

## "Do You KNOW THIS TO ?" EMBRACING AMBIGUITY WITH SOFIE LEBOW



## "I think I'm also trying to capture the freedom in poetry"

Prague in 2019 was cold, lovely, and brutal. The city made for an excellent backdrop for our early 20s hunger; I remember that carnal restlessness that puppeteered my bones, pushing for movement at threat of decay (not dissimilar to Svankmeier's lovely Flora). Sofie Lebow and I met during this time period; there was a similar energy I sessed inher. We became friends, she made the most gorgeous 16mm piece (that I have on a thumbdrive somewhere), and then it was May and we were returning back to the States.

We kept in touch sporadically over the years that followed until we, to our surprise, both made the decision to return to grad school at the same time, me to the RCA and Sofie to FAMU - where we met. Sofie is one of those "true artists"; she is concerned with experimentation, play, and collaboration and continually pulls these values into all areas of her life. Her practice continues to defy boundaries, denying parameters and championing play. When I began to develop AXIOM24 into AXIOM24 Extended, she was one of the first people to contact me, and I couldn't have been more excited. In our interview, she was candid about her processes and major inspirations. Her film SPROUT, an animated piece working between/with/for visual forms is currently in development.

## KJWA: I'm curious to hear more about SPROUT!

**SL** : Basically, it is about a girl who lives alone in this castle in a desolate world. She just wants something to grow, and then she wishes upon a star, and that's when she meets a plant creature. The story is pretty surreal and the script is just a poem I wrote, but when I think about the meaning, I believe it has to do with the climate crisis, and the despair that can come with it as well as feelings of loneliness in a hyper connected world. I actually wrote it a bit after going wwoofing where I volunteered on an organic farm in Slovenia in a time when I was feeling a bit hopeless, but going there woke me up again. It will be my first time using miniatures, which I am nervous about but also very excited for. We're going to mix stop motion puppetry with live action, which is definitely a challenge. I'm trying to be unafraid of whether it will work or not

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and just create to play and figure it out as I go. I think a lot in textures, and sort of how the texture of the film can make an emotional impact. The ending is ambiguous and I think poems tend to be a little more ambiguous. So, I think I'm also trying to capture the freedom in poetry.

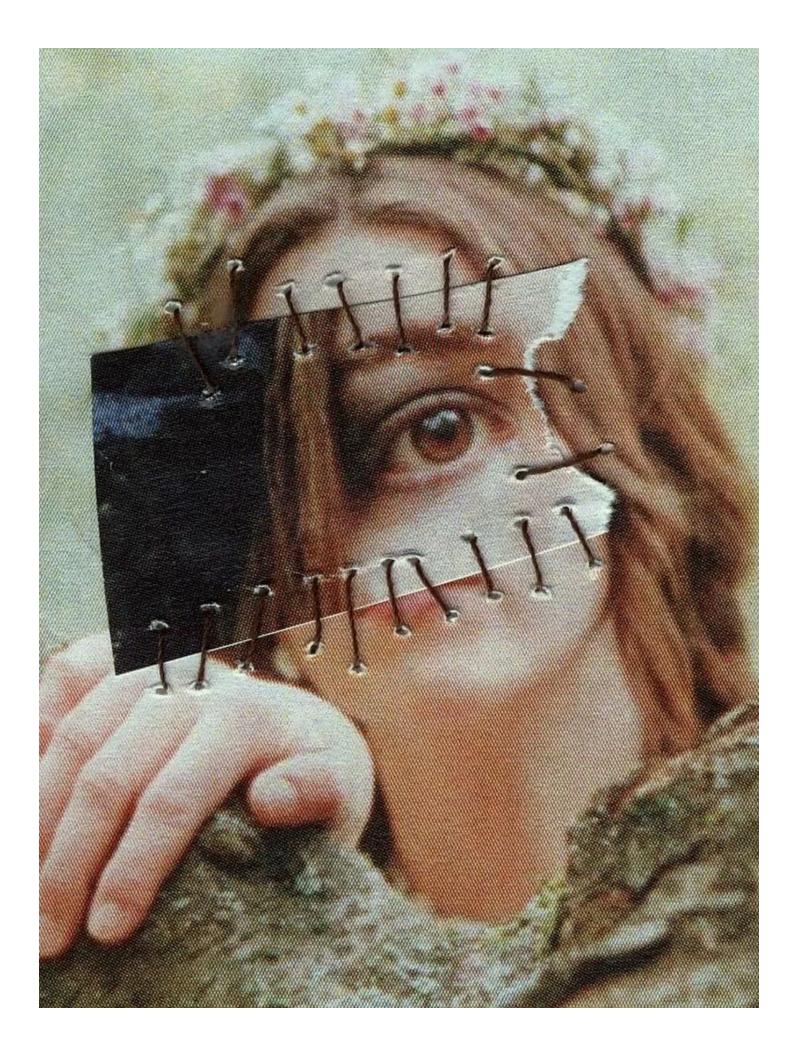
**KJWA**: I think that is so brilliant as a methodology; I've explained Short Form Film to my students as 'it's like a poem'. We often are thinking in terms of books, in terms of short stories. And I'm like, it's too much', y'all, reel it back. It's a poem. What's the one thing that you're focusing on? Which I think also resonates with what I know about your work. I was curious also to hear you talk a little bit about your role as a multidisciplinary artist; you're working across these different media forms. And I was curious about how it informs your work as a filmmaker. LOST PIECES is so gorgeous - we're mixing animation withlive action in the same way that you're talking about this gorgeous new film that you're working on. And I haven't seen any of LOVE LACEY LANE because it hasn't come out yet, of course.

