

CORNY COLE

About a year into my job at Murakami / Wolf Films I was asked to work with Corny Cole who was doing a Bardahl Engine Cleaner commercial as a freelance design and layout artist. A small room was assigned to him to make the artwork. "Hi Corny," I said as I entered the room, "I'm Dave Brain. I'm supposed to help you do this spot." Corny was pinning the storyboard he'd drawn on the wall above the art table. He turned to me and smiled. "Ever draw with a popsicle stick?" he asked. "Yeah, once at Chouinard in Don Graham's class." I answered. "Good," Corny said. "Here's five bucks. Go to the store and buy some popsicles and put 'em in the freezer 'til we need 'em."

Corny was fairly tall, 6'1" or so with a friendly face, a strong jaw line and a full head of barely combed black hair. His voice was full and deep but gentle. He was wearing well-worn clothes, baggy pants, tan with ink stains around the pockets, a faded collarless striped shirt and open sandals. An amply frayed straw hat and an army field jacket hung on a wall hook. He was on weight... almost thin. He knew Abe Levitow and was glad to learn I was taking his workshop.

We did rough animation tests from Corny's layout drawings. Adding drawings here, taking drawings away there until we had a movement timing we liked. It was pencil drawn oozy sludge monsters gumming up a field full of car engine parts until a Bardahl can appears and reduces the sludge to an insignificant puddle. After client approval we set about tracing over our paper drawings with thick and thin popsicle stick ink lines on acetate cells then the cell backs were painted with an intense sky blue color for the finished look.

The 1965 Watts Riots had occurred a few years earlier. At that time Corny was working with his friend, Frank Braxton, a Black animator at Warner Bros. Studio. They decided to establish an animation workshop in the Watts section of Los Angeles for local young artists. They associated with The Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles (PASLA). Frank had recently fallen ill with sickle cell anemia so Corny was asking other artists he worked with to help him with his workshop. Corny asked me and I started going to Watts with him once a week after work.

PASLA was in a supermarket type building on Manchester Blvd. near 103rd Street. It was run by a big, well-built man named Van. There were areas for training in acting, writing, camera and lighting, set design and building. There was a music / band room with a piano and an animation room. The areas were divided by partition walls. The animation area had a fold out table with eight chairs and six animation desks with light boards and taped peg bars. We had a small group of regulars, all young Black men. Some nights there would be other workshops meeting. Several of those workshop people looked to be associated with the Black Panthers. They dressed in black or dark grey pants, black leather jackets, turtleneck sweaters and black beret caps. Occasionally they would look in our doorway, smile or nod and move on. They might have been performing security duties. We were never bothered by vagrants.

The students in the workshop were memorable to me: Carl Taylor wanted to draw superhero comic books. He did good voice impersonation of Bill Cosby, James Brown and Martin Luther King. Anthony Cox who drew elegant figures, land and cityscapes and abstracts and was a Bruce Lee and martial arts devotee. Ron Battle very tall and thin who drew very well and wandered into the music room and played stride piano. Jim Borders who drew the most like Corny. Michael Swanigan who really worked at animation. Mitchell Walker who frequented the big downtown public library and brought checked out art books to show the others. He had a long career in animation and layout drawing. Collie Lowe who never drew much but seemed to have the respect of the others. The muralist, Richard Wyatt, who was a few years older and already working in art dropped by occasionally.

I showed the fellas how animation was put together. Some were more interested than others. With Corny they had one of the best drawing artists in Southern California. We gave everyone sketchbooks and checked them regularly for what they were drawing. The objective was to get them to make enough good drawings that they could get into an art school and maybe on scholarships. After our time together working at Murakami / Wolf ... I went to Pantomime Pictures and Corny got design and concept work assignments from studios all over town. He designed the Fruit Loops Toucan. His exploratory drawings looked like what DaVinci would have done if he were cartooning. We kept the PASLA workshop going.

