

Suzan

Pitt

Cartoon

Wilderness



...And then I think to myself—“What a wonderful world.”

Animator Suzan Pitt creates lush, eroticized, surrealized worlds that meld dark elements of film noir with the exuberant originality and visual delights of pure fantasy. Film, particularly animation, is the perfect medium for touring the psychic landscape. Freed from the limitations of the physical world, the artist is able to explore what Suzan Pitt refers to as the “inner movie.”

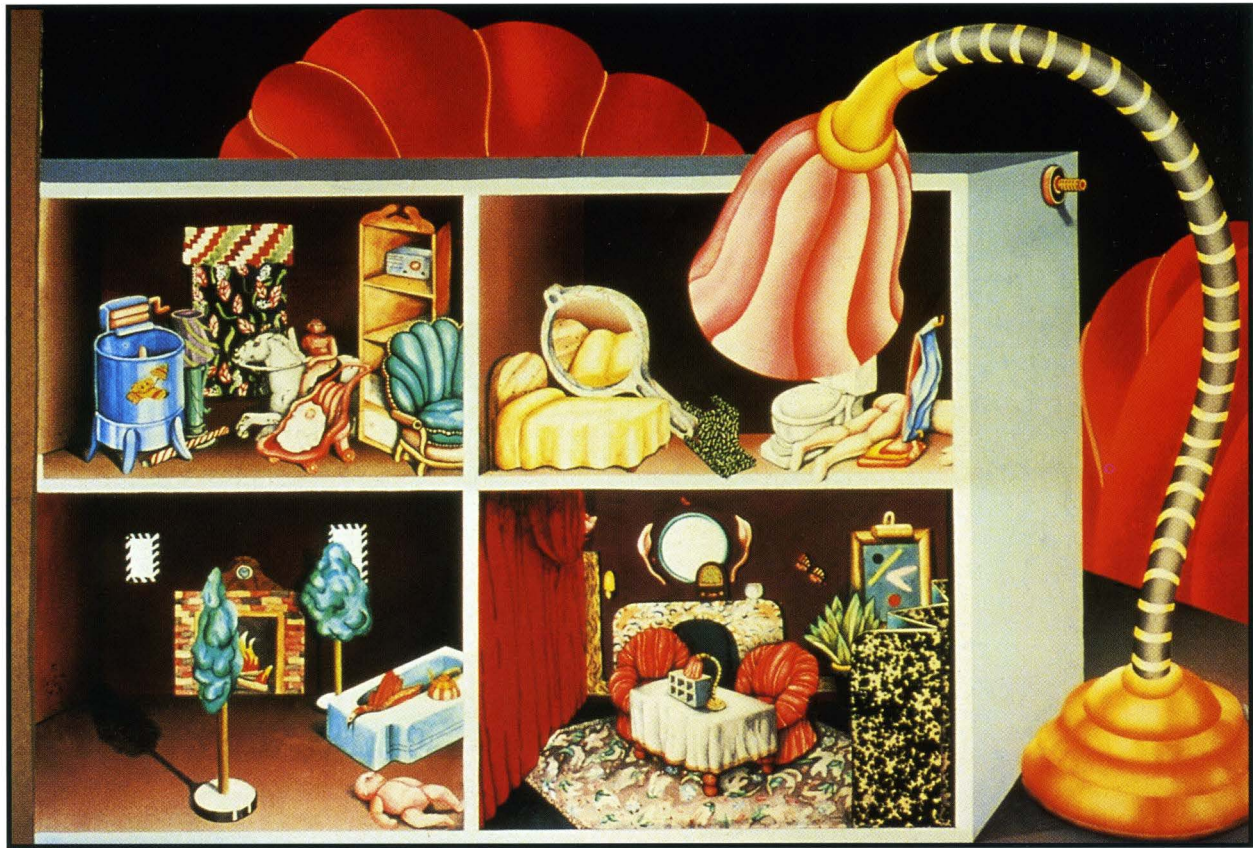
Pitt combines a variety of media and animation techniques for a dense, information-filled frame with a vertiginous sense of shifting realities. In an early scene of Pitt’s 1979 film “Asparagus,” there sits in the artist/heroine’s living room, a doll house replica of her house within which is a replica of the doll house, and so on. This image of the artist rearranging the furniture in the infinite depths of her personal universe gives way to the artist venturing forth into the world with a bag of its essence. One set in the film is a model of an ornate theater interior with an audience of 200, each figure sculpted of colored clay. In a technical tour de force the audience members are each animated and interact with drawn cels. We watch the audience as they view a churning cosmic vortex on the theater stage and then the artist/heroine releases into its creaking, backstage mechanism the contents of her bag. The awe-struck audience leaps to its feet and gestures toward the chimerical vision floating through the theater. Pitt’s wordless narratives are

accompanied by sound collages that heighten the pervading sense of unease and revelation.

