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Baby got back | Above, a doctor performs posterior plastic surgery in Avital Levy's film "Bootyful World." Below, a scene from "How Henri Came to Stay."

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## Take a LOOK at this ...

### The School of Cinematic Arts' First Look Film Festival exposes students to the exciting and scary world of movies.

**By: Matt Brennan**

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Welcome to the Hench lab," says Lisa Mann, waving her arm slightly to indicate row upon row of cubicles, each littered with the flotsam and jetsam of crumpled papers, pens and pencils, notebooks, figures, photos and posters. Some envelope, in a kind of dream world, an artist hunched quietly over a piece of paper, scribbling furiously or coloring with the painstaking attention to detail of precise needlework.

The gray room, softened slightly by the light pouring in through a wall composed primarily of windows, is the epicenter of the John C. Hench Division of Animation and Digital Arts at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. It has the hushed fervor of a chapel, at once soothing and intense - here are the devoted, the faithful, in all their splendor, genuflecting toward a forgotten art.

"We really look at this as an art form. I take my students to MOCA every year to look at the art and to imagine animating the works. How would they take a Rauschenberg painting, combine, and make that come to life?" says Mann, an adjunct professor at Hench and project manager of the animation component of this year's First Look Film Festival.

First Look - as it is called, simply and affectionately, by nearly everyone in USC's cinematic constellation - is a weeklong festival showcasing student films, both live action and animated, for the very purpose of displaying the art made in those film classes to a wider audience.

"We really encourage people to make personal films and express themselves artistically," Mann says. "You won't be criticized here if it looks derivative. We don't want to see the same thing."

With short brown hair streaked with blond, Mann looks, in her petite air of lightness and authority, the picture of the artist. Her brown shoes are marked with skulls in white and red, her skinny jeans ripped at the knee. She sports a brown T-shirt printed with the words "Sri Lanka" and stylish purple glasses that spend nearly as much time on top of her head as in front of her eyes.

"The projects that we choose, it's a pretty extensive curation process," she says to me in her dimly lit

office, unperturbed by the ghostlike silence of the lunch hour. "We like to have a broad selection, and it always ends up that way because our students are all over the place. Some are really very, very traditional character, and some are much more experimental."

Coming back out of her office, Mann leads me into a dark room nearly overflowing with equipment of endless variety, where a young woman leans over what looks to be a kind of seascape - aquamarine, foamy green, a dash of white - and manipulates its movement, frame by frame, down to the most minute scrap. "It's very painstaking," Mann says quietly, before another young woman pops her head in and says she has to get to class by 1 p.m.

This is Joanna Griebel, second-year master's candidate in animation and the maker of "Potatoes," one of the animated shorts on this year's First Look docket. Griebel's cubicle walls are barely visible in the thin cracks between an almost overwhelming amount of artful clutter: drawings of people slowly morphing into animals, or dressed in animal-like costumes, comic strips and self portraits, posters depicting Wonder Woman and Justice League, a collection of action figures huddling on a shelf above the computer. She lets me flip through her sketchbook, a sort of diary of faces - broad, square, thin, squat, pointed - of torsos, abs and asses, sometimes drifting solemnly on the white page, sometimes attached to a body resembling, in its fierce hardness, a Classical sculpture. (I'm a notorious doodler," she says.)

Inspired by her younger sister's battle with leukemia, "Potatoes" is a kind of cancer struggle in brief, lively, pulsing and rumpled like the comfortable, warming love of family. It isn't flashy by any stretch, and the colors seem washed out, like overworn clothes, creating an easygoing, homebound effect. Watching it, I found myself wishing I had a weekend with my loved ones.

The film is, needless to say, a personal one for Griebel.

"It's my story. It needs to be my voice," Griebel says, reflecting on her decision to narrate the film herself. "I'm excited and anxious (about showing the film) at the same time. It's very personal, just raw, so that part of me feels very exposed."

It is this kind of tension, between the joy of being seen and the terror of being unliked, that seems to imbue nearly all of the First Look filmmakers' attitudes.

"What if this fails?" Griebel says. "What if I'm not communicating what I'm trying to communicate to the audience? What if my family sees this and they hate it? What if my sister sees this and she's offended by it? You have all these voices telling you all this stuff and then after a while you're just like, 'No, no, no. I need to do this,' and then you convince yourself that what you're trying to say is more important than anything you could possibly be afraid of."