SL: Thank you! I totally agree with you. It's a really good question, and something I'm still figuring out. I definitely see all my pieces whether performance, collage, installation, or film having a conversation and informing one another. I think there are many things to this and I can't fully express it through words. I have always collaged and I think this informs how I create a film because I approach it like I would a collage and think, 'texture and layer wise, how do things go together?" Each person I work with adds their own layer to it. Collaboration is a big inspiration for me. Something I really, really love is I might have this idea in my head of how things should be, but I know that the people I work with are only going to enhance it and create something cooler than I could have ever come up with myself. I also work performance art and installations. with Film impacts how I approach these mediums, but they also inform how I approach film. I treat installations like production design and have learned about how space and objects come together to tell a story. With performance art, I've learned to understand the power of presence, even in stillness, and the strength and vulnerability that goes into acting, which influences how I work with actors. I think they all have a lot in common as they tell stories, but allow for different forms of expression, feelings, and engagement with an audience. What matters most to me is the authenticity of my work. We forget that film is an art form, especially in the U.S., where it's so business driven. For me, it's about creating something that brings people together, sparks conversation, curiosity, and hopefully creates a deep love for our ability to express ourselves as humans.

**KJWA**: I'd love to talk more about how physicality shows up in your practice. Especially in regards to ambiguity. Because when I think about artists that are particularly working on physical or sculptural pieces, they have to play around a lot with what is unsaid because they generally don't have words. So I'm curious about what resisting closure might mean to you in your work. Is there a sense of freedom that maybe comes from it?

## "But [i'm] trying to find a common ground with other people and ask: '*Do you know this*, *too?*"

SL: I think so much of why I make films is questions and not knowing the answer myself and just trying to understand. I don't think I'm trying to find the answer, because the answer will never be finite. I wouldn't say it starts with a defined question but a feeling I'm trying to explore and I don't know if it's actually possible to capture that. But trying to find a common ground with other people and ask: "Do you know this, too?". But their interpretation of it is going to be different from mine. And then what I'm really interested in right now is how can I create longer form narrative pieces with more experimental sides to them, in terms of form. How can I display them in a gallery setting that matches the atmosphere of the piece itself? So for SPROUT I am thinking about, especially because it's exploring loneliness in a hyperconnected world and our relationship to nature, how can I show this in a physical format when displaying the film? In a way that also doesn't provide answers. Something I'm thinking about is getting a retro



TV, painting it and then putting a real piece of grass under it. And then as the display goes on, the grass would die. I'm also sort of going back in terms of technology - shooting digitally and then figuring out how to get that file onto a tape or dvd.

**KJWA** : I love, love, love, love, love what you say, about how you like to communicate through your work with that question of "Do you know this, too?". I don't know if I've ever heard anyone verbalize it that way. It's so beautiful. And I want to talk about it in relation to LOST PIECES because it's so textural and feminine. And reckons with, at least for me, the question of what you lose when you come of age. I'm curious, however much you want to share about it, where this piece comes from for you. And what is the thing that you're asking if we also know?

**SL**: That's so great to hear that's what you got from it! Overall, a feeling of brokenness but then moving past that and healing. I don't know if that's what I'm asking, but an understanding of piecing oneself together again. And especially as related to being a woman, coming of age. And I think it also dives into mental health and trauma, and does so in a way that isn't explicit, but focuses more on a feeling. Detachment and then maybe, trying to feel alive again.

**KJWA** : I think how purposefully ambiguous you leave the piece is what's so striking about it. The ways in which I was able to read the piece would be very different from

"There is a 'way things are done' right? ... I think that recently I've sort of been trying to unlearn that a little bit."



the ways in which anybody else would read the piece. The part of the piece that is my favorite is that moment where the figure in black witnesses the breaking of the doll and for a moment, like, the focus is just slightly soft on her face, and it creates this distance between us. And we want to be closer to her, but we can't be closer to her. It feels like this inevitable moment - she spends the film chasing this figure in white, who's childish, almost fragmented. Ultimately, this figure in black is just left with the fragments of something she spends the entire film desperate to get to.

**SL**: A lot of the film was totally rewritten from the first draft. And there were mistakes in the shoot. But I really enjoy that, I think if those mistakes didn't happen, I wouldn't have incorporated the mixed media or let the film find itself. The editor and I had an original cut that followed the script more and another one that was a lot more searching, and I just gave the editor her own on that. And so when I actually look at the piece now, it feels like so many people's interpretations of it.

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process, because the next thing that I was going to ask "what else can this medium do for us?". you was : how important would you say process is to you?

that a little bit. I think for me, the process is that the more which is so beautiful. freedom I give myself, the more beauty can come out of it. I am trying to find my own as a director. It's different too when you're working in experimental versus making a narrative piece. I really have been trying to embrace mistakes and if things don't go as planned, being like "okay, how can this fit creatively into the project?". I think letting go versus having it all pre-planned, which is something I used to do, is finding a good in-between where, yes, there is enough planning so it's not a shit show on set, but definitely allowing for a lot of room to to find new things and also change things while also keeping my guardrails up on the original idea. The process is just really about discovery.

KJWA: It sounds like a lot of what you're doing now is sort of untangling and interrogating that formal

KJWA: I love that you already started talking about education that you had and really critically asking

SL: Yes, exactly that! What else can this medium do for us SL: There is a "way things are done" right? It's supposed is such a powerful sentiment and something so profound, to be well scripted, both in the script and when shooting, because for each of us it can do something different and I think that recently I've sort of been trying to unlearn yet allow for shared expression and understanding,

> The images from LOST PIECES OF HER feature mixed media by collage Ana Сисо and cinematography by Zoya Chung.

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