

***IMAGINED***

***ART GALLERY***

***HISTORIES***

***CATHY AND JESSIE MARION***

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery  
*Martha Colburn: Imagined Histories*  
September 3 through November 22, 2019

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State University of New York at Fredonia



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## Foreword

The Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Fredonia is honored to coordinate and present *Martha Colburn: Imagined Histories*, which features five animated films dating from 2008 to 2017 and related collages. Colburn's films are complex layers of diverse influences (Marcel Duchamp, Otto Dix, William Eggleston, Kenneth Anger, Half Japanese and Charlie Parker, to name a few!), autobiographical references, and, as legendary avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas described them, "naked testimonials of our times."

This exhibition and catalog would not have been possible without the assistance of Martha

Colburn who patiently answered all of my emails, gathered information and images, and flew from Los Angeles to Long Island City to sort artwork. Special thanks are due to Jason Dilworth, Associate Professor of Graphic Design, for his intelligent and resourceful catalog design, and Leonor Faber-Jonker for her insightful essay.

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Barbara Racker  
Director, Marion Art Gallery





My GOD is  
LOVE  
- Jim Carrey

Norlon

***Making Micro Worlds: How Martha  
Colburn finds the Largest of Truths  
in the Smallest of Things***

***Leonor Faber-Jonker***

Martha Colburn has the near-mythical ability to breathe life into *things*. In her kaleidoscopic body of work, painted and pasted pieces of paper, jigsaw puzzles, and flea market finds come to life to declare: I'm here and not going anywhere. *Deal with me, face me.*

Things become puppet-like characters—historical figures, wriggly insects, fantastical creatures, spirits and animals—born to dance, to contemplate, to slaughter or be slaughtered, to have sex or smoke meth. Dripping blood and grinding teeth, they rattle the gates of hell or ascend into the heavens. In Colburn's hands they are the protagonists of captivating tales, painstakingly animated

1/24<sup>th</sup> of a second at a time. As the projector heats up, their brittle bones begin to glow. With each microsecond she lets them move forward one frame, ever-forward, allowing them to exist a little while longer, an eternity.

The whirring celluloid of Colburn's films harbors worlds within worlds. Endless sequences of tiny, still frames open up never-ending, flickering vistas of the mind's eye and the American psyche. The dreamlike environments and their curious inhabitants don't stick to a single storyline but instead form loose associations, unlocking personal stories and memories of both artist and viewer.



Irresistibly, her films appeal to my deepest instincts. The endless, colorful possibilities bring back long-forgotten childhood memories, when fact and fiction flowed freely into each other... *The dust dust dust captured in red-green-blue pixels as I watch tanks rolling past on TV. Desert Shield. Desert Storm. Sand running through my fingers in the playground. The glistening snake skin in my grandmother's attic. Can I sleep downstairs? A black-and-white cowboy knocked unconscious, sprawled over the pages of my favorite comic book. The vaguely pleasant pain of a scraped knee.*

*RATATATATAT! Time for commercials.*





...So what happens when the end of the film is reached, the projector starts to cool down and the lights go back on? The memories and stories remain, forever changed. The characters sink back into sleep, some pinned to their collaged environments, others free, making guest appearances in Colburn's many lectures, their dangly limbs held together by tape and wire. Patiently waiting to be kissed back to life while Colburn is busy reflecting on the latest events, making new puppets, creating other worlds. She works so hard her characters, like the rest of us mere mortals, can't keep up.

For the exhibition at the Marion Art Gallery, boxes have to be opened. Crates and flat cardboard packages marked 'This side up' or 'F A C E', full of sleeping things and raw, collaged materials of Colburn's films. Even though the material was made little over ten years ago, those boxes are a bit like half-forgotten family albums. Open them and realize with a shock: those cut-out soldiers, addicts, and saviors *are real*. They know each other. They *hang out*. In their materiality, they bear witness to the way Colburn works: how she *collects*, destroys, transforms, drags and dances, creating micro worlds teeming with life.



## ***Collecting***

Collecting is a way of making sense of the world. Gathering data, information, and artifacts has been a way of taming seemingly incomprehensible natural phenomena and social rituals for centuries. We neatly classify the animal kingdom, much in the same way my elderly neighbor used to categorize her collection of ceramic dachshunds (***canis lupus familiaris***) according to size and color. In insecure times, chronologies, diagrams, taxonomies, and matching dachshunds offer comfort and security.

