

Experimental Animation Artist, Jinghan Zhang, Dives Deep into the Soul of Storytelling

By Jennifer Aline Graham



Whether animating a stop motion film or simply drawing by hand, Jinghan Zhang expresses her many talents through award-winning storytelling skills.

Upcoming Animated Film, Who is The Zookeeper, Explores Zhang's Personal Reality

Jinghan Zhang began her professional career by winning the Beijing Film Academy's Animation Award for Outstanding Work. Following this prestigious recognition, her animated short film, Elixir, won a multitude of awards including the Rome Independent Prisma Award for Best Animated Film. Elixir was screened on Animation Day in Cannes as well as the USA Film Festival—both incredible industry events to have work praised at.

Zhang's current project—Who is The Zookeeper—is already causing a stir within the animation industry. Zhang plans to bring Who is The Zookeeper to renown festivals such as the Annecy International Animated Film Festival, Animafest Zagreb, Ottawa International Animation Film Festival, Stuttgart Festival of Animated Film, and Hiroshima International Animation Film Festival among others.



"This story is what I [thought about] during the pandemic. It inspired me to create art about life, death, loneliness, and myself," states Zhang regarding her animated film titled Who is The Zookeeper.

Who is The Zookeeper is an animated, multi-level sculptural film that takes place in a personal reality bubble which mirrors the character's inner world. Zhang describes the film synopsis in her own words:

"There she is, the main character, a young girl, Lu, who is all alone on a tiny boat in deep darkness. Unpleasant reflections of self are all around her, leading to an omnipresent feeling of loneliness. There is no escape. Her body is terrified. Yet Lu's deeper essence sees itself in the exterior projection that her physical self is perceived as reality. Life is now propelling Lu's soul to overcome the self. Tension rises, and the mirror breaks. A stampede ensues. The reflection of everything Lu thought she knew is extinguished. This is a radical change of dimensions. For Lu, a door is now open. It is time to trust!"

As stated earlier, the pandemic was a very direct influence on Who is The Zookeeper. "During the pandemic, as the world pressed the pause button, a space opened up for me to reinvent my storytelling. From conventional narrative approach, I shifted towards an introverted philosophical vision where indirect surrealist expression is meant to reach straight to the heart of the audience."

How it All Begun

Raised in Harbin—a small northeastern city in China at the border with Russia, Zhang has been creatively inspired by her father, Yongshan Zhang. Mr. Zhang, an artist, had a glass company where he designed and produced landscapes, flowers, and figurines carved out of glass. Thanks to him, Jinghan took her first art class when she was just four years old. Over time, Jinghan expanded her interests from still art to moving images. After graduating from Beijing Film Academy, Jinghan continued her graduate studies in animation at School of Visual Arts, New York. Presently, Jinghan is a notorious experimental animation artist producing her work independently.

An Experimental Animation Artist with Focus on Innovation

Before Who is The Zookeeper, Zhang had many animated projects soar through the creative community. Some of Zhang's acclaimed animated films include the following: Seven Deadly Sins, an award-winning film; Elixir, featuring a dark, satirical story with four awards behind it; Liberation, focusing on female independence; and Eternity, presenting an abstract look into the infinite cycle of life.

"The style of each of my works is radically different," says Zhang. "Each theme and story calls for a different combination of materials to provide a unique visual language for each film. For Who is The Zookeeper, my team at Lumen Animae Studios in Los Angeles developed a "novel direct" technique in animation which works with a sculptural relief on an animation multilane. We made our own clay of different consistencies and colors. In its liquid form, our clay can be used as drawing material for animated backgrounds. When at its thicker consistency, the clay can be used to create a 3D animated illusions."

The film took two years to create until Zhang's team reached a confident point of completion. The release date for Who is The Zookeeper is scheduled for November 2023. It will actively be part of the animation festival circle.

Collaborating with Lumen Animae Studios, Los Angeles

"It was a pleasure to collaborate with the Lumen Animae Studios team for the production of Who is The Zookeeper," reflects Zhang. Founded by filmmakers Masha Vasilkovsky and Ruah Edelman in 2012, the Lumen Animae Studios is a creative business driven by artistic innovation.

The filmmakers within Lumen Animae Studios share a socio-centric philosophy with the global community through film, art shows, and education. The studio has presented work at the US Open Tennis Championship, Holocaust Museum Los Angeles, Museum of Jurassic Technology Los Angeles, Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, and numerous film festivals around the world—two of which include Sundance and Tribeca. Lumen Animae Studio's work in the film Ashe '68 received the SIMA Award in 2020 and an Emmy Nomination in 2019.

