



## Flight of Fancy: An Interview with Casey Robin Neal

Casey Robin is an artist, animator and illustrator from Sacramento, Calif. Her pictures always tell a story. She has worked for Zondervan, KlickNation, the Pac-12 Conference, and Walt Disney Animation Studios. She has studied art and animation at California Institute of the Arts, Studio Art Centers International, and The Illustration Academy at Ringling College of Art and Design. She loves reading, cooking, singing, and her cat, Oliver.

### What kind of education did you pursue to become a traditional animator?

**Casey:** I've had this kind of wandering past in my education. And I thought it was going to be a very logical, very linear career path. It ended up being this crazy, weird journey that no one else but no one would have planned. I certainly wouldn't have.

I went to a performing and fine arts charter school for high school. My plan was to do two years at a liberal arts college then to transfer to California Institute of the Arts in their animation department. I went to Westmont College as an art major and studied traditional art abroad in Florence. The purpose of this was to get good enough to go to Disney someday. And then I applied to the CalArts Character Animation Program.

I got accepted, but at the last minute, my loan fell through and I couldn't go. I took some time off to decide what I should do next. I had entertained the idea of being an illustrator. So I went to the summer Illustration Academy at Ringling College of Art and Design. But I found that the life of a freelance illustrator was not for me. It wasn't what I wanted. It was very solitary, and I'm just more social. While there I saw a poster for the Disney Summer Associates Program. In order to be part of that program I had to re-enroll in school. So I ended up enrolling in the Art Institute in Sacramento. Because of transfer credits and where I live, the Art Institute was the only reasonable way for me to be in school. And it was here that I took most of my animation courses.

I worked on a project, sent it to Disney and got accepted into the Associates Program where we made *Chalk*. That was the summer of 2010. That was an incredible experience.

After that I went back and finished school and now I'm trying to get into the Talent Development Program, which is the next step up.

**Before you went to Disney you were working on *Flight of Fancy*. How did that idea originate?**

**Casey:** It started with an assignment at the Illustration Academy. We were each assigned a color, and we could do whatever we wanted as long as it related to that color. My color was blue. I was thinking of things like blue stockings, the Blue Danube and the Bluebird of Happiness. So, I started drawing all these birds very loose and free. One drawing I did was off to the side. I was just thinking, - ha, ha, a hoop skirt looks like a bird cage, so it would be funny to draw a girl with little birds in there. And so I doodled that and went on with the assignment. I ended up doing Blue Moon, something completely different. The sketch of birds sat in my sketchbook for a while. And then when I was somewhere completely different, the idea came back to me.

A thought came to me that by "cartoon logic" that if you fill the hoop skirt up with birds, you should be able to fly. I would like to see that. And, so I did a little sketch in about half an hour in Photoshop of this Rococo girl flying with her skirt full of birds. And that actually captured the feeling and the palette and the basic look of it. Really, it was just a funny sketch that became an interesting idea.



It also tied in with my love of Paris. I had lived in France and I loved Paris. I felt like my best self there. Everything was opening up and, and everything was going my way. There was some kind of magic that just protected me and made things work out. I wanted to capture that kind of feeling in *Flight of Fancy*. Take the next step. Throw yourself off the balcony. Things will work out.

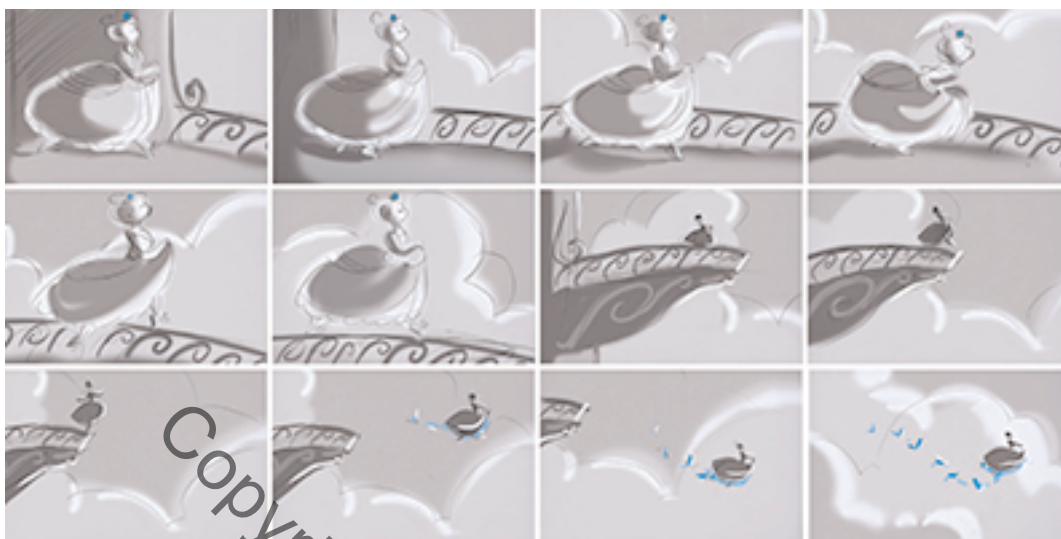
**So it's like you're jumping without a net.**