Martha Colburn is also a collector. She is quite unlike my elderly neighbor though. Security is not what she's after. Her films stand more in the tradition of cabinets of curiosities, wonder rooms filled to the brim with extraordinary objects. Preserved anatomical specimens, exotic birds, unicorn horns, shrunken heads, fossils, and pinned insects, jumbled together in dark wooden cases. A world of dodos and dragons, singing rocks and death casts. A make-believe world to make sense of the world.

Colburn cares less about systematizing and more about a sense of wonder. Her way of collecting is that of a child with a secret jacket

pocket. Recall that feeling of digging your hand deep in your pocket, dirt pressing under your nails, to come up with lint, a twig, a paperclip, a bubblegum comic and a Lego pirate? Open that hand, and there you have it: a tiny Colburn collection. Endlessly precious and full of hidden meaning.

A self-confessed microphiliac, it all began with pinning insects. Colburn's dad was a proud member of the Entomological Society of Pennsylvania, so as a kid she practiced the delicate art of pinning insects for hours on end. Making sure they weren't tilted and exactly in the middle, occasionally looking up at certificates on the wall that read 'E S P'. **Remember to**



*leave a 10 mm handle above the specimen.* In her films, those insects are let loose to bite, dance, lick feet and do *whatever they f-ing wanna do.* But the practice of controlling micro worlds stuck. The insects in her films are only free within parameters controlled by Colburn, the giant pulling the strings of her tiny wriggly subjects.

In Colburn's micro worlds, she collects anything and everything that interests her. Without paying heed to classifications or chronologies she researches historical paintings, cultural issues, natural phenomena, and her own history, bringing together images, objects, photographs, texts, and ideas in

unexpected constellations. Story lines weave in and out of each other, bridging past and present, fact and fiction, the personal and the universal. The smallest of things. The largest of truths.

She says: ***I'm tangled up by what I see in the world as wrong and beautiful and I make order of this in my films. Or at least have a good time getting out my frustrations.***

In ***Myth Labs*** (2008), past and present collide violently as Colburn imagines the founding myth of America as a prelude to the current meth epidemic, blending historical facts and news stories with her memories of the colors, people and attitudes of a poor town in rural





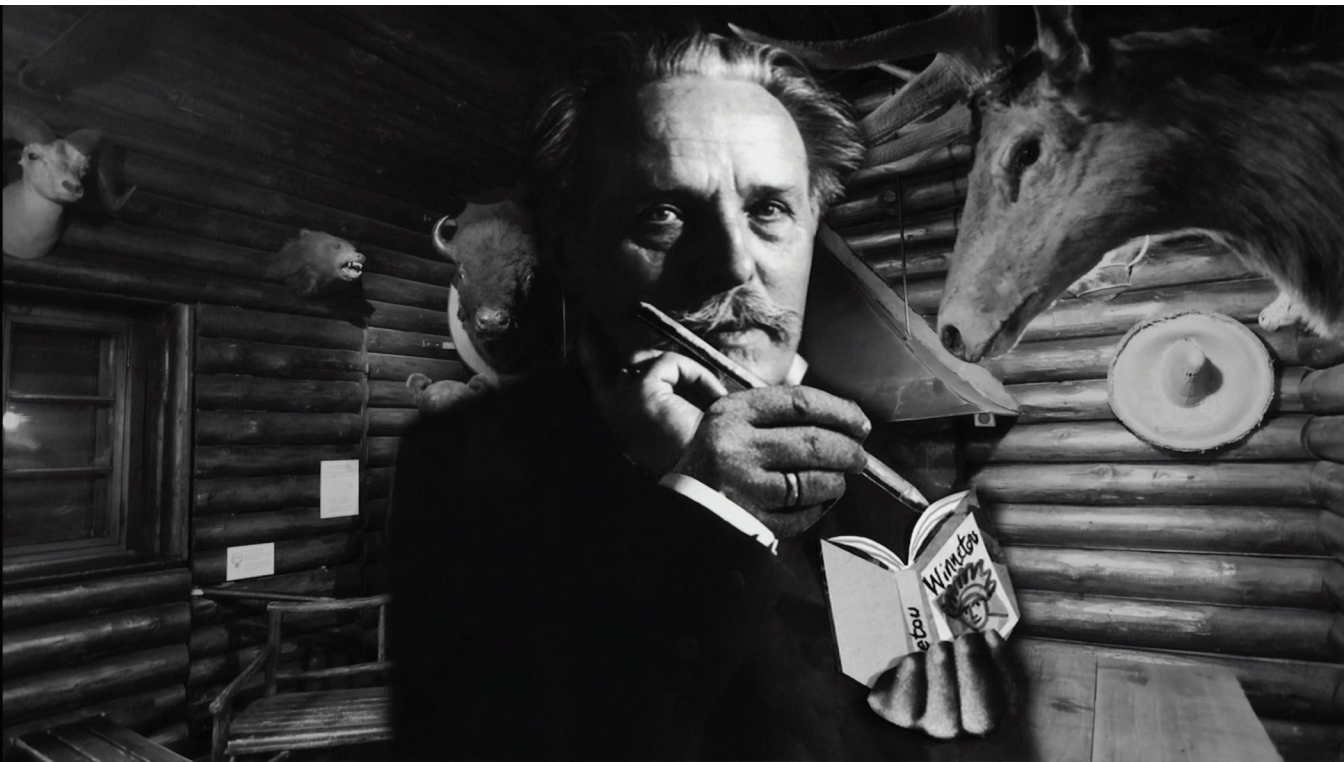
America. The film opens with a roaring sea: Jesus arrives in the promised land riding on a rolling wave, the Mayflower in its wake. On the coast, a scruffy-looking Puritan is speared trying to hand over the Bible to an American Indian. Bringing beliefs and diseases. As the Bible is picked up, square crystals come rolling out. M E T H ? !

