

(f)ART CULTURE

From the computer screens of Sunnyvale based computer animation/special effects studio, Pacific Data Images (PDI) to the film screen of local art house cinemas and international film festivals to television screens tuned into public tv and MTV, earthling audiences worldwide have had the opportunity to take a look into an alien, yet comically familiar place. "Gas Planet," filled with pastel colored, long snouted, balloon like creatures ingesting a strange plant life which produces effects similar to those of bean eating earthlings, is the product of filmmaker Eric Darnell.

His first project at PDI, Darnell had intended a storyline involving a balloon looking alien society of adults, babies, insects and predators, but then decided to pick a small event from the bigger story. "I never intended it to be the main joke," says Darnell. He also didn't expect the response that the three minute short has since garnered. The film has appeared internationally, winning praise and awards at well recognized animation and independant film festivals such as Monte Carlo's Imagina, Spike & Mike's Festival of Animation and the 1993 Sundance Film Festival. Additionally, "Gas Planet," began appearing in the fall of '93 at the Northern California based Camera Cinemas chain, paired strangely enough with another Sundance favorite, "The Piano." The film was also chosen to be included in San Francisco public television station, KQED's "Living Room Festival," a series which highlights work by independant filmmakers from a variety of genres. And last but not least, "Gas Planet" is set to air on the 1994 season premiere of MTV's "Liquid Television."

Beginning "Gas Planet" shortly after coming on board at PDI, Eric received the support of PDI's four year old Character Animation group, known for it's computer generated Muppetvision characters, including Mickey Mouse, as well as the first computer generated Pillsbury Doughboy. Animator Michael Collery, who served as the Art/Technical Director on the film, developed custom software to achieve the effects animation and also worked with Eric to achieve the hand-drawn look of the piece. Experimenting with a variety of image processing techniques, Michael developed a look which reflected the organic qualities of hand drawn imagery while maintaining the three dimensional advantages available through computer animation. "I don't come from a computer graphics background," explained Darnell. "I'd consider myself as being a more hands on artist, so I really wanted a different look. A look that reflected a warm, organic, hand made quality, traits that aren't normally associated with computer graphics. It was a fun challenge to integrate the qualities of more traditional forms of animation, such as color and texture, with the three dimensionality and integrity of volume computer graphics has to offer."

A background which includes an MFA from Cal Arts, several independant short films and music video directing for bands such as REM, Darnell considers himself a filmmaker first. When presented with the idea of a "Gas Planet" series, Darnell says he could develop more characters if he had to, but prefers to look forward to new and longer format films. "Drive to Big Smoke," a comic ten minute tale of cowboys and cattle drives, is Eric's next film for which he is currently in the process of completing storyboards and designing characters.