In “Joy Street” an ant cuts a hole in a leaf to reveal another ant cutting a hole in the leaf below. As we drop through the hole we are confronted by the repetition of the cutting and endless rows of ants industriously carrying the bits away. With these hypnotic movements, Pitt takes us inside the mechanism, inside the mind with its dream of inspiration, creation and regeneration. In this film, the artist/heroine’s suicidal depression becomes a metaphor for the death of the natural world, or perhaps vice versa, revealing the symbiotic relationship of the health of the natural world to the health of the heroine’s psyche.

Suzan Pitt’s adventurous spirit and craving for unmediated nature led her to kayak into the Guatemalan rain forest to make the jungle drawings for “Joy Street.” She is likewise unafraid to go it alone into the territory of her imagination. From these journeys Pitt has returned to create a wondrous experience for her audience. *Women and Their Work* presents *Suzan Pitt: Cartoon Wilderness* which includes preparatory paintings, animation cels, and screenings of “Joy Street.” This exhibition offers viewers a rare opportunity to study the animator’s methods and the genesis of her ideas.

**Nancy Bless, Curator**



Scene from *Asparagus*

# Ode to Joy: Animation & The Triumph of Life

*an essay by John Carlin*

Suzan Pitt's career as director, designer, painter and producer is framed by two monumental animated films: "Asparagus" (1974-79) and "Joy Street" (1991-95). Each is less than a half hour long, but together they manage to create the most poignant and profound representation of a person's inner life as any art work made in the past few decades.

The main theme of "Asparagus" is a woman's quest for identity—that of the unnamed female "hero," that of the artist, and ultimately that of the film itself and the medium in which it was created. This quest is not so much resolved as posed and projected across time—then doubled back to create a sense of identity in process rather than in form. As such, the film is an uncomfortable exploration of the relation of the self to society that ventures into areas of the psyche that remain hard to understand or even describe.

The film begins by shocking the audience. A sexy female leg wearing only a red high heel shoe enters the frame like an ad for a burlesque show. A snake enters the frame from the top of the woman's thigh, crawls around the leg and then spells out the artist's name. The frame pulls back to reveal an old-fashioned room. Large hands pick up a framed picture within the frame and turn on a light to start the show. This light transforms into

bathroom bulbs flanking a mirror. The main character enters that bathroom, walks to the toilet and literally defecates the title. By this time it is already clear that "Asparagus" is going someplace odd—the feminist tone and the prominent toilet suggests a wry synthesis of Marcel Duchamp, Maya Deren and Jean Luc Godard, who, after all, shocked the world by hiring Brigitte Bardot to play the lead in "Contempt" and then filming her on the toilet a decade earlier.

But I am getting ahead of myself. After the film's uncomfortable open, it settles into a more familiar narrative. The protagonist is puzzled and confronted by typical icons of home and hearth. Stuffed armchairs and a dolls' house parade through a dreamlike environment taunting her, one imagines, by contrasting "normal" life with her more fantastic inner thoughts. At this point, her hermetic loneliness is reinforced by the formal repetition of the film itself. The room she is in becomes the room in the doll's house—a picture within a picture, a simulacrum within a simulacrum. To break this tautology, she walks into the closet, puts on a rather plain female mask, packs up a strange assemblage of symbols and colored lights into her handbag and goes outside.

She walks past a series of ominous shop windows selling sex, guns, dolls and cigarettes. But she ends up in a



Scene from *Asparagus*

theater, another form of picture making within this moving picture. Yet at this moment she does not passively amuse herself with the dazzling show taking place, but goes behind the stage and opens her bag to let her own symbols escape and intertwine with the spectacle, giving its mechanical effects beautiful new animated content. The images introduced in the opening section fly out beyond the stage to thrill the audience who are depicted as three dimensional ("claymation") figures rather than painted animation. In short, she makes art from the symbols of her seemingly empty life and is able to affect other people with it.

