

B E G O Ñ A V I C A R I O

# Winter Toys

**What is the reason why someone decides to work in animation?**

**How do they develop and produce their work?**

**Where is the boundary between cinema, animation and art?**

These are just some of the questions that Begoña Vicario raises when she deals with her friend and colleague Isabel Herguera's professional career.

One of the devices commonly used by mothers with long experience and many children is to put some of the toys in the house away and after a few months take them out of the cupboard as if they were new, to the delight of the children. That was what Isabel Herguera's mother did, and so did mine, and I often think these ploys made an enormous impression on us — for instance, when we begin a project with reviews of old work, or when we take another look at those old projects and see new concepts within them.

We have never spoken of the parallel lives we have led, when we became acquainted on obtaining a grant to study our last year of *bachiller* in the United States — when we returned to graduate in Fine Arts, she went off to Germany to study animation, and I left for Russia. Living and studying here and there we have forged ahead in our animation work, with many similarities and differences, naturally, although in our heads we shared that special something which animated films give us.

Many attempts have been made to explain what on earth, like a drug, moves people to spend months on end in a room, using their hands to slowly and carefully move materials around

and take photos or whatever, often even shunning friends and life itself. The wonderful artist Caroline Leaf told me many times she felt she had lost out on part of her life, and so she hated every one of her fine films... but then she would also tell me that, deep down, her work had also helped her plunge into life and understand it better.

Herguera's artistic trajectory reached an important turning point when she left Bilbao to study in Germany. She had already taken the first steps towards her performances at the Bilbao Fine Arts Faculty, and she worked on developing her CV: at the beginning of the 1980s she presented her famous installation with Mikel Arce, in which the mark we leave on everyday objects and surrounding space was the main feature, presenting the subjective nature of the measurement of time. At the Kunst Akademie in Düsseldorf, however, she encountered far older representations of animation, and produced her first work there in 1988, *Spain loves you*, a film made with cut outs as fresh as they come — to the strains of a *paso doble*, it showed Isabel's family's Sunday outing, the Civil Guard, Franco and everything, in images with a special meaning for that generation.



Isabel Hegera *La gallina ciega* 2005

For her next two films, she used oil on glass — *Safari* (1988) and *Cante de ida y vuelta* (1989), and this led to a third, *El sueño de Inigo* (1990), although here she used chalk on slate. *Baquiné* (1991) was filmed using sand. Four years later, in 1994, she produced another piece, *Los muertitos*, and here she returned to the photo and cut out technique. Although between these projects she did much advertising work, for ten years she produced no more shorts — in other words, until 2003, when she made *The Balloon* with

Satinder Singh. It is accredited to Singh only, but this film is very Hegera.

A major tendency over the last ten years or so has been to classify animation projects in a very tendentious fashion — in other words, we have seen traditional animation and infography divided into two large sectors in so many places, from festivals to published articles. However, in my opinion, this is an extremely false classification, and the intention has been to represent work which uses 3D

programmes in an artistic fashion that ought to be continued, although all other techniques which are just as modern are rejected, as if they were too old. Many feel, as I do, that this classification is part of a marketing ploy for the big names, and those of us who have their feet firmly on the ground should not use it. For many of us feel that, if there is any need to classify, and if it is worth while, the real boundary lies between direct techniques and indirect techniques. Likewise, animation produced directly



Isabel Herguera *Los Muertitos* 1994

in front of the camera lens could be the first group, and animation executed away from the lens the second. This is a very different work mode for producers, who use their hands to directly remove heaps of sand, spots of colour and chalked lines, and then draw them again, taking photograms each step of the way. They are certainly aware that the work they are producing must be extremely accurate, because they have no chance of correcting it. If there are any errors at the end, in the lighting or the syntax, they will have to repeat the

entire shoot, and this can often mean a whole day's work. The indirect technique, however, using drawings or infography, for example, produces animation as the result of the screen play, and all circumstances can be tested, approved and corrected before the final shots are taken.

The reader will, of course, appreciate that the rush of adrenaline while filming is extremely different in both cases, and also in the case of direct techniques the work pace is much



faster, production time is cut back, and improvisation circumstances are much more frequent than in other techniques in terms of purity of movement and design, although adherence to the narrative script is much greater.

So it was that Isabel Herguera used direct techniques in all these initial works and, as she says, it has never been her intention to produce work which is too narrative, but to convey sensations to viewers in the proportion in which she creates the images, and she has always used movement rhythms to transport her work from the abstract to the figurative. In 2005, however, when she brought out *La gallina ciega*, she fully intensified this tendency of hers, and the work showed far more clearly than all the others the same abstract/figurative dichotomy – in many parts of the film, the sounds provided by Xabi Erkizia are the only helpful clues we have.

Herguera has used cartoons for the first time in *La gallina ciega*, one of the indirect techniques, as mentioned above. She had previously been forced to retain the discipline and continuity not encountered in her productions. It was also a considerable challenge from the outset, since the objective was to portray the way in which someone who is blind perceives reality, and also a great challenge for the producer since the first ideas and designs are already in place.

It is true that this production, as in all animation, but in this case in particular, requires viewers to make an enormous effort to understand it, and I had to see it several times myself to perceive all the hidden details. You might say that we should read this work by Isabel Herguera in the same way as we conduct a slow reading of a painting, or as when we look at a sculpture from all angles and take note of it as we walk around, but of course we cannot delve any deeper into it during a first screening. First, we must understand the codes used to portray the noises and sounds heard by the blind. Then, when we are presented with a representation of the sensation whose main components are space and its scale, through a dihedral system, our spatial patterns shatter, and we just have to reconstruct them to grasp the ultimate

reality. Isabel claims this is the most narrative work she has produced, because the main thread of the work has a beginning, a core, and an end, but in the same vein I would say all this is nothing more than an elegant structure in order to explain all the rest in images, and somehow make it more understandable, because it has always been important to Isabel that her work be understood.

It could be that this is actually the reason why a producer like Isabel would carry out a project, aware that a production process is so painstaking. When she is on a new film project, Isabel accumulates her wishes and her task – it is certainly extremely important there be a considerable number of tasks before launching into an animated film, because this will allow you to continue with the project as you stand there, despite tiredness, contradictions and all kinds of problems. It has been a year since she finished the film, and it was only recently that she started to relax after those anxious times. Outsiders will find this hard to imagine, but she thought she was never going to finish it, since she had to complete the job in time to avoid losing her grant. When the profile of the producer's ideological discourse is the end of the film, this is usually the hardest time, because you have to present your conception of the world and life in a small collection of images.

This Donostia artist certainly knows how to divide up her energy, she successfully enlists the assistance of those around her, and also knows how to use her resources. She is an artist with firm roots, she has grasped the economics of films in all senses, and with her latest production she has demonstrated that the best devices and maturity she employs to depict her ideological universe have now come to the fore. She also knows that, while she works on her animation, she will not be accepted as a film-maker or as a plastic artist in these two separate worlds, but she will continue to nourish herself with both of them, as she has done to date, and let both of them enrich her films and her artistic work. ❧

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