**Casey:** Yes. Pure belief is what makes you fly.

**This is just a small adventure. How did you develop the setup and the payoff?**

**Casey:** For the setup, her off-stage mother hurries her along saying, "You know the carriage is here, you need to go." She rejects that and takes a nontraditional means of transportation and things worked out just fine for her. The payoff is that she beats the more traditional person to the dance and she had more fun on the way.

It's kind of a romp and a lark. There's this girl who has a bird. The bird is her pet. She sends the bird off and it brings back more birds. Now she puts them into this hoop skirt and then she jumps off the balcony. I usually get an "OOOOH" from the audience at that point and then you just enjoy it from there.



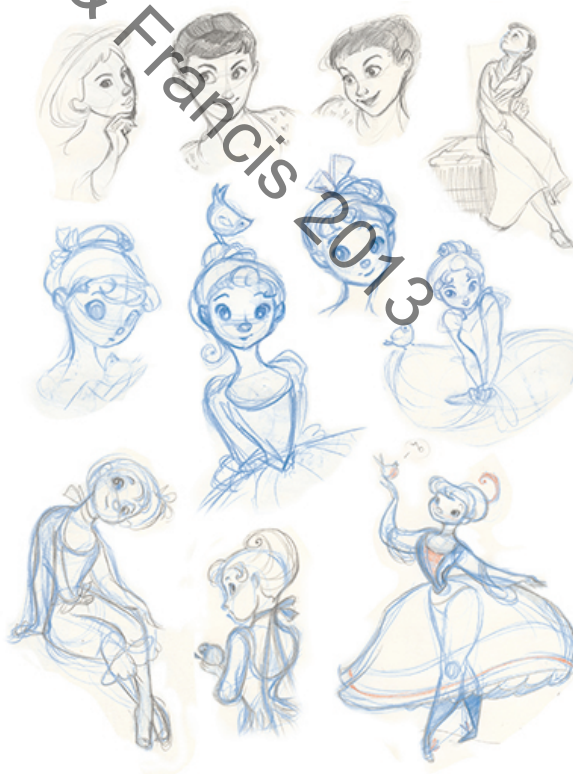
I also wanted to make sure that she was a likeable character. So I spent a little time in her room with her day-dreaminess and her interacting with her pet. Just so you can see that nothing fazes her. She's unflappable. She has this personal serenity, where she's just happy and at ease. My inspiration for her personality was like Lise in *An American in Paris* as kind of a winsome, innocent heroine who is quirky.

**Can you talk about the development of your character designs? They seem to be realistic and then later designs get progressively simple and cuter.**

**Casey:** I almost had it the first time in that first sketch. It had the feeling and level of simplicity that I ended up going with. But I did a whole series of drawings. The more realistic it got, the more it lost its charm and innocence that would let you believe in the world where she could fly. Some of them were almost shameful, where she looks a little bit too sexy. And if I'm typing a character who you meet in her underwear, she needs to be really innocent.

I think of her as somebody who doesn't deny herself pleasure very often. She tends to eat the bonbon if the bonbon is there. Her bird is overfed. She loves going through life in a *laissez faire* way and experiencing pleasure, which is very much a French idea. So, I allowed her to have a little bit of chub in her arms, a bit of booty and a chubbier face.

