

Frank Abney III's 'Canvas' Paints a Story of Grief and Healing

Premiering tomorrow on Netflix, the poignant and moving animated short draws directly from the director's childhood loss; he hopes his film encourages storytellers in the Black community to get their voices heard.

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Thursday, December 10, 2020 at 4:42pm

In [2D](#), [3D](#), [CG](#), [Digital Media](#), [Films](#), [People](#), [Short Films](#) | [ANIMATIONWorld](#) | Geographic Region: [All](#)



Frank Abney III's poignant and emotional animated short, 'Canvas,' premieres December 11 on Netflix.

As part of Disney's "golden age" in animation, *The Lion King* proved iconic for many viewers -adults and children alike - with captivating visuals and an award-winning score. But for Pixar animator Frank Abney III, it was the story's approach to grief that made him first fall in love with animation.

Get **AWN** delivered to your inbox!
Never miss an important article again!

Latest AWN Must Reads

- » 'Bearly' Charms as SCAD Animation Studio's Debut Film
- » 'Cops and Robbers': Contrasting Childhood Play with Racial Hatred
- » Pixar's 'Soul' Skillfully and Honestly Embraces Ethnic and Cultural Diversity
- » Madeline Sharafian 'Digs' Her 2D World in Pixar's 'Burrow'
- » Translating Simon Stålenhag's Art to the Screen in Duvchi's 'Geronimo' Music Video
- » The 5 Most Memorable Animated Christmas Characters
- » Celebrate the Holidays with an AI-Remastered 4K Christmas

“One of the things that has been ongoing in my life is dealing with the loss of my dad when I was five,” says Abney. “Seeing Simba going through that similar experience, I really saw myself in him. I would watch that movie every single day when I got home from school, really connecting with it, and that lit the fire underneath. I didn't know I wanted to be an animator at the time, but I knew I wanted to be part of making these stories.”

Now, Abney - whose credits include DreamWorks Animation's *Kung Fu Panda 3* as well as Pixar's *Coco*, *Toy Story 4*, and *Soul* - is making his directorial debut with similarly grief-focused and family-centered story, *Canvas*, releasing December 11 on Netflix. The nine-minute 2D and 3D/CG animated short, funded by Abney's Kickstarter campaign and developed through his own animation company, Chainwheel Productions, follows the mourning and healing of a stoic grandfather and painter who has lost his wife. While the man has previously shut away his sadness and desire to paint again, his granddaughter, who also loves art and color, discovers a hidden painting of her grandmother, ushering her grandfather into the beginning stages of healing.



Produced by *The Boss Baby*'s Paige Johnstone and created in collaboration with 20 animators including *Substance*'s Jamaal Bradley and *Moana*'s Boris Maras, Abney's short film, five years in the making, is highly personal; the main characters are inspired by his own grandfather and niece, with the short's story and messages drawn out of the grief Abney observed his mother journey through every day.

» The Personal Story Behind Guy's Opening Sequence in 'The Croods: A New Age'

[See More »](#)

Top Headline News

» VFX Producer Edward Irastorza Dies at 52

» WarnerMedia to Release Six Superhero Films a Year

» Justice League's Ray Fisher Removes Himself from DC Film Franchise

» Hand-Drawn 'Minor Accident of War' Tells Harrowing Personal WWII Story

» Joseph Gordon-Levitt May be Joining the MCU

» Shia LaBeouf Not Joining the MCU Following Abuse Allegations

» 'The Boss Baby: Family Business' Release Date Pushed

» Podcast EP92: Skylar Zerr's Top Tips on Becoming A 3D Animation Director

[See More »](#)

Career Connections

» Animation Supervisor
[The Christian Broadcasting Network](#)

"Growing up after my dad passed, I watched how my mom would navigate that grief, usually through something artistic, whether she was on the phone and doodling or taking part in a play," says Abney. "And I had always wondered if there was something she'd lost in that loss with my dad. *Canvas* started to take shape as I was kind of thinking about these things. It was my therapy."

He adds, "We go through these traumas and losses and I wanted to put something out there that shows we don't have to go through it alone."

Canvas is a music-led short with no dialogue, alternating between the earth-toned 3D/CG world of the grandfather's everyday life, and the star-dusted 2D animation that makes up his dreams and spiritual experiences involving his late wife throughout the film.

"Most of my career has been in 3D animation, so I had a crew around me already, all these people that I've worked with and know in the industry," says Abney. "But I also wanted to pay respect and homage to 2D animation and that magic that I was hypnotized by as a kid."

Wanting a clear separation between the 2D and 3D worlds, Abney grounds the grandfather's real-world day-to-day in warm hues of yellows, browns, and greens, inspired by the live-action cinematography of *Selma's* Bradford Young.



