

Right, a figure appearing in John Frame's project "The Tale of the Crippled Boy."



JOHN FRAME



GREG JARDIN

Above, Kina Grannis in her music video "In Your Arms," directed by Greg Jardin; right, Mr. Frame at work in his studio.



CAREY HASKELL



# Stop. Snap. Move. Repeat for, Oh, 10 or 20 Years.

By ROBERT ITO

**F**OR the last seven years, John Frame has been working on a film in his home in Wrightwood, Calif. Its cast includes a cockeyed skeleton, a bespectacled monkey and a horned man sporting a cloak adorned with eyeballs. Mr. Frame made all of the characters himself out of wood and found objects, built the sets, even composed the score. When he discovered that his characters were going "wherever they wanted to go," he let them. For the first four years of the project, he worked completely alone, driven by what may have been a muse or "daemons," he's unsure which; not even his closest friends and colleagues knew what he was up to.

Mr. Frame is part of an underground group of stop-motion artists in Southern California who labor in the shadows of the major studios. Long the center of studio-backed stop-motion animation made by artists like Ray Harryhausen and Art Clokey, the area is now home to scores of solo practitioners more interested in creating highly personal art pieces than commercial works. This year looks to be a strong one for stop-motion features, with big-budget releases including Sony Pictures' "The Pirates! Band of Misfits," Laika's "Paranorman" and Disney's Tim Burton film "Frankenweenie."

Unlike the creators of those movies, Mr. Frame and his colleagues work alone or with the smallest of crews, creating makeshift studios in their homes. On a typical day, Mr. Frame can film from 1 to 10 seconds of footage, shooting frame by frame: he shoots one, moves a figure's arm a millimeter or so, shoots another, and so on.

"Most of the stop-mo animators I know are solo animators," said John Ikuma, editor of the online quarterly Stop Motion Magazine, out of Culver City, Calif. While filming a documentary about Los Angeles's "garage animators," Mr. Ikuma found artists working in bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens and on rooftops. Julianne Eckert filmed much of "Goodnight Molly," her three-minute film, in her rental's tiny walk-in closet; Michael Granberry, founder of Red Hatchet Films, has produced more than 50 stop-motion pieces in his 538-square-foot Hollywood apartment.

The stop-motion bug bit Mr. Frame in 2005. A sculptor for 25 years, he had called it quits after a long artistic drought. But just two days into his self-imposed retirement, he found himself jolted awake in the middle of the night, with visions of a world unlike any he had seen before. He began jotting down everything he saw: characters with personalities and histories, intricate set designs, snippets of dialogue, action sequences.

"By the end of the day I had about 70 or 80 pages of the stuff," he said recently at his home in Wrightwood, a secluded town nestled in the northeastern corner of the Angeles National Forest.

Convinced that his sculptures could be brought to life through stop motion, Mr. Frame read every book on the technique he could find. To make his puppets, he went on eBay and bought 19th-century handblown glass doll's eyes excavated from landfills in Germany. He grew a small verdant field of wheat grass in a spare bedroom for a time-lapse sequence; the score was composed by Mr. Frame in an upstairs room.

The film addresses universal themes of mortality, grief and loss through the smallest of moments: a tiny skeleton pirouettes and blows kisses to an audience of two; a mole-faced man discovers a pair of child's crutches in the middle of an overgrown field. To date, Mr. Frame has 12½ minutes of footage, the first part of what he said he hoped would be a feature-length collection of animated vignettes.

Mr. Frame often works 12- to 14-hour days on the film and sometimes returns to his studio to hang out with his creations after his wife goes to bed. "I developed a kind of fondness for them," he said, "almost like pets or something."

Shelley Noble, a graphic designer and first-time filmmaker, is equally fond of the assorted bugs and beasts that inhabit Halfland, a fantastical forest world she created in her South Los Angeles loft. Built to one-third scale, the stop-motion set — complete with an insect band, a bamboo grove and a frog with watchworks in its translucent belly — occupies about a quarter of her 4,000-square-foot home. To create it, she used tree branches knocked down in a windstorm, paper fished out of the Dumpster of a nearby clothing factory and scrap pieces of wood from local lumberyards.

In 1992, Ms. Noble read a cover story in The New York Times Magazine about Julie Taymor, the director and puppeteer. Ms. Noble wanted to be a part of this world, she said, despite having no art background. A cold call to Ms. Taymor — along with pleas and offers to sweep her workshop floors — led to involvement on three Taymor theater productions, on which, Ms. Noble said, she learned the "fine, traditional art" of mold making, a method used to create both static and stop-motion puppets.

Inspired by the release of Tim Burton's "Nightmare Before Christmas" and armed with her newfound puppetmaking skills, Ms. Noble began working on her short "Halfland" in 1993. "I tell people it's a 20-

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year project," she said, "because 21 would be nuts."

When completed, it will consist of 12 vignettes, each a minute or so long: a snail slithering home, hats falling on a cat's head, bugs having a party. "Sometimes I'll walk by and go, 'Wow, there's a freakin' storybook in my house,'" she said.

Unlike Ms. Noble, the director Greg Jardin used a single material, jelly beans — 288,000 of them — to make a video for the singer Kina Grannis's single "In Your Arms."

After persuading Jelly Belly to donate the beans, Mr. Jardin constructed a set in a bedroom of his West Hollywood condo. The video — which includes a snowfall sequence, exploding fireworks and floating penguins — would have been tough enough to animate with just the candies. But Mr. Jardin wanted Ms. Grannis to be stop-motion animated, too, not green-screened, and to interact with the moving beans. She was shot a single frame at a time lying on a sheet of plexiglass a foot and a half above a jelly bean "sandbox."

From inception to completion, the three-and-a-half minute video took 22 months to create. Released in November, the video quickly went viral; to date, it has garnered more than 6.5 million hits on YouTube.

None of these filmmakers are in it for the money, since for the most part there is little to be had. Mr. Jardin made "In Your Arms" free, his \$5,000 budget going for equipment and food. Mr. Frame sells DVDs that include his 12-minute short and a making-of featurette, but these can also be viewed on his Web site free. He's now financing the next stage of his production through online donations and speaking gigs.

So, a rational person might ask, why go through all the months and years of time and trouble? It's certainly not for the sheer joy of the process. Mr. Frame, whose film and several of his puppets are currently on display at the Portland

Art Museum in Oregon, described stop-motion animation as "oftentimes just torture"; Mr. Jardin found much of his shoot "super tedious."

For these artists, what keeps them going is the possibility of creating works of art without being beholden to anybody's else's vision or meddling.

"If you look at the closing credits of 'Fantastic Mr. Fox' or 'Coraline,' it's acres of names, and for obvious reasons," Mr. Frame said. "Those are big productions, with big production values and big budgets. That's not what I'm doing. And I realized early on that that isn't where I aspire to go."