If the film ended here it would still be a complex and remarkable achievement. But it goes further: The woman is not given identity by this artistic triumph. As her symbols flow through the theater and out into the street, she is shown getting into a cab, and then pulling down the mask to reveal her face for the first time. But underneath the mask, she has no face, just a blank shape—we see her visualized as she sees herself. She returns to her room, takes off her clothes and the mask. She then stares out the window at giant fields of asparagus which loom outside. This scene echoes something at the beginning that I neglected to mention. As the woman wanders her apartment before she goes out, she stares through



the window at an impossibly fecund natural scene on the other side of the glass. Nature is portrayed as all that is given—the aboriginal source. While this fantastic jungle moves by, it stops on the image of these same giant asparagus upon which a large female hand descends and caresses in a very sexual manner. This seems to disturb the woman who quickly draws the curtains and moves on to the next scene. In fact, one could speculate that this disquieting aspect of her fantasy is part of what propels her out of her home and into the street, suggesting that disquiet inspires creativity. Now, at the end of the film, as these symbolic phallic plants appear for the third time, the woman enters nature with them and puts them into her mouth in a direct sexual manner. When she does so they transform into a waterfall, a river of quivering flesh, ribbons, pills, hair, stars and then back to asparagus as the film ends.

On one level this type of sexual content was quite commonplace in the late '60s and '70s, particularly in the so-called underground and among vanguard artists who began to explore and use their own bodies in their work. For instance, Carol Schneeman, a student of Stan Brackhage, began making a series of provocative films and performances in the late '60s that set new groundwork for expression of female sexuality in art. What makes Pitt's use of this

new found freedom so interesting is that one does not get the sense of intoxicating liberation, but of anxious discovery. I have long felt that the central thrust of Pitt's work was a complex reversal of traditional symbolism, largely based upon the dominance of men in Western art (and culture). In "Asparagus" Pitt symbolically transforms a phallogocentric image into a cathartic object of female creativity and liberation. And this creativity affirmatively rejects not only the typical ways that emotions are expressed in art, but the very structures upon which such work is based. This makes the film deliberately female, almost uncomfortably so, and as such has suffered competing in the world it tries to recast as its own. And this struggle has had a real personal cost. By delving so deeply into her true self and by fighting tradition both in terms of form and content, Pitt clearly took herself to the edge and dangled there precipitously for some time. Her next major film, "Joy Street," begun over a decade later, clearly addresses some of the deadly consequences of her artistic journey.

This film begins by showing streams of light floating down a deserted street. The light echoes the colored animated sprites that drift through "Asparagus" as symbols of the imagination, but here they are more harsh and less fantastic. The camera slowly moves down the street and up a building to a broken window frame through which we glimpse a rather broken looking woman. She is clearly in pain. The streams of light in the beginning are revealed to be smoke from her cigarette—not so much light and breath as the vapor of her own destruction and destitution.

This woman lives in a space that is more stark and depressing than the worn down apartment in "Asparagus." Our view at first is limited to a table with a glass of liquor and an old ceramic ashtray made of a cartoonish ceramic mouse filled with cigarette butts. The woman is clearly shown to be at her wit's end. The room spins in uncomfortable repetitive patterns that never resolve into a stable rhythm. She makes phone calls, but no one answers. Her hands caress a cactus (echoing the vegetable fantasy of the earlier film) only to have the thorns pierce her skin. She walks down the hall and flops on her bed like a crumpled forgotten doll.

As this terribly sad moment unfolds, the film cuts back to the living room and the ceramic mouse who "wakes" from the ashtray at the moment the woman falls into a stupor. The mouse literally animates itself, fiddles with the radio until it finds "What A Wonderful World" playing and then dances about the room in a happy crazy cartoon-like way.

As the song ends, the mouse tiptoes into the bedroom only to see the woman lying there with her wrists slashed. Her blood falls on its tiny body and it tries to flee in fear out the window. But it is too small to get it open. It sits and tries to go back to its ceramic form, but can't. Its eyes open, it sees the woman and begins to cry "real" tears. This forms a river which engulfs the woman and carries her away, seemingly dead, along a stream of bloody branches, dead animals, floating debris and buzzing insects. It is as dark a vision as imaginable.

