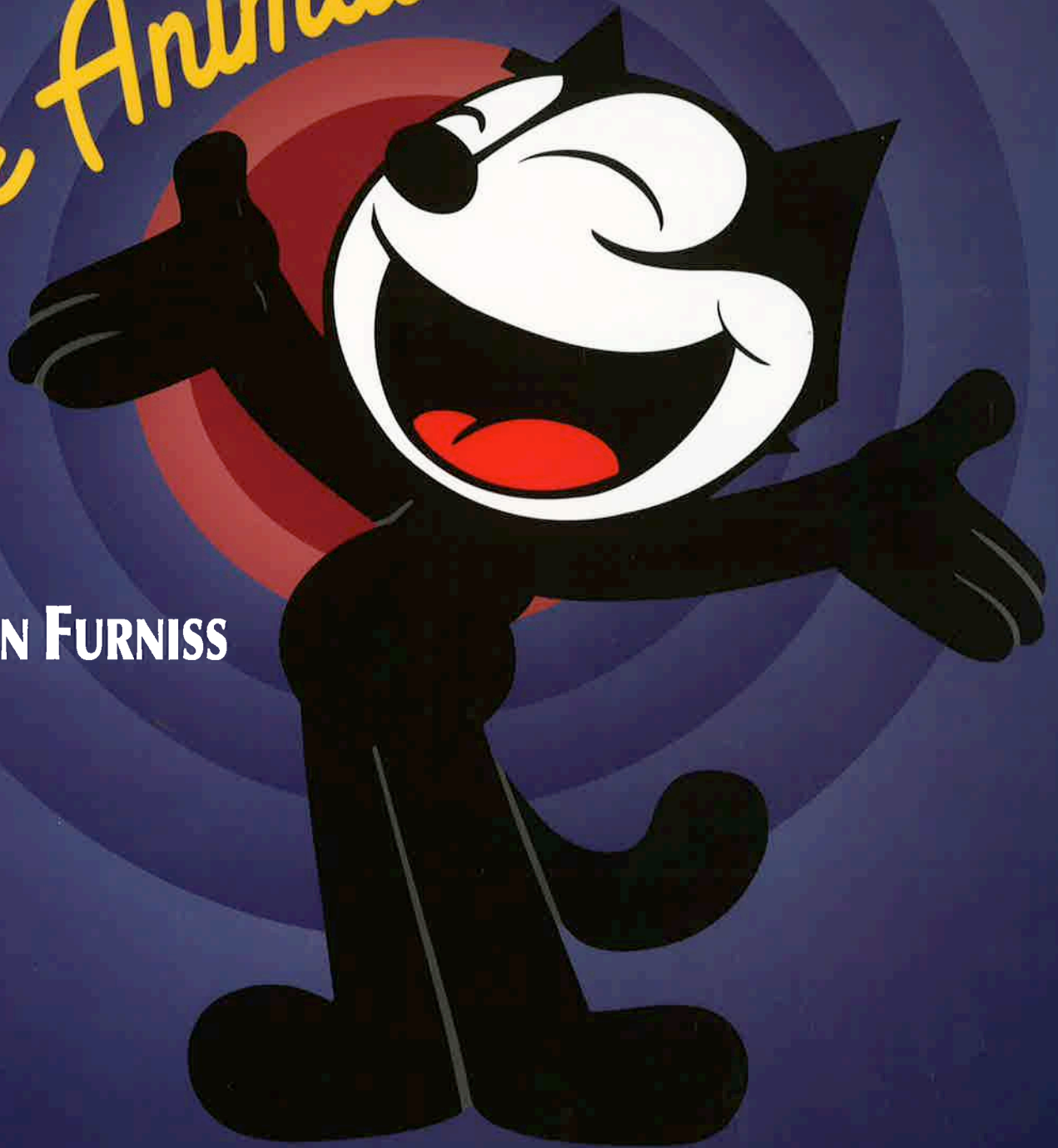


A GUIDE TO EVERYTHING—FROM FLIPBOOKS TO FLASH

"The Animation Bible!"



MAUREEN FURNISS



**Direct
Filmmaking:
Vision,
Sound, and
Collective
Experience**

Case Study: Donna Cameron

Direct film production presents a unique opportunity for close examination of materials, to move beyond surface detail by magnifying them and filtering light through their forms, in search of some essential quality of being. New York-based filmmaker Donna Cameron has engaged in this pursuit using a method she devised, “cinematic paper emulsion,” which she patented in 2001. On photographs and other paper-based materials, she marks areas that are equal in width to a piece of 16mm film. She then lays clear sticky 16mm editing tape over the marked-out portions of the images and peels them off. Excess paper on the sides of the tape is trimmed off and the strips are then printed onto film.¹⁴

Cameron discovered the technique when she decided to attend a university screenwriting course. She recalls:

My instructor did not share my views of what made a good film script, and took to publicly humiliating me by harping loudly on its shortcomings (“You’ll never make a film with that script!”). For a final project, I ripped that script into 16mm size shreds and then projected each one through a Bell and Howell 1920s open wind projector (which I still own). I called my project *A Film Made with a Script*. Of course, *A Film Made with a Script* had a scrappy running time. But—amazingly—in those tiny intervals of screen time I SAW the gesture of TREENESS. I was surprised by those flashes of fibrous light.¹⁵

Another breakthrough came when she was printing photos and accidentally left one in its fix bath. When she returned some days later, she found the fixer had gone and that the dried image, peeled away from its paper base, had adhered to the plastic fix pan.