Her hair was a throwback to the 1950s. I wanted to get that kind of innocent, but not cheesy, quality that *Singing in the Rain* has where it's very innocent fun and you can pull off some kooky stuff that you couldn't





do in a more realistic style. So I was looking at Audrey Hepburn, her bangs, I was looking at Leslie Caron. They're probably not period, but I found that they were just so much more charming than a more literal Rococo style.

I took her colors to connect her to the robin and to also connect her to the ending when her bird is a little different from the other "birds" at the dance.

I don't know if it comes across, but the birds in all the hats (except hers) are very fake. Fake birds were really big. And I think, as a viewer, it is nice being in on that little joke that she has. How often does she do this? These birds seem really well-rehearsed. That's a well-trained bird.



I think that part of the fun of the short is being in on this secret life. My hope is that you wish that you would let yourself be free enough to live that way.

### Can you talk about the bird lady that you encountered before you get to the dance?

**Casey:** There were two reasons for the bird lady and the first one is very reasonable. When I was pitching the story I often got this question: "How do we know that this isn't a world where everybody could go around flying with birds in their skirts and it's not a big thing? We only have exposure to this one girl and it's only quirky if it's out of the ordinary. It's an animated world and we're not sure that it's out of the ordinary." So, I was looking for a way to show that the average person in this world would be shocked by her behavior and this isn't a normal thing. This is unique to this one girl who has figured out the really fun way to get around.



The second reason was because my friend Darcy, said, "I would love to see an old woman feeding three scraggly pigeons in a park, and this girl swoops in with 300 well-trained bluebirds, and totally shows her up, and freaks her out a little bit." And so, I did it partly to amuse Darcy. And the payoff is that we also show that she cares for her birds after they take her on her ride, instead of leaving them in the old lady's care.

I also found that I needed a hint of the dance in the background in that scene. Otherwise it read as if she took this flight to get to the bird lady, and she was all dressed up. So if there was a mansion and music started the audience would know there was something more.

### In the work you sent there are paper cutouts of scenes. How do you use those? What was their purpose?

**Casey:** I definitely do not use those for every project. Those were particular to the struggles of this project. I had a very hard time visualizing the figures in space. I tend to think very shape-based, and very flat. It's difficult for me to draw a top view of a room, and then know where everything is when you put the camera in there. So, it was kind of a quick and dirty way to see where things are in the room. I did some kind of 3D cutouts where I took like a cereal box and I made little walls. And I made kind of a set. Because I'm trying to figure out, where's this window, where's that window, where does the camera move.



There was also an earlier paper cutout version that was just white paper that was flat. And that was because I was trying to figure out my really basic story points and the drawing was distracting me. I was so getting into the drawing that I was losing the essence of the story. I was losing the simplicity. And so to force myself to think simply and to think story, and pictures that tell stories, I just need a bunch of little cutouts. I tend to get precious with my drawings and get noodley, and I really didn't want that for this piece. So my challenge for this piece was to be simple. I was trying to tie my hands a little bit because I'm a perfectionist. I needed to handicap myself so that I could see what I was doing.

**Your video reference was also very interesting. You dressed the part. Where did you find the dress?**

**Casey:** I ordered the hoop skirt online because that was the one thing I had to custom order. I needed it to be huge. It was the biggest one I could find. And I got my hair cut especially for that shoot. That was when I went with bangs. The costume I pieced together from five or six different dresses. I tried on a ton. I took photos of each one. And then I went through the photos and found the elements that were closest to what I envisioned, especially in terms of fabric weight and how the fabric hangs. If I could get the weight and the layers approximate, then that would help me with the wind in the dress for final animation.

**Please see the *Flight of Fancy Animatic* video on the 'The Traditional Animator' page of the Companion Website**



**Live action reference and storyboard resulting from the reference**

**It's amazing that you went to that extent.**

**Casey:** I think most people don't do that. They're looking for like the general gesture or pose. And I have to admit that I am deeply influenced by Disney and how they do live-action reference. By costuming, you frame through and see things you wouldn't normally notice. I wanted access to that at least once in my life and it just turned out that I had people willing to lend me their service for free, give me access to a theater. Doors opened up because people liked what I was doing. So, I just seized the opportunity. And it's going to be very, very useful when I get further down the line in production.