She begins to fall down through the water like a stone when the scene suddenly shifts back into the bedroom. The mouse has become gigantic and is able to force open the window. It lifts the woman (almost like King Kong or the Frankenstein monster holding his bride) and carries her off down the street tenderly holding her dead limp body. They sit on a park bench and it tries to revive her. Finally it props her against a tree, peels a color from its chest and uses it to bandage her wounded wrist. She stirs slightly and a fertile jungle begins to grow around her, finally bringing her back to life. This music sequence isn't the solipsistic mouse dance, but a concert of all the creatures dancing together: An ode to the life force of nature itself.

In the director's notes to the film, Pitt makes clear the symbolic role of the mouse, "the animated characters of the Twentieth Century are simulations aimed to fill a void in the world where the wild state of nature had already been destroyed...dressed in little hats and polka dots, they make us feel we are still surrounded by a natural world of plenitude. Whether this is tragic or wonderful, it certainly is a testament to the ability of the human being to survive through imagination."

At the time Pitt started "Joy Street" she was emerging from her own personal crisis, testing the limits of the struggle among imagination and despair. In the ten years between the two films she moved to New York and participated in the vibrant art scene emerging in Soho, the East Village and the South Bronx at that

time. During this decade of intense activity, she created a powerful series of huge collage paintings as complex and rewarding as her films. In fact, she described them as "animated" in that they provoked the viewer to make repetitive changes of eye movements which replicate the temporal unwinding of film.

The first major painting in the series was "Comic Book Suicide." It contains repainted recycled and mediated icons—fabricated from our common pop culture collective memory—which she reshaped to create associative poetry. In particular, the background was taken from a Superman comic (the buildings, bus crash and tire in the left foreground) and another comic book, "The Enforcers" (the star field). In the foreground are a series of figures from Western art history, including a weeping woman in the center foreground (courtesy of Edvard Munch); a fallen chariot holding Phaeton (taken from a late Rubens painting) and various allegorical figures repositioned from a painting by Mantegna called "The Triumph of Virtue." These figures include a remarkable group of three female figures, two with arms outstretched moving forward, the third holding her babies and circled by angels, and the terrifying tree-woman covered with ribbony text, that Pitt transposed from behind the women in the original, to blocking their way (near the right edge of the frame) in her telling of the tale. Other images come from Bosch (the pale exotic tree from his "Garden of Eden") and a book of industrial symbols signifying various minerals as well as insecticides and sterilizers. Unlike many contemporary





Scene from *Joy Street*



*"Comic Book Suicide," 65"x65", Acrylic on Canvas, 1982.*

artists who simply borrow from the past to create clever formal designs, Pitt transforms these random bits of cultural history and detritus into a powerful allegory all her own. This is clearly now a woman's story, not just a story about women by men. And the tale is almost too powerful to behold. The weeping woman's despair is amplified by the symbols of destruction and flight that engulf her, indicating a world out of control over which individual characters have little choice but to play the cruel hand they are dealt. But as in all of Pitt's most powerful work there is also something cathartic in this despair. It is as if the making of art is the life raft through which the chaos of our inner and outer lives can be navigated.

And the trajectory of Pitt's work seems to affirm this joy, even against the odds. As the '80s wore on, Pitt continued to paint these rich complicated works, based upon a theory of appropriation and simulation. There was nothing in these paintings that wasn't copied from existing pictures. And as she went along the collages became more and more complex and her painting became more and more masterful. The final painting of this series in a way sums up the entire trajectory. It is called



*"Delicate Future,"* 51"x78", Acrylic on Canvas, 1986.