Pop-pop-pop go button-bubbles as pilgrims and Indians alike start to cook meth in their cabins and trailers under the watchful eye of Jesus. Colburn sends fragments of these explosion-prone meth labs flying across the screen in painted flames. Addicts cling on to their meth pipes, as Puritans to their Bibles.

Methamphetamine as an answer to spiritual emptiness.

Growing up on the blood-soaked soil of rural Pennsylvania that witnessed both the genocide of the American Indians and the Battle of Gettysburg (the bloodiest in the entire Civil War), Colburn has a knack of exploring wrongs and injustices through personal memories and associations. She makes pressing political and cultural issues tangible by combining the fantastical and intuitive with real, often harrowing details.

Her recent film ***Western Wild... Or how I found Wanderlust and met Old Shatterhand*** (2017) reflects on the American frontier as imagined



by German best-selling author Karl May. Blending animation with documentary, she combines extensive research into the mind-boggling life of May—a kleptomaniac dreamer—with her own history and references to current affairs. She revisits May’s imagined Wild West as the backdrop to the Standing Rock protests and reveals how May’s fantasies resonate in her family albums.

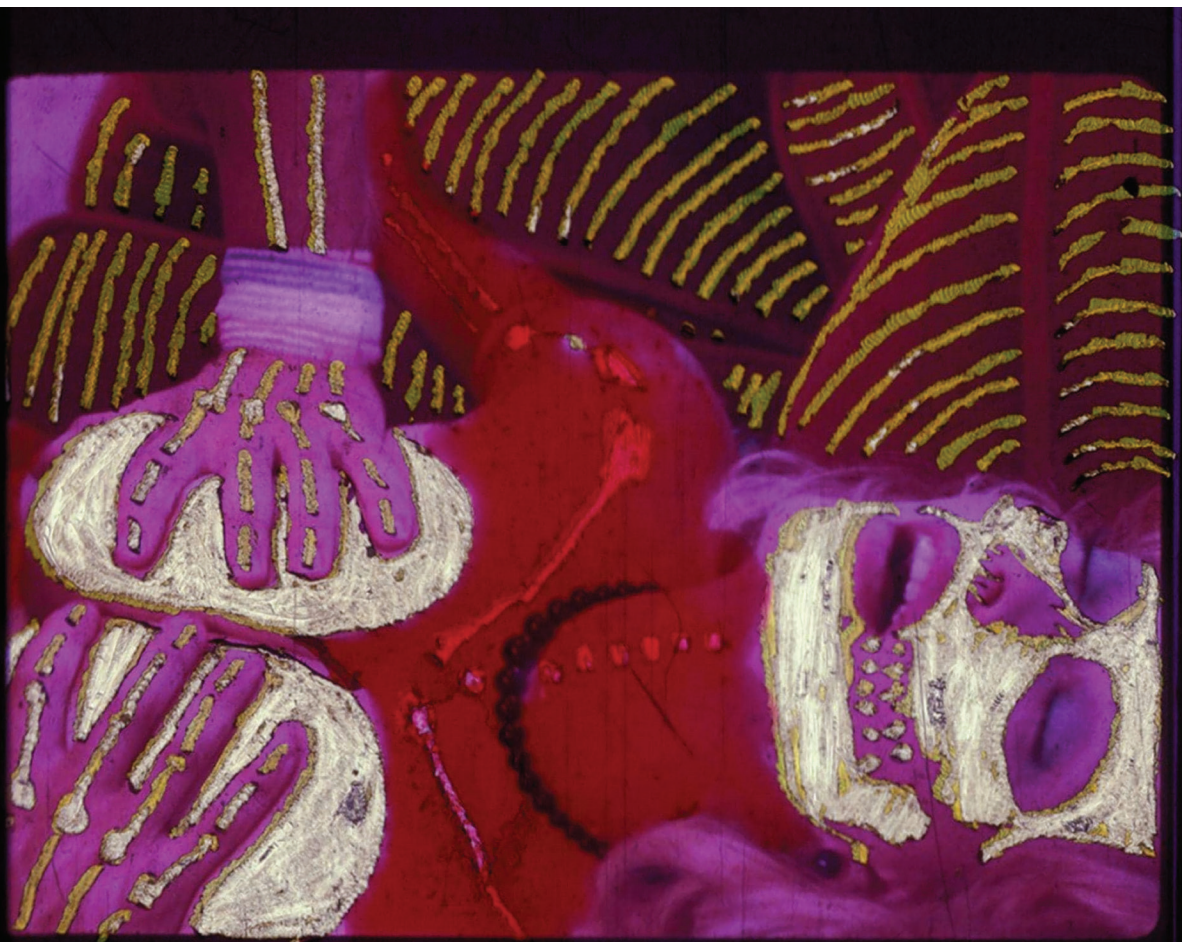
In Karl May, Colburn recognized her own wanderlust: the urge to explore the unknown. May was also a collector. Writing about lands he had never seen, he collected curious paraphernalia to make his imagined