» Sr. Graphic Designer
[Motorola Solutions](#)

» Digital Media Design, Adjunct
[Florida Gulf Coast University](#)

» Editorial Creative, Photo & Video
[Paypal](#)

» Senior Digital Graphic Designer - Minnetonka, MN
[UnitedHealth Group](#)

» Creative Services Producer - Graham Media Group
[WSLS](#)

» Multimedia Production Specialist
[US Cellular](#)

» Senior UX Designer
[Paypal](#)

[See More »](#)

Recent Comments



The most important issue for me on this news is how will the VFX work environment improve if these projects are greenlit. While everybody looks at the accusations by the actors the production staff...
[WarnerMedia to Release Six Superhero Films a Year](#)



Excellent series.
[Nickelodeon's 'The Legend of Korra' Steelbook Collection Coming March 16](#)



He left us too soon. May he rest in peace.
[VFX Producer Edward Irastorza Dies at 52](#)

"I was always fascinated with his work," says the director. "There's a very unique look and feel to it, and there was a lot of live-action influence and quality to how he handled the animation work and the camera angles and movements in *Canvas*."

In contrast, the "spiritual plane," as Abney describes, looks more like the crayon sketches depicting the grandmother in heaven that are drawn by the granddaughter in the film, with rough-lined 2D characters featured in scenes saturated with blues, purples and pinks, the background sprinkled with golden, shimmering flakes.



'Canvas' director Frank Abney III.

smiles," remembers Abney. "That's something my wife would do. And that scene always has stuck with me."

"I love seeing rough drawings before everything is cleaned up super perfect," Abney shares. "It's kind of a direct line to the artists when you see their process. So, I wanted to maintain some, quote-unquote, 'imperfection,' and still convey that feeling of serenity and calm, and that's where the blues started to come in and the stardust to make it more ethereal."

The final 2D shot also contains yet another deeply personal inspiration from Abney's life, the emotion highlighted even more by the absence of dialogue. "There's a moment where the grandfather gets to say goodbye to his late wife and, before they share the kiss, she places his hand on her cheek, and softly presses her face against it and



David Finch Very thorough article on an important story, thank you Animation World Network!

[Hand-Drawn 'Minor Accident of War' Tells Harrowing Personal WWII Story](#)



Hey Kate, thanks for this, I'm so glad you find these topics meaningful.

[Teach Yourself Animation - The Art of Timing](#)



animation (2d or 3d) have been my dream since i was a little kid... sadly, animation courses are very scarce and very expensive... i couldnt afford it so i make it a lifelong goal to earn so i...

[Teach Yourself Animation - The Art of Timing](#)

Most Popular

[Nickelodeon's 'The Legend of Korra' Steelbook Collection Coming March 16](#)

1 comment · 2 days ago

[Hand-Drawn 'Minor Accident of War' Tells Harrowing Personal WWII Story](#)

2 comments · 3 days ago

[VFX Producer Edward Irastorza Dies at 52](#)

1 comment · 3 days ago

[Fans Already Disgruntled with Studio Ghibli's 'Earwig and the Witch'](#)

9 comments · 3 weeks ago

He adds, "As an animator, I'm less interested in what's coming out of your mouth, and more interested in what you're thinking. I wanted to focus in on the performances and get a rawer take on the emotion coming from just the expressions and body language."

The background texture of the 2D sequences, while more simplistic to highlight the performances and emotions of the characters, is texturized like a canvas, tipping a hat to the healing powers of art through grief and the grandfather's salvation in returning to the paintings, as well as the emotions, he had tucked away. It's a message that not only is meant to reflect the grief that comes with the loss of a loved one, but that Abney also identifies with the Black community.

"The way he's locked away all the artwork that he's done, and things that remind him of his wife in this back room, that's how I felt in the Black community, where there's a trauma or tragedy that happens and you feel like you have to just move on and don't take that time to really process and grieve," explains Abney, who also executive produced Matthew A. Cherry's Oscar-winning African American family short, *Hair Love*. "It's like you have to just push all that stuff aside and lock it away. Being a Black animator and director myself, I want *Canvas* to inspire other black creators to get their stories out there and allow their voices to be heard."

The vulnerability of both the characters and the short's director is woven throughout *Canvas*, the animation being a window into Abney's own family and grief, and his hopes for more diverse voices in animation. Having worked on *Canvas* for six of his 13 years in animation, Abney says it was the deeply personal aspect of the story that help bring the film across the development finish line.

"If I was creating a story that wasn't personal, I don't think I would have been able to stick with it for so long," says Abney. "Wanting to put out that kind of hope, something that my kids can watch and that I can experience again, along with other people going through the same stuff, it was all fuel for the story. It's always a vulnerable experience, putting yourself out there. But this film has the power to reach a lot of people, and that's the main goal. We all have something to say, and it's important to get it out. I think we owe it to ourselves."