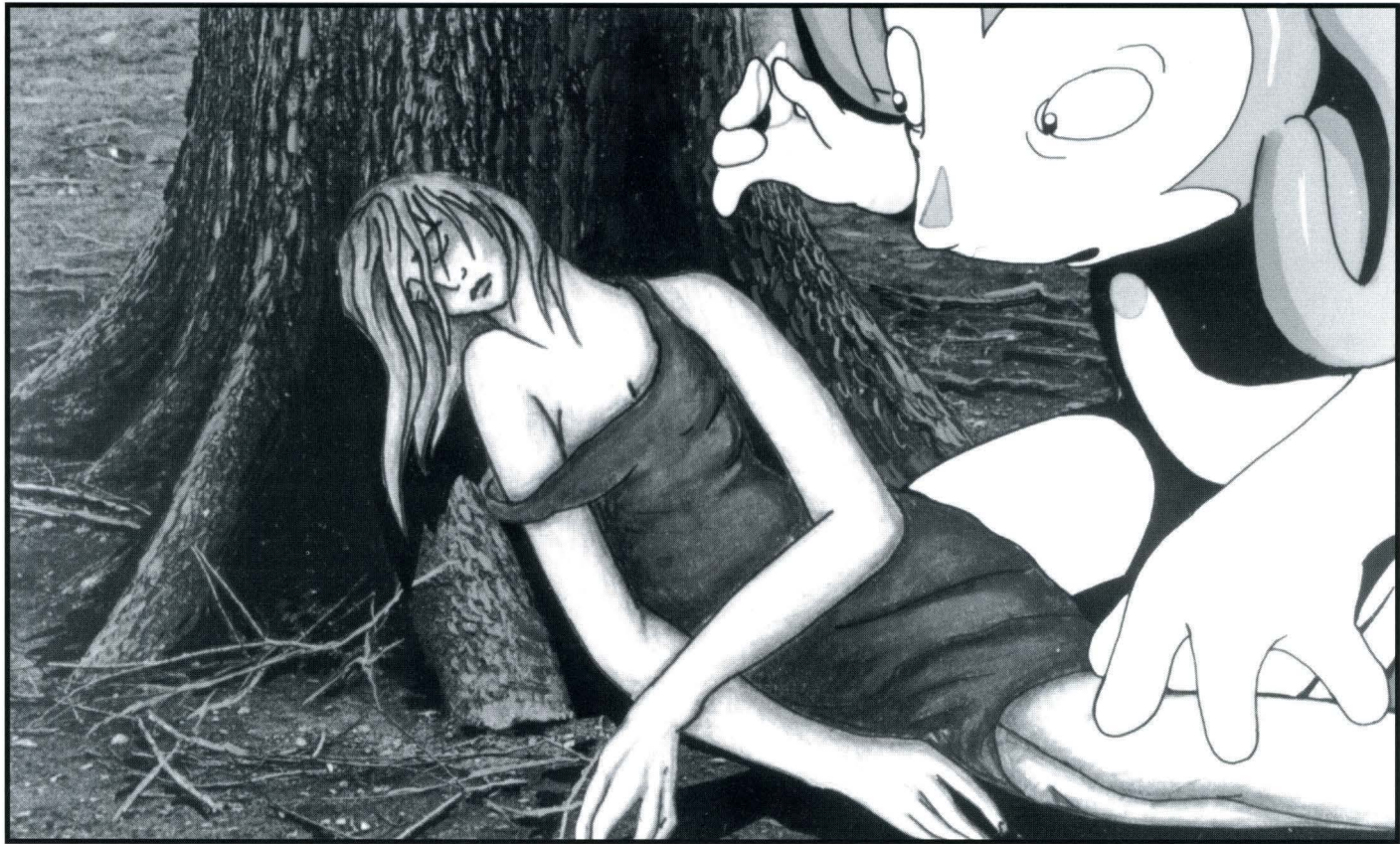
"Delicate Future." In it a huge young girl (taken from a painting by Courbet) gently pours milk into a bowl for a cute little dinosaur. Elsewhere larger dinosaurs (taken from mural paintings in Natural History museums) munch on various plants and flesh. In the foreground there is a large tree with an electrical socket on its trunk and a nest of eggs precariously resting in its thin branches. Plugged into the socket is the tail of a cartoon cat whose upside-down face fills an empty TV screen. On the top of the picture, the letters "KO." are formed by wooden branches, followed by a flaming tire that clearly echoes the tire in "Comic Book Suicide." Read alone the letters suggest "Knock Out." Together with the tire, they spell "KOO," a childish murmur or perhaps the Cuckoo of a crazy cartoon character.

The transformation from existential despair to a future, however delicate, is the overriding theme of Pitt's work. Nowhere is this better or more significantly rendered than in the end of "Joy Street." The moment I stopped telling its story earlier is the same place that Suzan stopped making it during its long four year gestation. She felt the need to take it further. So, instead of copying imagery from other images, she set out into the world to see the last bit of nature left unspoiled on this continent and to draw it as it is. From this she made the rain forest sequence that signifies her character's reawakening at the end of the film. This allows the film not to be just a gesture of survival or hope, but a literal transformation from art (and life?) based upon simulation to one in touch with nature and reality itself. At the same time, in a

characteristically tough gesture, Pitt reaches out to a bit of nature that is rapidly becoming extinct—showing us hope but at the same time how much more fragile our world is than we can imagine to live and succeed in it. When the rain forest dance ends, the woman wakes on her bed, alive, smiling at the antic mouse. She reaches out to touch it as it fades away. She leaps up with renewed vigor, runs down the hall, forces open the window, and stretches her head out into the fresh air; her hair blowing happily in the wind as the sounds of the street surround her.