world a reality. In a strange twist of history, his imagined world was the reality Colburn escaped from, to become a global citizen who collects facts and fictions to build fantastical micro worlds.

### Destroying (= creating)

In *Western Wild... Or how I found Wanderlust and met Old Shatterhand* Colburn reveals that making violent imagery was a way to deal with the violence she experienced first-hand in a rural mountain culture. Blink and you will miss them: childhood drawings emblazoned with







swastikas. Fast forward a couple of decades and violence has become a recurring element in her work. Blood and guts ooze from her sex and death inspired imagery, echoing her raw approach to making films.

Making these films is itself an act of violence. Like a kid burning ants with a magnifying glass, she started out bending over old rolls of film, hand-scratching them with any sharp

objects at hand. In *Skelehellavision* (2002) bones are painted over pin-ups and erotic films, skulls suckling breasted skeletons amidst an electrified and flaming afterlife. ***Crack that whip!*** She never felt films to be somehow sacred, but views them as raw material to create worlds.

Collage art is all about destroying to create. If you consider your original material precious, that's it, you're lost. The collage artist must give free reign to the universal impulse to scratch out and draw over the cheerful faces of advertisements and school book pictures. By juxtaposing imagery, sweet and violent, old and new, mundane and startling,

original connotations are lost, new associations evoked. Colburn is a master of such subtle acts of destruction.

Her medium of choice, animation, brings up memories of Disney and watching that one sugary program just before bedtime. **Not** the medium you readily associate with phallus-eating spiders and overdosing meth addicts. Still, her work is never crude. She makes full use of the intuitive possibilities and inherent contradictions of the medium to give her films a poetic quality. A puppet version of ***Seek & Destroy***.

Colburn's unscrupulous approach to filmmaking is echoed in violent narratives.

In her films, characters tend to get blown to pieces, stabbed or shot, their bellies bursting open with vipers, spilling guts and flames. For me, such violence resonates with slasher movies, not something from real life. Assuming Colburn has never witnessed vipers bursting from bellies either (but who knows?), she did grow up gutting and skinning animals year-round, the sound of gunfire ringing in her ears: neighborhood kids killing each other playing Russian roulette, her living room like a well-stocked arsenal. ***No trespassing.***

Like those kids playing Russian roulette, the characters in her films—hunters and hunted, dolls and dictators, police and protesters—kill

each other matter-of-factly. Blood-red woolen strings or painted drops—comes gushing from wounds with a violence disproportionate to the gracefully landing arrows, bullets and blows. In *Join the Freedom Force* (2009), a policeman is gobbled up by an over-sized activist; in *Dolls vs. Dictators* (2010), Colonel Gadaffi shoots brightly colored feathers that cut deep into the plump leg of a curly-haired doll.