I remember that a few years later I directed some action story boards that Mike Swannigan drew. I think Mitchell Walker got on at Hanna-Barbera. When I had my own small studio I

hired Anthony Cox to draw some loose versions of stills from an after school TV special I was doing the titles for. The PASLA Workshop location just lasted another year and a half because its founder, Van, was hired by the Johnson Administration to head a government outreach program. The PASLA funding weakened and so did site security and we did get strangers walking in. Lightbulbs and other equipment disappeared. Corny had trouble driving home from PASLA one night. He parked his car and took a cab up to West Hollywood where his son picked him up. He never found his car and eventually got a notice from the city of L.A. that his car was sold at auction to cover the impound costs. The students told me they wondered why Corny and I came to PASLA now. They said the area was getting “ sketchy “ and they didn’t feel safe. They were going to the Tutor Art program at Otis Art Institute on Wilshire Blvd. and suggested that we teach there. I did, but, it was on Saturdays and Corny had very full family time then.

A few years later Corny and I were working together for a few weeks at Bosustow Films in Santa Monica. Lee Mishkin was directing five short animation films for Xerox Corp. They were on elements of society in the USA to be distributed to schools at no charge. The one Corny and I were doing was about the division in the country between liberals and conservatives amplified by the Vietnam War and alternate lifestyles. It was titled “Is It Always Right To Be Right?” The budget was larger than the normal educational film but still not like Disney or Warner Bros. shorts. Corny designed the characters and look. Lee drew the storyboard. I got the animation credit but Corny and Lee helped. It was very limited animation. Lots of camera moves and sliding still drawings. We produced all the art in about three weeks using a temporary soundtrack for the narration. Nick Bosustow, the producer, learned that Orson Wells was in town at the Beverly Hills Hotel. He pitched the idea over the phone to Wells of his speaking the narration. Wells told him to bring a cashier’s check to his hotel room and he’d read two takes of the script. Nick sent the studio editor over after lunch and had the two takes recorded by midafternoon. With Orson Wells on the soundtrack Xerox decided to release the short film in theaters to qualify it for Oscar consideration—and it won. Nick, Lee, Corny and I all were invited to join the Motion Picture Academy. I believe Orson Wells was already a member.

The one time later I worked with Corny was on a Sunbeam Bread commercial at Spungbuggy Works when Frank Terry put us together. The spot needed a watercolor look so we had the

animated character cells backed with white paint and applied Dr. Martens dyes on the front. Corny drew the backgrounds and I painted them.

Not long after this time Corny started a studio in partnership with Duane Crowther, a UPA and Warner Bros. animator. Their studio was in Venice, Calif. on Ocean Avenue in a building owned by Marv Rubin. Marv was an advertising producer/designer and taught at Chouinard and then CalArts. All the tenants in Marv's building were past Chouinard students. Duane greatly admired Corny but Corny's work style was driving Duane crazy so Duane became partners with Roger Chouinard (no relation to the school) in the animation film studio Duck Soup which was just across the hall and Corny became Corny Films. He specialized in loose design, floating and mutating animation. He did several commercials and was hired for lots of design and concept work. He designed for a Chuck Jones' MGM feature, a Japanese financed version of Windsor McKay's LITTLE NEMO and parts of Richard William's THE THIEF AND THE COBBLER.

I read in the L.A. Times that Corny was having a show of his fine art paintings at a bank lobby near Universal City. I hadn't seen any of Corny's fine art work and I was curious. The lobby had his paintings which were full canvases 4 to 6 feet wide and tall hanging in its wide hallway entrance and over into a high ceiling square waiting area. As best I can remember the paintings were composed of lots of small figures, some nude or partly clothed in action poses running, diving, dancing, fighting, threatening and so on loosely but deftly painted. Existing in darker areas sometimes spatially defined, sometimes not. Occasionally parts of the figures emerged or vanished into their environs. A few bore a resemblance to Richard Nixon or other prominent figures. I called Corny later to say I'd seen the show. He talked about a New York City viewing in the near future and that this gallery showing was to help him design the NYC show. Sort of like opening a play out of town. The paintings were priced at \$8,000-\$12,000.

In the early 1990s Corny was teaching a drawing class at a small for profit school on Wednesday evenings on Van Nuys Boulevard. He called me to say my Glendale College students could join the class for \$5 a session. I happened to have six Irish students staying at our house for the summer months so I drove them to the class. My daughter Megan, 15 years old at the time, came along. I had a VW Vanagon.

