SURREY ART GALLERY PRESENTS

Flavourcel I SPY A CITY



Collective Abundance BY MADISON MAYHEW

Biographies FLAVOURCEL MADISON MAYHEW

Flavourcel *I Spy a City*, 2021

Digital animation

Image: Brian Giebelhaus

Collective Abundance Madison Mayhew

I Spy a City is first and foremost an invitation, from animation collective Flavourcel, to play. A riff on the classic I Spy books from Scholastic Press, the piece challenges passersby to spot, within a collage-like assemblage of looping animations, various landmarks and objects representative of the Whalley neighbourhood of Surrey. Urban skylines, natural environmental features, food items, local wildlife, and other shared cultural touchstones populate the constantly moving image, using familiarity as a tool



A selection of animation stills from I Spy a City, 2021. Image courtesy of the artists.

to reaffirm a connection with the city for the casual passerby.

The passerby who pauses to engage for a moment longer is invited into a more complex relation with the city and its visual vocabulary. Flavourcel's animated objects are recognizable as representations of the area, but for the most part, they are not presented in any familiar, iconic form. Instead, they are mediated by diversely idiosyncratic artistic styles and even by completely distinct animated media: they are variably hand-drawn, 3D-modeled, and digitally animated, among other formats. What's more, they are all defying physics in some way or other—spinning, bending, popping in and out of existence, quivering and flickering in place.

Beyond reaffirming community through familiarity, the piece actually seems to be all about unfamiliarity, especially when it comes to familiar things—familiar objects are offered from unfamiliar perspectives, through different ways of seeing.¹ Flavourcel thus proposes a different type of community-building, a different way for Surrey's residents to connect to the city and to each other. While *I Spy a City* does point towards a shared lexicon of cultural objects and sights that defines some collective experience

of the Whalley area, the specificity of individual interpretation is at the forefront. These diverse ways of seeing exist side-by-side in the projection, spinning and vibrating together in a curious, almost haphazard harmony.

In this way, Flavourcel positions itself within a long media history of representing the metropolis, recalling several early moving-image works that focus on the interplay between private and public experiences of urban environments.² The projection is further visually anchored to the specific urban site in Whalley by its animated orange-brown "windows," which line up with the physical windows of the building onto which the image is projected.

Collectivity and connection are more than aesthetic considerations in *I Spy a City*, however. They comprise an ethic that informs Flavourcel's operations in relation to an animation industry that has traditionally been inhospitable to such values. The 11 collective members' shared principles of community-building are not necessarily communicated in any didactic or literal way within the work itself. Instead, these principles are baked into the work by the very conditions of its production. Flavourcel makes claims about the conditions under which compelling

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animated work might be created in the way that it positions its members' labour outside of the traditional animation industries and economic structures that encourage competition between individual artists. Instead, theirs is a community that shares resources, knowledge, and solidarity.

The visibly collaborative nature of I Spy a City (and of Flavourcel's other works³)—visible, that is, in the myriad animation styles and media present offers a glimpse into a future of animation that is disinterested in the mythology of the individual, genius auteur. Flavourcel's working methods decentre the image (the "content") in favour of a collective, engaged practice. In this way, the conditions of the work's production satisfyingly nest into themes of collaboration and community present in the image itself. And the message put forward on both these levels is one of abundance: where there is collaboration rather than competition, there is abundance. Indeed, viewers are treated to a striking abundance of visual textures, contrasting media, and most importantly, an abundance of perspectives,



Kat Morris, still from I Spy a City, 2021. Image courtesy of the

of micro-narratives related to these familiar objects and sites. Various members of Flavourcel have been given a turn to "direct" *I Spy a City*, creating their own backdrop and curating the placement of various animated elements. While pigeons, shawarma skewers, and tower cranes twirl around, disappear, and rematerialize repeatedly within the moving image, different ways of seeing multiply and evolve over a longer timeline.

Viewing I Spy a City in the street is not the only encounter with the artwork that is available to the public. In addition to the projection, some members of Flavourcel produced instructional videos for the Gallery's Art Together series of online programming, demonstrating how viewers could make animations at home. These included introductions to short animated loops, both digital and traditional (handdrawn) animations, and other elements present in the projection. As with the collective's unconventional labour structure, as well as the visual abundance of textures and styles in the image itself, Flavourcel's engagement with a public through these instructional videos reasserts a politics of collective authorship. The social relation produced with the audience is one of community rather than competition.

When Flavourcel's founding members observed the available options within the traditionally unwelcoming labour landscape of animation, refused them, and chose to labour, create, and collaborate on their own terms, they started making important claims on the levels of artistic production (how animators could work), of content (what animation could be), and of community (who could be an animator). In the Flavourcel model, animation is more than an authored, autonomous artwork or simply a marketing tool: it is a practice. And animators are more than either genius auteurs or exploited workers: they are empowered, connected members of a meaningful, inclusive community.

FLAVOURCEL I Spy a City FLAVOURCEL I Spy a City

Notes

- 1. As John Berger proposes in his 1972 Ways of Seeing, "Every image embodies a way of seeing," 10.
- 2. Early film and moving-image works used the specificity of this new artistic medium to capture the urbanization and industrialization of their societies taking place at the time. Examples include: Man With A Movie Camera (Vertov, 1929) and Berlin, Symphony Of A Great City (Ruttmann, 1927).
- 3. The collective has collaborated on several similarly collage-like animated music videos for multiple Vancouver music artists, and has hosted their own events at Vancouver arts venues, showcasing each member's individual animation work within a cohesive, collective framework.

Works Cited

Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Classics), 2008

Vertov, Dziga, and Yuri Tsivian. *Man with a Movie Camera*(London: British Film Institute). 1929.

Ruttmann, Walter, Timothy Brock, Carl Mayer, and Karl Freund.

Berlin, Symphony of a Great City, 1927.

About the Artists

Flavourcel is an animation collective based in the unceded Coast Salish territories. Born out of a desire to break down the institutional barriers that limit animators and introduce play into their work, Flavourcel produces experimental animations in a variety of styles. From hand-drawn cell-shading to digital doodles, music videos, and gifs, each artist pushes the boundaries of the medium and challenges the preconceptions of how animated art should be made.

Flavourcel includes Harlo Martens, Kat Morris, Josh Neu, Julia Song, Alia Hijaab, Chhaya Naran, Gil Goletski, Laurel Pucker, Lana Connors, and Chris Strickler.

About the Writer

Madison Mayhew is a writer, musician, and cultural worker based on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm, Skwxwú7mesh and Səlílwətał Nations, where she sits on the Board of Directors at Unit/Pitt Society and the Toast Collective, and works as the Admin & Governance Coordinator at 221A Artist Run Centre Society. She holds a MA in Comparative Media Arts from SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts (2021) and a BFA in Critical and Cultural Practice from Emily Carr University (2017).

FLAVOURCEL I Spy a City



About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey's UrbanScreen is Canada's largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen's 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

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