As the title implies, *Dolls vs. Dictators* makes full use of the contrast between children's toys and bloodthirsty dictators. Feared statesmen like Robert Mugabe and Kim Jong-il are up against round-headed baby dolls and the Power Rangers. Fantasy overcomes reality as





those dictators, cursed, die one by one in real life, slowly, thankfully outdating the film.

In *Triumph of the Wild* (2008), a similar surreal battlefield, a jigsaw puzzle deer disintegrates after it's shot by a soldier with a scarecrow-like face. When a crippled fox shoots a cavalryman with a cannon, his head comes clean off. Remember that traumatizing Disney scene in which Bambi loses its mother? These are







the darkest corners of that Disney world, seen through PTSD glasses. Fairytale forests merge into Vietnam swamps, while animals and men alike are shot to smithereens to the tunes of frenzied piano music.

Remember, Colburn is the giant pulling the strings of these micro worlds. She says: ***As animator of those scenes I play the parts of perpetrator and victim.*** When bare-chested soldiers, cut out from a ***Life*** report on the Vietnam War, open fire on a crocodile that has just chomped on their comrade, she relentlessly orchestrates these characters towards their deaths. But it wouldn't be possible to create scenes as raw and unnerving without

immersing herself in the troubling world of soldiers suffering from PTSD.

Many of the unsettling scenes in *Triumph of the Wild* are built using puzzles. Colburn takes these happy scenes—a peaceful lake, a cozy family gathering—constructs them, takes them apart again and transforms them into more realistic settings. Now, beauty is balanced by the grotesque, noise by quiet, and paratroopers (military puzzles are a thing, apparently) come to life, raining down in the painted thicket. It is collage at its best. Harsh but beautiful, real but dreamlike.

One puzzle piece, another, then five more pieces. *That bit goes there.* A glistening

## Breathing life

snake opens its mouth and comes alive as it would when I was a child, making puzzles on the floor. Knees rubbing against the carpet, imagining worlds.

The violence in Colburn's films is both disturbingly graphic and pretty, choreographed without being sterile. The movements of her painted and collaged puppets are graceful, sometimes to an extreme. In *Myth Labs*, a DEA agent, on his way to busting a meth house, bounces across the screen like a true Nureyev. Her characters dance, even her backdrops dance. And the viewer is invited to dance

along to these micro worlds in which everything is in constant flux.

So how does Colburn breathe life into her collected stories, ideas, drops of blood, things?

Over the years, she developed from scratching directly on found film to making stop-motion films with multi-plane glass set-ups, allowing her to work on several layers at the same time. Improvising as she goes along, she creates extremely dense films. The glass layers enable the collision of past and present, fantasy and reality, fact and fiction, as cowboys transform into soldiers, peaceful lakes into treacherous wilds.

**1/24<sup>th</sup> of a second.** A tiny joint moves inaudibly, a dash of paint is added. A paper limb moves forward, ever so slightly.

Suspended precariously with magnets, the process of breathing life into her micro subjects is messy. **Gravity is a bitch.** The set-up can only be controlled to a certain extent. Often, her characters take on a life of their own, making Colburn dance along, instead of the other way around. She compared the process to **taking a pack of zombie mules across a mountain ridge.** Bits might fall off, she might lose sight of them for a while as they wander off to look for pastures. But she always gets there.

*I make my films a bit like if Frankenstein made a Balinese puppet theatre in a back alley with a camera.* And then imagine the open backdoor of a seedy bar, music spilling into the alley.

Because, without music, you can't dance.

A one-time avantgardist underground musician, Colburn knows how to use sounds and rhythms to maximum effect. If the visuals are the heart of her work, music—from her own collage-music in *Skelehellavision* to Thollem McDonas' haunting piano melodies in *Triumph of the Wild*—is the pulse. The visual spectacle and musical atmosphere work together to pull you into her micro worlds.

Music also allows her micro worlds to burst from the screen and become environments. Because her work is both universal and deeply personal, simply projecting her films seems to her too one-sided. In recent years she experimented with live music and performances during her screenings. Colburn engages with the audience, who instead of just viewing, **enter** her micro world, to bring in their own impressions, ideas, childhood memories—those textures, that sound, making puzzles, pinning insects—to make sense of the themes addressed.

When her panels and films are seen together, they form an environment encompassing many



worlds, luring in the viewer. Step inside and see a glimpse of the never-ending process of making micro worlds: collecting, destroying, transforming, breathing life. As the exhibition at the Marion Art Gallery is in the making, her characters are ready to burst out of their boxes. ***Deal with me, face me.*** They are both the result and witnesses of Colburn's creation. With them, through them, she has conjured up worlds, micro worlds that take in the larger world and spit it out again in a mad orgy of movement and color.