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Sandrine Cassidy, director of festivals and distribution for the School of Cinematic Arts and this year's festival director, sees First Look, no matter what the fears it may engender, as a unique opportunity. "We're pretty much the only school that does this," she said. Among the 350 or 400 people who attend each night of the festival are numerous festival directors, agents, managers and industry moguls, she said, creating an atmosphere of youthful potential rarely seen in the film industry.

Cassidy, wearing a midlength dress in autumnal shades of brown and burnt orange, looked a bit frazzled when I met with her in the courtyard outside the Lucas Instructional Building. She leaned heavily on the sooty square picnic table, its red dimmed by years of chain-smoking film students and the California sun. Her fatigued countenance was understandable given her juggling of countless festival tasks -

overseeing the receipt and screening of films, helping to set the program, sending approximately 20,000 invitations and, since 2000, organizing a DVD compilation of the festival's films, which is sent to major agents, managers and distributors worldwide. Each year begins with 480 open minutes of screen time at the Directors Guild of America, which is filled on a first-come, first-served basis by a huge variety of student films, from animated to documentary, from horror to high drama. It is this screen time, coupled with USC's great reputation in the film industry that makes the festival so perfect of film students, Cassidy said.

"You make a short film, to, you know, put the best of what you can do with a film, all of your artistic ideas, into a short," she said. "Our goal, our mission, is to take the short films off their shelves and show them to people ... on a bigger scale."

"We've been around for a long time," she continued, "and we know most of the players, and we guide (the filmmakers) through what they want to achieve from this film."

Cassidy sent me a white box that once held reams of printer paper but was now brimming with DVDs, some packaged quite artfully, in boxes of all shades with actors' faces (looking overly serious) peering out to glimpse the real world; others had been slipped into white paper casing with a clear plastic window on one side, like CDs your friend once burned for you in seventh grade.

Avital Levy, who graduated in December with an MFA in directing from the School of Cinematic Arts, was one of those with her name printed on the back of an artful cover - a butt, plain and simple, its crack framed to the left, its rough surface a gray-green-black moonscape, the intensity of the close-up obscuring any possibility of easy recognition. Levy is the director of "Bootyful World," subtitled, tellingly, "a documentary about butts."

Levy has a sweet, soft voice, which seemed only slightly strained when I talked to her recently.

"My week just feels like one long work day," she said, referring not only to her obligations at the festival but also to a variety of editing jobs and next week's shoot, in New York, of an HBO show which she failed, quite ostentatiously, to name.

The idea for her film came from a mixture of humor and seriousness.

"I was kind of laughing at all of the seriousness I had had in my earlier education," she said, adding that the film also takes on issues of "body image and beauty standards - men look at women's breasts, but they also look at women's asses."

Her film was also, in a way, sort of personal.

"I have a bigger butt," she said, after prefacing the statement with a chuckle. "And people notice that."

Levy discussed in some detail the process of making the film, from having to take a documentary prep class, in which she created a short documentary pitch, to finding a crew over the course of two weeks of extensive interviews, to suffering through the inevitable working curve.

"No one's really professional," she said. "You learn while you're doing it."

She, like anyone whose film is being screened at First Look, is hopeful that the festival will lead to new opportunities.

"First Look, for someone just leaving school, it's perfect," she told me, because representatives from the industry are there "to see who the next directors are. You go to First Look knowing that people are looking for what's out there, you know that it's for USC, it's the USC family and reputation that's drawing people to the festival."

Levy, who comes from a family of artists, still feels the butterflies when her work is exhibited, as it has been at numerous festivals in the past.

"I'm always nervous when my film is about to screen," she said. "You never know who is going to show up; is anyone going to show up?"

But whatever the reaction she receives from the crowd of friends, family, industry wonks, film buffs and Trojan supporters, Levy is prepared.

"You don't have to justify what you do," she said. "I just have to accept the fact that not everyone's going to love it."

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The First Look Film Festival runs through Friday night at the Director's Guild of America Theatre Complex, 7920 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, and at Norris Cinema Theatre on Saturday. For more information or to make reservations, call (213) 740-1153.

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