**Now that you're returning to the piece after your hiatus at Disney, what would you do differently?**

**Casey:** One of the things I learned at Disney was cut the piece down as much as you can before you get really heavy into production because things that seem simple are not going to be simple, and everything's going to take twice as long. Now I'm in the process of re-assessing to see if there's anything I can cut without losing the charm.

I guess if I had the whole project to do over again, from the genesis of it, I would have trusted myself more. Originally, I had this vision. But then I pitched it to a woman at the school who used to work for Disney and she didn't like it. She said there was no conflict and didn't seem to think I had anything there. So I doubted what I saw in my head. And because of this I tried to create a situational conflict between the characters. It got very busy and it took a turn where the main character was getting pushed around. Everyone was more assertive than she was. I had a storyboard that I had worked on for a long, long time (and it had better drawings) but it wasn't really what I wanted to make. Two days before my live shoot I scrapped it. I knew I might be doing something really stupid, but I just didn't recognize the film anymore. I called my best friend who said that I should make the movie I want to make. So I spent two very feverish days drawing what is now essentially what you see in the final animatic.

**How do you assess if a story should be told in traditional animation?**

So, the first and foremost thing is I think there should be something inherent to the story or the idea that would make it work best in traditional. So in my case, a lot of it had to do with charm and appeal. And I find hand-drawn stuff personally very charming and it fit the time period of the piece. I also thought that drawing captured the childlike nature of the main character to help push the simplicity. Lastly, I could have a flock of birds and a secondary character that would be hard to justify and animate in 3D.

**What are ten things to consider if you want to make a traditional animation?**

1. Why choose traditional for *this* story? There should be something inherent to the story concept that works best in traditional animation.
2. Consider the strengths of traditional: Traditional animation lends itself well to organic forms, squash and stretch, and transformations. It also allows you to "cheat" drawings from certain angles.
3. Consider the weaknesses of traditional: The style is not great at rigid forms, highly detailed designs, pattern, literal textures, and so on.
4. Assess your skill set: Are your drawing skills strong enough to realize your vision in traditional animation or are you stronger in some other form, such as stop motion, paper cutout or 3D?
5. Assess your resources: Do you have access to an animation capture station? Do you have the proper software to color your animation? Do you have the manpower and the time to pull it off?
6. Assuming that you choose to go with traditional animation, consider how you can use technology to enhance your work: You might be able to hand off tedious or repetitive elements (such as large crowds, mechanical objects, special effects) to the computer. Smart use of technology can free you up to focus on the most important, creative parts of the animation.

7. When working in traditional animation, design for simplicity: Extra frips and frills in the character design will slow you down in the animation process, and often clutter the silhouette.
8. Don't be too literal: You don't have to draw every hair on the character's head, or show every minute detail of an action. Your animation is almost always stronger when you find a way to exaggerate and streamline reality, rather than slavishly copying it.
9. You don't have to show *everything*: Some types of action work best as off-stage sound cues or in silhouette or shadow. If you set it up properly, human imagination will fill in what is not shown.
10. Style: Remember, you can pull off any number of looks in traditional animation. It doesn't have to be clean, slick or pretty. Lines may be wobbly, rigid or elegantly curved, depending on what kind of look you are going for. Find a style that best suits your story and run with it.

### Is there anything you would like to add?

I would like to add just a few words about style. I think story is always more important than style. I think style should support the story. So, if you're telling a story about a sloppy caveman, you might want to let your line go loose and sloppy. If you're telling a story about a samurai warrior, a Japanese-inspired approach might be appropriate. But, it might not be appropriate if you are telling the story about an American vaudeville performer and you really like anime, so you want it to look like anime, for no particular reason other than you like anime. I don't think that's a very valid choice. But I do think you should consider what kind of story you're telling and how your style supports that, and then the visual style will determine how your characters move, whether it's really choppy or whether it's really fluid. If you want something childlike, you might allow it to be less polished.

But the biggest addition is that I think that animation is fun and I think the most important thing is that you, as an artist, as a human, are reaching out to other humans. Humans have emotions, and emotions are important to people. And so, instead of just me showing off, "Look, I can draw really well," or "Look, I made a really great model or bright colors," I think you really need to have your goal be to reach out to humans. I may not know them, but I assume that they're like me. And in my story and characters these are emotions that are true to me, and that have been important to me, and I hope that I can express them in a way that will let other people feel what my heart feels and put that into my work.