One of her earliest cinematic paper emulsion works is the silent 16mm film *Newsweek* (1979), which was made with a variety of art papers and *Newsweek* magazine. Using a stencil, Cameron exploited the true-life aspect ratio of the 16mm frame as a measure and a guide for “lifting” information from the magazine. For example, the title is taken from the footer on every page; “Newsweek” is all that fits into the 16mm frame. Cameron writes,

This consistent measuring device holds the disparate materials of the film to one thematic vision. The 16mm stencil provides a gauge edit—35mm or 8mm

stencils would never produce the same film. And it’s the stencil that fragments the existing world of the papers, the paper elements are not fractured and broken to fit onto the 16mm gauge. This premise of gauge and viewpoint is consistent in all of my work. The film itself is seeing the world. You are seeing the world the film sees.¹⁶

Within the borders of the 16mm film frame, viewers see a date—January 1, 1979—and a few other words, plus some comic-book images. Mostly, though, the film displays abstract patterns of pixels from printing and paper fibers. It also contains some drawn-on-film images.

In films such as *New Moon* (1982), *Tyger Tyger* (1990), and *NYC/Joshua Tree* (1991), Cameron also employs photocopying, her own live-action imagery, found footage, ink animation on paper, filtered pigment wash

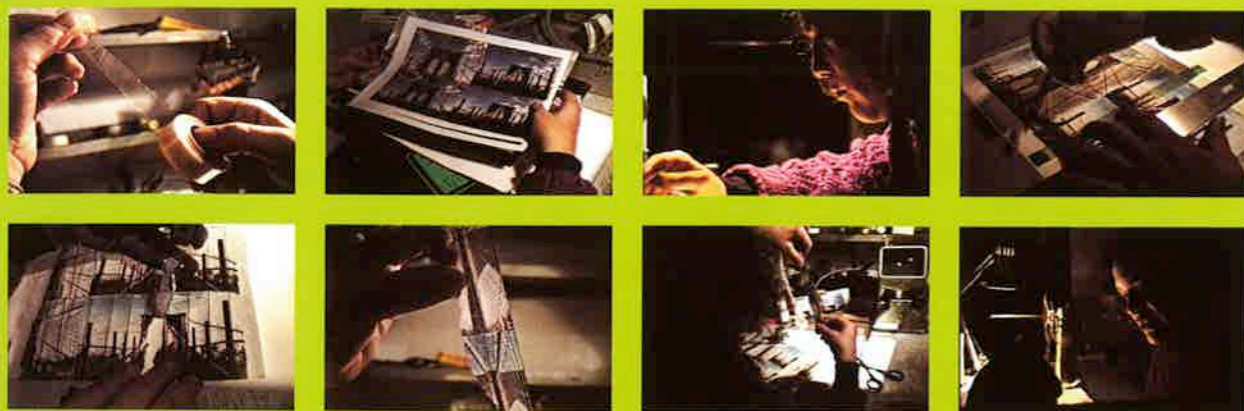
(a combination of pigment, paper pulp, and liquid), and other techniques.¹⁷ In 1993, she collaborated with filmmaker Shirley Clarke to create the experimental biographical *Shirley Clarke in Our Time*. The seventy-minute film incorporates the cinematic paper emulsion technique into home movies and popular film footage from when Clarke was growing up.

Cameron sees the cinematic paper emulsion process as part of her work as a photographer. She contends, “The physical sphere manifested in the cycle of my films begins and ends with the photograph. I create special photographs with the idea of making filmstrips from them. The process of photography dictates how to shoot each picture element of the shot. Each still frame is like a DNA structure, which, composited together, provides material for the film frame.”¹⁸ Her stated goal is to explore “the relationship of image to the frame, and the function of the frame within the

framework of inter-media.”¹⁹ Cameron explores natural objects in close proximity, asking her audiences to see her photographic images in unconventional ways.

Her approach reflects her interest in the structures and origins of images projected on the screen. She writes,

Paper and pigments pass TO THE SCREEN through a photographic membrane. Paper, any paper—from the lowliest generic newsprint to the highest-grade exotic import—contains in its anatomy the history of its origin: the tree, the plant form. On the screen, luminous light embryos grow into dancing flora; gritty fibers speak eloquently of the life of the tree or the grasses from whence they came. The film membrane acts like a sieve, through which light flows, in lush color and with sensual textures.²⁰



These still images (above) are taken from a documentary, *Donna Cameron at Work*, by Mike Kuchar.



Donna Cameron uses a patented process she calls “cinematic paper emulsion,” which allows her to conceptualize each frame as part of a DNA-like structure. Included here (opposite and above) are images from *Newsweek* and *Tyger Tyger*. © 2006 by Donna Cameron. All rights reserved © Papercamfilms™.