritualistically carrying a fur hat through the forest in her expanded-cinema project *Bill's Hat* (1967). She encouraged Munro when he reached adulthood and became an artist and filmmaker in his own right. If their relationship

necessarily changed over the years, they would continue to inspire and influence each other. Munro dedicated the film *June* to his friend and mentor, whose early-onset Alzheimer's led to her death in 1998. In a profound sense, this film can also be regarded as an homage to their shared imaginative universe.

June is a 6-minute long, hand-drawn stereoscopic animation. In two distinct sequences, vividly-coloured shapes undergo a pictorial metamorphosis, accompanied by the expressive sounds of Philip Glass's *String Quartet No. 5*, as played by the Kronos Quartet. The film's two parts have very different sensibilities, moreover. The "Alzheimer" sequence begins with a complex abstract structure, replete with curving and winding linear elements, some of them wound tightly into massed shapes. The animated action here is subtractive, as those shapes quickly disintegrate and disappear, until all that is left is a node of light that was initially hidden at the center of the structure. Within an expansive midnight-blue space, this hovering ball of light diminishes in size—suggesting not so much a point of finality but rather a star zooming off to join a new firmament. The second part, "Memory," has a more exuberant layering of pattern, coils, networks, planes, round shapes and linear features—all moving and shifting. At times these elements overlap and collide, but each encounter seems to generate new phenomena. The erasure and loss implied by the Alzheimer section is compensated for here by a sense of unstoppable growth, invention, and connectivity.

June's abstract schema can certainly be thought of in relation to the operations of the human mind, in line with the artwork's dedication and linguistic cues. But abstraction is inevitably open to multiple connotations. Ferguson's fantastical interconnected shapes might resemble a neurological system, but can equally be construed as a communications network, or a cosmological event. The stereoscopic effect of the installation seems to envelop us, but do we then find ourselves inside a brain, or perhaps astride an atom, charging around the universe?

In the hands of both Wieland and Ferguson, abstraction is wielded as a rich and complex visual language. Wieland first achieved recognition in the Toronto art scene when she was a young artist in her 20s, and it is easy to see why, since her early paintings show a masterful control of composition, colour, texture, and mark-making. The brash and irreverent Wieland soon showed, however, that unlike many fellow artists of her generation, she wasn't prepared to worship at the altar of abstract art. In her hands abstract shapes were something to play with, even to make fun of. She began to interrupt her own abstract compositions with speech balloons, words, or erotic scrawls. This is the case with a painting such as *Redgasm* (1960), where the humorous title alerts the viewer that the energy activating this pictorial field is supposed to be libidinal. At times, *June* seems to echo the dynamism of early paintings like *Redgasm* and *War Memories* (also 1960).

If Ferguson's *June* is mindful of Wieland's trajectory as an artist, it is equally important to situate his film within a history of experimental animation at the National Film Board of Canada—going back to such remarkable films as *Begone Dull Care* (1949), where venerable NFB animators Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambart choreographed painterly gestures as a visual counterpart to music by the Oscar Peterson Trio. Also, by making a film that experiments with technology and software, Ferguson carries the torch of NFB's vanguard of technological innovators.

At OBORO, Munro Ferguson's *June* plays on a continual loop, and this format seems appropriate and even necessary. The unravelling and erasure that are characteristic of the "Alzheimer" section trigger a sense of pathos, an emotional response that is shored up by the haunting quality of the Kronos string instruments. With the film looping, this sensation of loss does recur, but not traumatically so, because it is immediately followed by the pleasure and adrenaline rush of the "Memory" section. This ensures that the imaginative artistic journey begun by Joyce Wieland continues into the present day.

— Johanne Sloan

Presented in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada



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