In the end this film has remarkable weight beyond its slender poetic story and relatively short length. It is as profound an allegory of art and identity as I have ever seen. It also suggests a powerful double catharsis that goes beyond the solipsistic creative and sexual awakening at the end of "Asparagus." The woman needs the mouse (cute little animals being the vehicle of her art as an animator) as much as the mouse needs the woman to breathe life into its static form. But there is even more. This recognition of mutual need and identity has become truly liberating through the identification of the mouse with nature and not just art or self. For Pitt, the mouse symbolizes lost innocence, an amoral childlike state of wonder that we must remain in contact with to preserve the future of the natural world.

Then, after the story ends, almost by surprise, the artist's hand reaches into the film with a paintbrush and draws a prancing horse. This horse runs and frolics joyfully around and around a tiny piece of ground. Happy



Scene from *Joy Street*



"Succulent by the River Sarstoon," 20"X14", Gouache on Paper; 1993.

to be alive even if the world it defines remains circumscribed. And in this sense, we come to understand that a "pit" is really a seed.

John Carlin (c) 1997

Front and back covers show scenes from *Joy Street*

**Joy Street** is available from Bullfrog Films. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547 (610) 779-8826

**Asparagus** is available from the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, Circulating Film Library, New York, NY 10019-5486 (212) 708-9400 or Canyon Cinema Filmmakers, 2325 3rd Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94107 (415) 626-2255

**Animated Films Produced and Directed by Suzan Pitt**

**TROUBLES THE CAT** (1996) (Director), 12 six-minute sequences for the Cartoon Network, produced at the Ink Tank, N.Y.C.

**JOY STREET\*** (1995) 24 min., 35mm, color, for Channel Four, England and PBS, USA  
**COLORS/COLORS** (1995) 1 min. 15 sec., video, color, for the Public Broadcasting System

**BAM VIDEO** (1990) 3 min., 35mm, color, for the Brooklyn Academy of Music

**THE DAMNATION OF FAUST** (1988) One hour, 35mm, color

for the Hamburg State Opera

**SURF OR DIE** 3 min., 35mm, color; A music video for Profile Records, music by "The Surf M.C.'s"

**BIG TIME** (Storyboard and Animation) (1986), 3 min.,

35mm, color; A music video for Warner Records, music by Peter Gabriel

**NIGHT FIRE DANCE** (1986) (Co-direction), 1 min., 35mm. A music video for Columbia Masterworks Records, music by Andreas Volleweider

**ASPARAGUS\*** (1979) 20 min., 16mm, color

**JEFFERSON CIRCUS SONGS\*** (1973) 20 min, 16mm, color

**WHITNEY COMMERCIAL** (1973) 3 min., 16mm, color, for the Whitney Museum of American Art

**CELS** (1972) 6 min., 16mm, color

**A CITY TRIP** (1972) 3 min., 16mm, color

**CROCUS\*** (1971) 7 min., 16mm, color

**BOWL, THEATRE, GARDEN, MARBLE GAME** (1970) 7min., 16mm, color

\* Distributed by the Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C., the British Film Institute, London, Bullfrog Films, and Canyon Cinema

**Film Festivals**

**JOY STREET** (1995) 24 min., 35mm, color:

- 1995 New York Film Festival
- 1996 London Film Festival, England
- 1996 Sundance Film Festival
- 1996 Hiroshima International Animation Film Festival, Japan
- 1996 Cardiff International Festival of Film Animation, England
- 1996 Black Mania Film Festival (First Prize)
- 1996 San Francisco International Film Festival (Golden Gate Award)
- 1997 (Best Short Film) Naples International Film Festival

**ASPARAGUS** (1979) 20 min., 35mm, color:

- 1979 Main Prize and International Critics Prize, Oberhausen Short Film Festival, Germany
- 1979 "Best Film of 1978," ASIFA East Annual Awards (International Association of Film Animation)
- 1979 First Prize: Ann Arbor Film Festival
- 1979 First Prize: Kenyon Film Festival
- 1979 First Prize: Baltimore Film Festival
- 1979 First Prize: Atlanta Independent Film and Video Festival

