



Presented by SEE-RAY STUDIOS

BREATHLESS ANIMALS

(DONGWU FANGYAN)



A FILM BY LEI LEI

USA | 2019 | B&W - Color | Creative Documentary | 68 min

DCP | Chinese | 29.97 fps | 4:3 | DOLBY 5.1/Stereo

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SYNOPSIS

"What did you dream about and how was your life as a teenager?" A woman recalls her youthful memories of her 1970's, while the re-creation of the modernity of the past of China unfolds in front of our eyes. One day, the first animal appears to her, a White horse...



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Because of my work, I spend a lot of time away from my hometown – located in the south of China - and away from my closest family and relatives. Even my grandparents passed away, I was not able to attend the funerals because I was not in the country.

I return to my hometown several times a year to visit my parents. Through our interactions, I realize that they harbor much more anxiety than I remembered. Perhaps out of their love for me, they would usually express their concerns and worries about my current life.

I believe that in a fast-developing country like China, there are many young people like me that leave their hometowns and families to pursue opportunities in a faraway place - to a bigger city or even to a foreign land. In that new place, the rapid rate of urbanization, modernization of lifestyle, and difference in culture are all factors that may evoke the sense of distress and anguish found commonly amongst this population.

Young people work hard to assimilate into society or integrate with the most modern trends. In contrast, the life experiences of our parents' and grandparents' generations are seen as passé and obsolete.

But, is that really the case? Whenever I feel lost in a foreign land, I also feel this eagerness to return to my family. This is not simply a case of being homesick, but a desire to explore and gain a more clear understanding of myself, and my identity.

In the past few years, I've conducted many interviews with my family members where I listened to their tales. These oral histories are like broken fragments of a mirror or reflections of a lake, piecing together a world that I haven't yet imagined.

The world may not be about "history" or "reality" but it is very real. You can feel the palpable wetness of the air, the dust within a building, the expression of an individual, and the touch of an object... It is the same world that my family walked out from, and their bodies emanate this warm radiance.

Putting to use the many stories told by family members to me, I completed **BREATHLESS ANIMALS** in 2019. Along with it, I explored and experimented with images and sounds.

I hope that through this film I can gain a better understanding of my parents' and grandparents' generations, and the shadows that they casted on me. I want to understand the influences they had on me and how the grander historical backdrop and social movements affected my entire family.

Perhaps there is not a definite answer to each question.

LEI Lei



INTERVIEW WITH LEI LEI

*How did you start **BREATHLESS ANIMALS**? What motivated you to make this film?*

For the past few years, I've picked up the hobby of collecting old photos and magazines from flea markets, and I would organize and reconstruct a story out of them. **BREATHLESS ANIMALS** did not come out of the blue, it is rather an accumulation of work over time. Recently I have become fascinated with family oral histories I feel that stories told by family members are more powerful and closer to reality. In this film, I tried to make the images not directly portray the reality, instead, it is somehow a "fiction" that do not depict the protagonists themselves.

Interestingly, when images and dialogues are both "fictional" or "remakes" of the reality, a mirror of the "reality" also surfaces. This "mirror" is why I created this film. I think it is quite a neat process that the audience can observe the reality and history through this untouchable "mirror".

The narrative is a dialogue between you and a woman, whom we understand later is your mother. Why did you want her to be the narrator?

My conversation with my mother is easy and natural and does not require much effort. This type of conversational environment cannot be easily replicated. As a director, I keep her identity unknown at the beginning to build theatricality for the latter part. This enables the audience to have suddenly a different perspective, and be able to replay the images and dialogues in their heads.

How did the conversation take place?

Last summer, I returned to my hometown and the conversations unfolded very naturally. It was not my intention to do an interview as we talked. Instead, some keywords were thrown, such as "bicycle", "television", "dream" and so on. I got these words from old magazines. My mother then expanded on these keywords with anecdotes. The conversations were about four hours and took place over two nights.



Why did you choose to talk about this specific historical period?

In fact, I don't really care about the specifics of time. I even hope that some "errors" may occur with the timeline. In **BREATHLESS ANIMALS**, the images I used came from the 1950s to the 1980s, and these images are not lined chronologically, but are intersected in a chaotic way.

I am not eager to reconstruct a "pure and certain" version of an unknown part of history. As an artist, my intent is to use collage to reconstruct the relationship between images. In cinema, if the right to reconstruct an unknown history is given to the audience, then each viewer would come up with a different answer.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, my parents' generation experienced the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, Down to the Countryside Movement, and the restoration of the national college entrance exams. These historical movements have profoundly affected their lives and directly changed their fate.