[WATCH: The White Stripes' 'Animated Yule Log Video'](#)

1 comment · 1 week ago

[Kickstarter for 'Art of Change' Book by 100 Artists to Support Black Lives](#)

2 comments · 2 weeks ago



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.



Tags

[animated short films](#) [short film animation](#) [animated shorts](#) [animated films](#)

[Short Films](#) [Shorts](#) [independent shorts](#) [Indie Shorts](#) [Kickstarter](#) [Frank Abney III](#)

[Chainwheel Productions](#) [Paige Johnstone](#) [Jamaal Bradley](#) [Boris Maras](#) [Bradford Young](#)

[Matthew A. Cherry](#) [Hair Love](#) [2D](#) [2D animation](#) [3D](#) [CGI](#) [CG](#) [cg animation](#)

[Disney Animation](#) [Disney](#) [Pixar](#) [The Lion King](#) [Moana](#) [Soul](#) [Coco](#) [Netflix](#) [SVOD](#)

[VOD](#) [streaming entertainment](#) [Streaming Media](#) [streaming platforms](#) [streaming](#)

More From ANIMATIONWorld:



[Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart Talk 'Wolfwalkers'](#)

Next Post

Previous Post

[Billy Corgan Talks The Smashing Pumpkins 'In Ashes' Music Video Series](#)



Related Content

[Three New Diverse Animated Shorts Coming Soon to Netflix](#)

[A Couple Faces the Pain of Unspoken Grief in 'If Anything Happens I Love You'](#)

[Nickelodeon Pulls 'Made by Maddie' Over Reported 'Hair Love' Similarities](#)

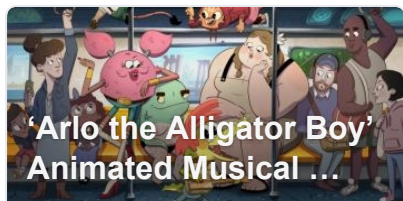
[Imagine Kids+Family and 'Hair Love' Producer Lion Forge Partner Up](#)

[92nd Oscars: 'Toy Story 4,' 'Hair Love' and '1917' Win Academy Awards](#)

[A Father and Daughter Bond Over Hairstyling in 'Hair Love'](#)

[Animated Short 'Hair Love' Gets Theatrical Run with 'The Angry Birds Movie 2'](#)

ALSO ON ANIMATION WORLD NETWORK



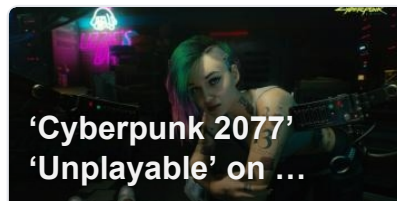
2 months ago • 1 comment

Streamer announces new 2D movie and 20-episode follow-up series from ...



a month ago • 2 comments

Iervolino Entertainment has released its first peek at their upcoming animated ...



21 days ago • 2 comments

The highly anticipated futuristic-RPG doesn't play well with older consoles, ...

0 Comments

Animation World Network

Disqus' Privacy Policy

Login ▾

Recommend

Tweet

Share

Sort by Best ▾



Start the discussion...



LOG IN WITH



OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS [?](#)

Name

Email

Password

Please access our [Privacy Policy](#) to learn what personal data Disqus collects and your choices about how it is used. All users of our service are also subject to our [Terms of Service](#).

☐ I'd rather post as a guest



Be the first to comment.

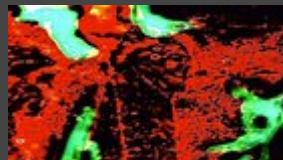
Subscribe

Add Disqus to your site

Do Not Sell My Data

DISQUS

Elsewhere on AWN



Free Download: Special
Annecy 2018 Edition of
ANIMATIONWorld
Magazine!

The Burden of Other
People's Thoughts: Don
Hertzfeldt Talks 'World
of Tomorrow Episode
Two'

A Candid Talk with
Scratch Film Master
Steven Woloshen

Marcy Page Leaves Her
Mark on the NFB

Hayao Miyazaki – The
Interview

Chris Landreth Talks
'Subconscious
Password'

Animation World Network

[Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Terms Of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Media Kit](#)

More Animation World Network Sites

[AWNtv.com: AWN Television](#) | [Videos](#) | [Channels](#) | [Categories](#) | [Playlists](#) | [Submit Your Films](#)

[AIDB.com: Animation Industry Database](#) | [Production Companies](#) | [VFX Houses](#) | [Schools](#)

© 2017 AWN, Inc. AWN.com - Part of the Animation World Network - 13300 Victory Blvd, Suite 365 Van Nuys, CA 91401