**Selected Solo Film Retrospectives 1980-1997**

- Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois
- Anthology Film Archives, New York
- Media Study Center; Buffalo, New York
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Museum of Modern Art, Paris, France
- Arsenal Kino, Berlin, Germany
- Walker Art Center; Minneapolis, Minnesota
- The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California
- International Festival of Film Schools, Mexico City, Mexico

**Expanded Film Performances**

- 1980 "Suone E. Imagine," Venice Biennale, Film Performance with composer Richard Teitelbaum, Venice, Italy
- 1979 "Asparagus," Whitney Museum of Art, New York, Film Installation and exhibition of drawings

**Stage and Costume Design**

1988-98 Sets, costumes, and animated films for "The Damnation of Faust" by Hector Berlioz for the State Opera Theatre, Hamburg, Germany. In repertoire 1988

1983-87

through 1998 "Silver Mask" award for stage design from Friends of German Opera, Hamburg.

Sets, costumes and animated films for "The Magic Flute" by Mozart at the State Opera Theatre, Weisbaden, Germany, in repertoire 1983-1993. "Production of the Year Award," Opera World Annual Award, West Germany, 1983.

**Solo Exhibitions of Paintings**

- 1993 Guatemalan American Institute, Guatemala City, Guatemala
- 1986 Gallozzi-La Placa Gallery, New York
- 1984 Cantor/Lemberg Gallery, Detroit, Michigan
- 1982 Delahunty Gallery, New York
- 1981 Galerie Denise Rene/Hans Meyer, Dusseldorf, Germany
- 1980 Galerie Denise Rene/Hans Meyer, Dusseldorf, Germany
- 1979 Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
- 1974 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

**Selected Group Art Exhibitions**

- 1992 The Drawing Center, New York, "Darkness Visible"
- 1988 Institute of Contemporary Art, London, England, "Comic Iconoclasm"
- 1986 Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York "Pop Apocalypse"
- 1985 Schlesinger-Boisante Gallery, New York, "The Layered Image"
- Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, "Otherland"
- 1984 Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, "B Younger Americans"
- Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, "Artists Call"
- Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, "American Women Artists Part II: Recent Generations"
- Galerie Ingstrom, Stockholm, Sweden, "Twelve Artists from New York"
- 1983 Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown Branch, New York, "The Comic Art Show"
- 1980 Hunter College Gallery, New York, "Times Square Show, "
- Gillespie-Leage-Solomon Gallery, Paris, France
- "Trois Dimensions-Sept Americaines"

**Painting Commissions**

- 1996 '36' mural for the U.S. Post Office, Fountain City, Wisconsin
- 1992 "Artists for Nature" -A portfolio of silkscreen prints commissioned by the Columbus Group in Munich, Germany to raise money for rainforest Exhibited at The Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 1986 Artruin, 85 'x7' mural commission, (painted train cars which traveled in the United States during the summer 1986), sponsored by the Michigan Arts Council

**Grants**

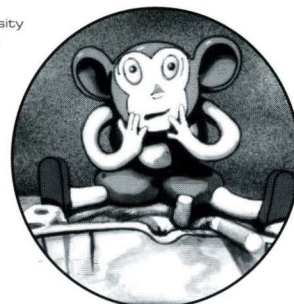
- 1997 Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship
- 1996 National Endowment for the Arts, Public Works Grant
- 1992 Fulbright Scholar Award
- 1992 Bush Foundation Artist Scholarship
- 1986 Hoopes Faculty Prize, Harvard University
- 1988 Media Arts Filmmaker Grant, National Endowment for the Arts
- 1978 Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (D.A.A.D.), Berlin, Artist in Residence Grant, Massachusetts Arts Foundation
- 1975 American Film Institute, Independent Filmmaker Grant

**Teaching Appointments**

- 1987-92 Associate Professor; Harvard University, Department of Visual and Environmental Studies

**Education**

- 1963-65 B.F.A., Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI



Scene from *Joy Street*



Suzan Pitt: Cartoon Wilderness  
Organized by Women & Their Work  
Austin, Texas 1997.

Curator: Nancy Bless  
Project Director: Lisa Tamiris Beck  
Catalogue Design: BAH! Design

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The gallery features ongoing exhibitions  
of Texas women artists and brings a  
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**WOMEN  
& THEIR  
WORK**