Corny, that first evening, had constructed on the model stand a facsimile of a human to draw. It was composed of a filled gunny sack leaning against the back of a wooden chair with rulers and yardsticks for arms and legs. A wooden hanger sat atop the sack with a punctured volleyball looking like a head and shoulders. Knotted rags held the rulers and yardsticks at hinged angles. This gave the students a chance to draw shapes balancing and hanging without the intimidating structure of a human model. An ingenious idea. Every Wednesday evening my student house guests and Megan were there and drawing along with Corny and me. Corny tried to spend some time with each student in the class addressing their work. At summer's end Corny said he hoped my Irish students felt their time in the workshop was worthwhile. He said he was impressed with the progress Megan had made. He asked me if I had been working with her. "No," I told him "Not really...but you have."

His full name was Cornelius Cole III. His father was Cornelius Cole II, if my following of computer records is correct. Corny's grandfather, the original Cornelius Cole died in 1924 at the age of 102. He had been a U.S. Congressman and a U.S. Senator. He was one of the founders of the California branch of The Republican Party along with Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford and the Crocker Brothers. That group represented a good deal of the investment money in the state at the time. Cole purchased a Spanish Land Grant that made him the owner of the real estate that later became Hollywood, California. Several of its streets are named after his children. There is Willoughby, Seward, Eleanor and, of course, Cole Avenue. Corny was quite suspicious of politicians and their motives. He was quite chagrined to have Phlebitis (blood clots in the legs) at the same time as a man he detested, Richard Nixon.

Frank Terry and Corny started teaching at California Institute of The Arts at about the same time. Frank was department chair and Corny taught layout, design and drawing. He also instituted a Sunday life drawing workshop where students, ex-students and prospective students and, most importantly, Corny could draw from the model. He wanted to draw every day and he meant it. Corny's wife, Dawn, had died a few years earlier Corny had married again and that it was one of his life drawing models, Linda.

Prior to that event, in 2008, the Sayre Fire burned through the hills above Sunland in the northeast corner of the San Fernando Valley. Corny was living by himself in a single wide mobile home in the Oakridge trailer park which overlooked the Valley above the 210

freeway. The fire roared thru the trailer park in minutes charring, more than burning, the mobile home's interiors. Corny had been safely evacuated and relocated until it was safe for residents to return. I went to visit him to see what he might need help with.

All vegetation at the site was a dusty grey. Corny was living minimally. He was sorting thru stacks of burnt paper to salvage what he could. The canvases leaning on the walls were blackened with some melted paint in spots. Corny wasn't too concerned about this artwork. His worry was about the three cats he had that he put outside when he was evacuated and watched them run into the underbrush away from the fire. It had been two weeks and they hadn't returned.

I'm eleven years younger than Corny. I was born the year the U.S. entered WW II. I asked Corny what it was like growing up during the war. "So many men disappeared from everyday life." He said. He told me about a time when he was 14 years old. He was nearly six feet tall and starting to fill out. One day on Santa Monica beach as he was walking at water's edge with his long board past a group of 30 or so young women, probably war factory workers, sunbathing, one of them stood up and shouted to Corny, "Hey... what's your name? Come over here." Corny replied that he had to go home.

"Ahh... come over here." The woman repeated and a few more women stood up and waved at Corny. Corny kept walking away and heard one woman shout, "Get him ! ". Corny broke into a run and eventually dropped his long board as the women running after him grew closer. He began to gain away from them. He reached the parking lot and hid between the cars. After a few minutes the women stopped and walked back to their group. Corny waited until the women left the beach then he went back and picked up his surf board.

I believe Corny taught at CalArts full time from 1992 until 2008 if I read the records correctly. He died in 2011. There was a memorial for him at CalArts which I couldn't attend. But I think Tim Walker did. He recently related to me that he was going thru his closet storage and he came across two T-shirts they handed out at the memorial with caricatures of Corny on them along with quotes of Corny's familiar to his past students of which there are legion. One shirt said, "Are you in my class?" The other said, "Has anyone seen my latte?"