Come on, join their dance, you know you want to.

***You can't be funky if you haven't got a soul.***

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**Leonor Faber-Jonker** is an author, researcher, and artist with an interest in the entanglements between materiality, memory and meaning. In her work she investigates the practices surrounding objects, collections, human remains, photographs, statues and places. She has published extensively on a.o. the counterculture of the 1980s, the Rotterdam underground, and Namibian colonial history. Leonor Faber-Jonker lives and works in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

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## Martha Colburn Biography

Martha Colburn was born in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and is currently based in Amsterdam and Los Angeles. She is a self-taught filmmaker, whose first films were cameraless manipulations of found footage. In 1995 she began making animated films with a Super 8 camera. She has since completed over seventy films.

Shortly after receiving her BFA in painting from Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art in 1993, Colburn discovered a treasure trove of old 16 mm films at a city surplus and began manipulating them by scratching, tinting, splicing, and adhering press on symbols and letters. For early screenings, Colburn

performed live with musicians and a combination of 16mm and Super-8 projectors, mirrors, colored gels, strobing devices, and hand-painted screens. Initially, the majority of her films were videos for musical groups in which she and her friends played. During her undergraduate years Colburn became involved in the Baltimore experimental music scene and, with Jason Willett, formed the band *The Dramatics* which released six records.

In the late 1990s Colburn participated in film festivals across Europe and the United States and received her first film awards: the Kenneth Patchen Award at the National Poetry Film Festival, the





Jury's Choice Award at the Super 8 Film Festival in Austin, and the Jury's Choice Award for No-Budget Filmmaking at the International Hamburg Short Film Festival in Germany. In 1999 she won Best Animated Film at the New York Underground Film Festival for *Lift-Off* and the Chicago Underground Film Festival for *Spiders in Love: An Arachnogasmic Musical*.

Assisted by a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Colburn left Baltimore in 2000 to study at Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. During her time there, she concentrated on multimedia art installations while continuing to make films. After completing the program in 2002 Colburn began focusing on socio-political issues in her films. She provided animation for the feature film *The Devil and*

the new Museum of Art and Design in Manhattan. Recent performance venues include the Knitting Factory in Brooklyn, International Film Festival in Rotterdam, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Monstra Animation Festival in Lisbon, and Paris Festival for Different and Experimental Cinema.

From 2008 to 2010 Colburn completed commissions for the Times Square video screen, Performa, and music videos for Serj Tankian, Deerhoof, Friendly Rich, and They Might Be Giants. Her films are included in public collections around the world; among them are the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art in New York, Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In 2011 Art21 featured Colburn on the *New York Close Up series*.





*Daniel Johnson*, about the noted American musician's battle with bipolar disorder. The film won the Documentary Directing Award at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. That same year Colburn participated in Directors' Fortnight, Cannes, France with her short film *Cosmetic Emergency*, which was also selected for the 2006 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In 2007 organizers of the Sundance Film Festival invited Colburn to initiate the New Frontier program with her animated film *Meet Me in Wichita*.

Throughout her career Colburn has collaborated with musicians to create interdisciplinary performances, as well as original sound tracks for her animated films. In 2008 her live performance of films, sound, music, and light opened

In 2014 the Center for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, Spain presented a retrospective screening of Colburn's films. Among recent screening venues are the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, Uppsala International Short Film Festival in Sweden, London International Film Festival, Glasgow International Festival, Los Angeles Film Festival, Vienna Shorts in Austria, Dresdner Schmalfilmtage in Germany, and Lucca Film Festival in Italy.

Among the venues of Colburn's recent solo exhibitions and performances are the St. Louis Museum of Art; Stadtmuseum, Jena, Germany; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gallery Diana Stigter, Amsterdam; and Frans Hals Museum de Hallen, Haarlem. She has taught

workshops on her animation technique in China, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Among the institutions are: Nanjing Art Institute; Dutch Art Institute, Enscheda; School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; La Casa Encendida, Madrid; The Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague; Atelier Rochebrune, Paris; IADE, Lisbon; and Xavier University, New Orleans.

Colburn is a recipient of the 2015 Creative Capital Award for film and the 2016 Mondriaan Fund Project Grant for Artists. In 2019 the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles hosted a twenty-year film retrospective titled *I Can't Keep Up with Martha Colburn!*.