



Fluid Frames

Experimental Animation with Sand, Clay, Paint, and Pixels

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Witold Giersz

Witold Giersz began working with traditional cel animation at Cooperative of Animated Cartoons in Bielsko, Poland, in the 1950s. An animator with a truly experimental frame of mind, Giersz wished to free the color in traditional cel animation from the confines of the outline and focus solely on the transforming shape. **08** **09**

In *Little Western* (1960), Giersz paints patches of color directly on cel without any outlines. The lively cowboys are constructed with loose brush strokes and are very aware of their painted nature. One cowboy dips his finger into another cowboy's painted chest, using it like a brush to draw a rope across the screen. Later, the blue cowboy collides with a yellow cowboy to reform as a larger green cowboy. Though Giersz was not working directly under the camera, being able to manipulate the paint itself rather than confine it within a drawing eventually led him to painting directly under the camera.

Koń (*Horse*, 1967) was Giersz's first film primarily animated with wet paint under the camera, though Giersz did use his cel technique in a few shots for the sake of efficiency. It is quite likely the first paint-on-glass film in the world to be widely shown in festivals.⁶ Telling the story of a warrior's attempt to capture a wild horse, the prominence of the material is evident from the opening title, in which paint spreads across the screen in thick patches. Giersz deliberately makes no attempt to blend the colors, letting them exist independently in visible brush strokes. **10**

I was always attracted to [the French Impressionists'] work, especially because it seemed to be three-dimensional, incorporating both convex portions and deep relief . . . By drawing in paint with a blade I was able to achieve even deeper relief. I also admired the French painters for putting colours next to each other rather than mixing them: the resulting impression is much more interesting.⁷

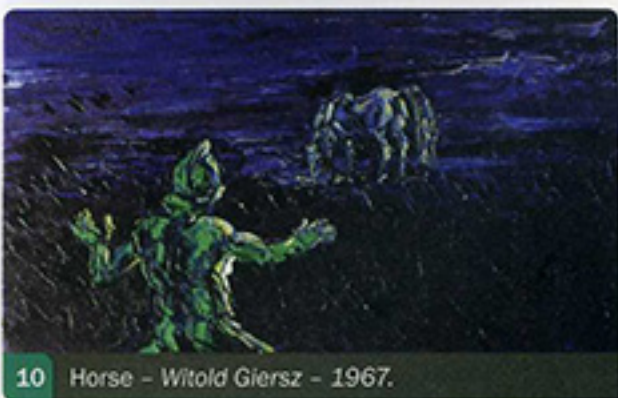
While *Koń* feels like an exploration of a new technique, Giersz's later film, *Pożar* (*Fire*, 1975) reaches a new level of painted sophistication. The variation in texture and color is more refined and integrated into the entire scene.



08 Witold Giersz at work in his studio in 1989. Photo Credit: Romuald Pierkowski/Polish National Film Archive.



09 Little Western - Witold Giersz - 1960.



10 Horse - Witold Giersz - 1967.

While painting *Koń*, I learned from some of the technical mistakes in the film. Removing each drawing left a trace so the background around a character pulsed and twitched. Instead of masking this, I decided to use it as an additional effect for a peculiar, lively background. You see it clearly in *Pożar* – the whole frame, the background, not the characters, and their traces, pulsate. It is alive.⁹

Giersz masterfully uses trails of paint, in a way that does not clutter the frame but enhances the sporadic motion of nervous animals as they try to escape the coming fire. In the central part of the film, Giersz delves into abstraction, playing with flashing exposure variations, fiery slashes, and smears of paint. **11** Giersz animated on glass and cardboard, occasionally using a multiplane for special effects like the smoke and raging fire.

In his lifetime, Giersz made over 60 films, always placing a priority on finding new techniques. His most recent work *Signum* (2015), goes back to the very beginning of animated drawings – the Paleolithic caves of Lascaux and Altamira. Using clay and burnt coal as his pigments and stone as his canvas, Giersz takes his vast understanding of animal movement and painted animation into the distant past.

Hunting scenes were pictured [by Paleolithic artists] as evocatively as possible, with meticulous attention to creating the impression of movement. Today, thanks to the possibilities offered by animation, by hand-painting each phase of movement on the rocks, one is able to fulfill the prehistoric artists' dream and animate their paintings.⁹ **12**

By taking yet another step into uncharted territory, Witold Giersz continues to create from an experimental frame of mind, finding new (or perhaps ancient) approaches to painting under the camera.

Caroline Leaf

We met Caroline Leaf and her sand films in the previous chapter. You may be noticing that animators practicing from an experimental frame of mind are rarely satisfied doing things the same way every time. They are constantly looking for new ways to build upon the techniques they have mastered. After making several films in sand, Leaf was looking to try something new:



11 Fire – Witold Giersz – 1975.



12 Signum – Witold Giersz – 2015.