As a director born in 1985, I am very foreign to these historical movements. On one hand, I did not acquire much historical knowledge from my formal education. On the other hand, I am not particularly concerned with the details of these movements. Therefore, in the film, I chose to omit any description of a historical background. I am more focused about the impacts on the individuals and their families. So, it doesn't matter if the audience doesn't know much about Chinese history, the film is ultimately about humans and emotions, more than its historical narrative.

What is your position on the portrayal of history in cinema? How can a personal and artistic vision be used to represent a reality that doesn't exist anymore?

I don't believe that just a few images or someone's oral dictation can represent the reality. Therefore, it is not an "exclusive" privilege to portray history. Yet the Film director has some kind of authoritarian rights in cinema. As there the transmission of information is one-way: the director expresses himself or herself and the audience listens. On a historical event or topic, a director can speak for himself and speak freely. In the cinema, the right to speak is monopolistic. I believe that films in the modern age should oppose such authoritarianism and hegemony and give the right to speak back to the audience, in order to create more democracy in cinema.

Therefore, for me, the moving images are only a medium of communication. The audience can come up with their own interpretation to complete their understanding of the reality they recognize. I think this is a dialogue with cinema. This is the ingredient to a contemporary film.

What were you trying to achieve through the experimental search of BREATHLESS ANIMALS?

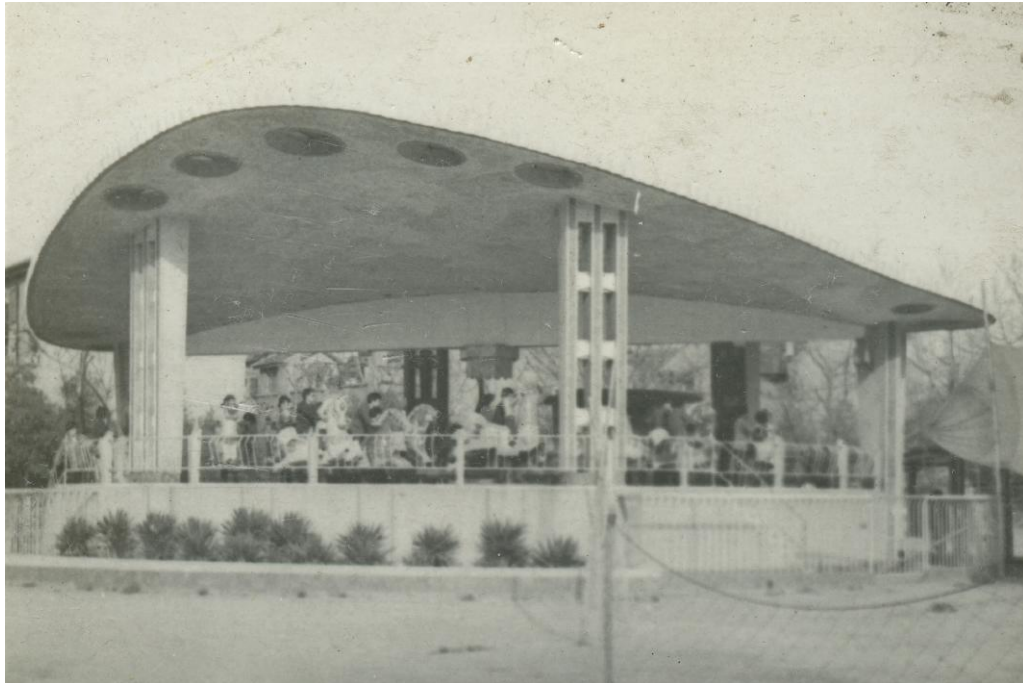
From a collector's perspective, I wanted these wonderful old photos to be displayed on a big screen. Upon zooming in, the original images would be applied a new meaning of aesthetics.

From a filmmaker's perspective, I wanted to convert the meaning of these images in the film, render them to cinema, and them to possess multiple new meanings.

How did you work on the preparation and editing of the film?

In fact, prior to the editing, there was not a lot of preparation or logical reasoning behind it. The interchange between still and moving images, are driven by factors such as the music, the content of the conversation, the details of the images and so on.

I was not particularly interested by the original meaning of the images, or by the history behind the photos. I am more interested by how a photo is "converted" through the medium of cinema, or how images have multiple meanings. I hope that the audience can get involved during the viewing process. The audience needs to redefine the images on the silver screen. I don't have so much power in the selection, as I am not a collector by profession. On the contrary, I always try to use the film and sound footage that I have. The process is similar to playing jigsaw puzzles. I always hold the belief that every old photo I find at the flea market has its place within the film.



You wear a lot of hats in this film – as the director, producer, editor, as well as the composer of the music. How did you work on the music?

The music footage came from family tapes in 1988. I edited and mixed the tape recordings to make the music. The music production process is consistent with the source of the material and the visual references. All was done specifically for the film. It can't be replaced by another music.

We are used to seeing very realistic documentary and features from China, but BREATHLESS ANIMALS is very different from those. How do you view yourself and the film within the context of Chinese cinema?

My work is different from the Chinese realist documentaries. As someone born in the mid 1980's, I don't carry the burden of history, and this film is not about documenting or hawking historical events. During the film, I interrupt the main character at my disposal, piece together the oral narrative, and not even provide any visual references of the main character and narrator. Because I don't care about the so-called "reality". I am more interested in creating a crevice between the images and language. I believe this is the kind of experiment that enables a sense of aesthetics in cinema.

What was the biggest challenge in making this film?

The whole film for me was a challenge. This film was very different from my previous works. A film is an industrial production that is the result of a team's work. Because I completed the project on my own, I needed to face the tribulations on my own, which I learned were more difficult to overcome than economic difficulties.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1985 in Nanchang, LEI Lei graduated from Tsinghua University with a Master's degree in Animation in 2009. Since then, he has worked as an artist and independent animator.

His works include short animation films THIS IS LOVE (Best Narrative Short Award at Ottawa International Film Festival in 2010), RECYCLED (selected at Annecy Film Festival, Grand Prix of Shorts & Non-Narrative Films at Holland International Animation Film Festival), and many others, which have been selected in numerous international festivals and exhibited in museums.

In 2014 he served on the Jury of Zagreb / Holland International Animation Film Festival, and won the Asian Cultural Council Grant. He has also been selected to attend many artist residencies and fellowship programs, including the ACC Cai Fellowship in New York (2014), Artist Residency Program at Abbaye de Fonteyraud, France (2015), Locarno Summer Academy (2016) or Artist Residency at Macdowell Colony, U.S.A (2016). Since 2017 he is a full time Faculty Member on Experimental Animation of CalArts Film & Video School.

Furthermore, he has had solo exhibitions of his work in Beijing and Austria, and has also been a part of group exhibitions all over the world, in the U.S., Singapore, Netherlands, Canada, and China.

BREATHLESS ANIMALS, his first feature length film, is to premiere at the Berlinale Forum 2019.



FILMOGRAPHY OF LEI LEI

NINGDU

In production, animation

BREATHLESS ANIMALS

2019, creative documentary, 68min

- Berlinale Forum 2019

I DON'T LIKE THE COMICS YOU DREW

2018, music video, 3min30s

- Best Music Video award at Anifilm Animation Festival

HAND-COLORED NO.2

2016, animated short, 5min

- Screened et Annecy Film Festival, Animation Off-limits

BOOKS ON BOOKS

2015, animated short, 7min

- Screened on Zagreb Animation Festival, Official Competition 2016
- Holland Animation Festival, Official Competition 2016

MISSING ONE PLAYER

2015, animated short, 4min25s

- Fantoche Animation Film Festival, International Competition, 2015.
- Prix Ars Electronica '15, Animation competition. Austrian, 2015.
- Awarded Silver Dove, Intl competition short at DOK Leipzig 2015.

THIS IS NOT A TIME TO LIE

2014, animated short, 3min30s

- Anima Festival, Official Competition, Brussels 2014
- Holland Animation Film Festival, Official Competition 2015

RECYCLED

2013, experimental animated short, 5min40s

- Selected at Annecy Film Festival, Official Competition 2013
- Grand Prix Shorts and Non-Narrative Films, Holland Animation Festival 2013

BIG HANDS OH BIG HANDS, LET IT BE BIGGER AND BIGGER

2013, animated short, 6min

- Screened at multiple international film festivals such as Stuttgart International Animation Festival, Seoul International Cartoon Animation Festival, New York International Children's Film Festival

MY...MY...

2011, animated short, 4min38s

- Screened at Holland International Animation Film Festival and London International Animation Festival among others

THIS IS LOVE

2010, animated short, 2min38s

- Best Narrative Short Award at Ottawa International Film Festival



CREDITS

Director	LEI Lei
Image & Sound & Music	LEI Lei
Music Post-production	Mark LEE
Title Font Design	LEI Jiaqi
Producer	LEI Lei
Production Company	SEE-RAY STUDIO
International Sales	ASIAN SHADOWS

