

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL D'ANIMATION D'OTTAWA
OTTAWA International
ANIMATION
FESTIVAL

Festival Guide
Guide du festival



SEPTEMBER 23-27

2026

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Showtimes

Friday, Sept 25
9:00 pm
Arts Court Theatre

Saturday, Sept 26
1:00 pm
Arts Court Theatre

Vendredi, 25 Sept
21h00
Théâtre de la cour
des arts

Samedi, 26 Sept
13h00
Théâtre de la cour
des arts

Pastel Dreams

By Alla Gadassik

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The word “pastel” is frequently applied to films that weren’t made with pastels at all. It is used to describe a certain palette or mood – a dreamlike atmosphere achieved through chalky pinks and blues, soft edges, and powdery compositions. Walt Disney Studio’s animated symphony film *Fantasia* (1941) may have set the precedent for this association. To develop the film’s famous “Nutcracker Suite” section, story artists Sylvia Moberly-Holland, Bianca Majolie, and Ethel Kulsar gathered blossoms and weeds from hillsides near the studio and interpreted them in soft pastels as fairies and floral dancers. Their vivid, saturated concept art proved difficult to reproduce with Technicolor film, so the studio’s Special Effects and Ink and Paint departments created an imitation “pastel effect” by painstakingly layering translucent gouaches, stippled inks, and airbrush spray on celluloid sheets. Buoyed by the film’s popularity, the meaning of pastel animation drifted free of the material to become a loose assemblage of qualities like delicate femininity and gauzy reverie.



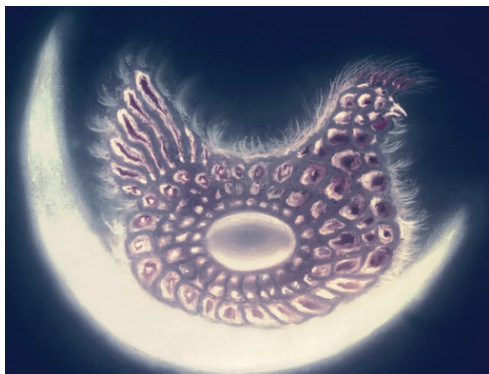
The simulated “pastel effect” in *Fantasia* (1941)

Reclaiming the concrete material that gave rise to the fantasy, *Pastel Dreams* presents ten animated films made with chalk, oil, and wax pastels that reflect the material’s gestural immediacy and chromatic range. Digital films can simulate pastel’s colour palettes and atmospheric effects, but the artists in this program tap into the medium’s cultural history and direct sensory qualities.

Named after a paste (*pastello*) of finely ground pigment held with binder, pastels are essentially handheld sticks of concentrated colour. Giulio Gianini and Emanuele Luzzati’s *L’uccello di fuoco* (*Firebird*, 1981) uses the medium’s chromatic intensity for a spellbinding adaptation of a Slavic fairytale. Paper cutout characters are animated against waxy pastel backgrounds, which are underlit to create a glowing effect reminiscent of stained glass. The film’s visual style is informed by Luzzati’s interest in folk crafts and medieval illuminated texts – traditions in which expensive pigments were not merely decorative but a measure of value and prestige. The film’s lush colours convey the spectacular allure of the magical firebird, but they also endow the allegorical fairytale with the luxury of a sacred altarpiece.

What distinguishes one kind of pastel from another is the substance that binds the pigment into stick form. Norman McLaren’s *La poulette grise* (1947), for example, is the consummate demonstration of soft chalk pastels. The film renders a folk lullaby in the visual style of a schoolhouse chalkboard, on which twilight thickens into night, a glowing moon rounds into a glowing egg, and daytime lessons are abandoned for nighttime dreams. Working with light

hues on black cards, McLaren adjusted and redrew pastel strokes frame by frame, using in-camera editing to dissolve each transitional state into the next in what he called a “mix chain” technique. The cross-dissolves amplify chalk pastel’s powdery effects, so that images drift from one to the next the way clouds form familiar shapes before disintegrating into nebulous vapour.



Luminous chalk pastel in *La poulette grise* (1947)

Joanna Priestley’s *Surface Dive* (2000) enlists chalk pastel for a different atmospheric effect. Inspired by the artist’s experience of sea diving, the film depicts an aquatic milieu populated by primordial organisms. Pastel drawings are overlaid with found glass and polymer clay sculptures on a multiplane stand reminiscent of an aquarium. As the clay figurines twist and coil on floating glass, the hazy edges of the drawings underneath move like diffused shadows on a grainy seabed, scattered by filtered sunlight. Chalk pastel’s softer colours and blurred contours add a sense of depth to the composition, as if the images are submerged underwater.

Where chalk pastel scatters, oil pastel accumulates. In Alisi Telengut’s *The Fourfold* (2020) – animated on a single canvas under the camera – thick strokes of oil pastel are built up, reworked, and combined with moss, stones, and other textured materials. Guided by the voice of the animator’s grandmother describing nomadic land rituals, the film’s layered pastels mark the passage of seasonal and geological time: compositions settle like sediment and wash away like mud, producing a weathered image of planetary forces that carve rivers and move mountains. The pigments that saturate the film, such as azurite blue and viridian green, are themselves made with ground minerals and ores. The film’s portrait of soil, water, and tectonic pressure is sculpted from earthy matter.



Earthy oil pastel in *The Fourfold* (2020)

Pastels do not blend the way wet pigments do. Tonal gradations have to be assembled on the canvas by hatching and contrasting individual hues. Sara Petty’s *Furies* (1977) harnesses the graphic frisson produced when adjacent strokes touch without dissolving. Using chalk pastel on textured paper, Petty animates two felines that arch and rub against a continuously shifting architectural environment. Sharp hatchings bristle like fur and soft smudges move like shadows. The film uses pastel to explore the intertwined relationship between contour and shading, or figure and ground. The animals slink around a restless composition, bodies and surfaces generated by the friction of one stroke of colour pressing against another.

For centuries, chalk pastels were prized for their ability to depict luminous skin and used to capture the cosmetic “bloom” of faces in commissioned portraits. Florence Mialhe’s *Hammam* (1991) transposes this practice to a women’s bathhouse, where the artist’s continual rubbing, smudging, and lifting of pigment keeps pace with the scrubbing and washing of bathers. As each shot is drawn and redrawn on a single paper canvas, visible traces of the animator’s gestures slide across the frame, massaging and powdering the pictorial surface. Dense fields of accumulated colour are periodically covered by white pigment that emulates rising steam veiling the bodies. Nude bathers are rendered in a wide range of shades, recalling an eighteenth-century pastel manual that claimed no other medium “produces tones so true – it is flesh.”

Pastel’s least acknowledged role is as a children’s medium. Wax and oil crayons were first devised to give schoolchildren portable, mess-free colouring materials. For this reason, wax-based pastels are often erased from art historical accounts and “crayons” are dismissed as the stuff of immature art. Yoko Yuki’s *In the Big Yard Inside the Teeny-Weeny Pocket* (2022) embraces that association as its starting point. The film was made primarily with Sakura Cray-Pas, the world’s first oil pastels, which were developed for the progressive “free drawing” movement in Japanese schools. Yuki wields the classroom crayon with unembarrassed

gusto, cramming thick cakey wax pastel, marker, glitter, and craft paints into a whirlwind tour of a world bustling with colourful characters and encounters. Figures and backgrounds shove one another out of the frame, and the result is as exhilarating as a sugar high. The film taps into the magic of early childhood drawing, that sensory joy of dragging a crayon across paper and producing wondrous marks unencumbered by rules and instructions.



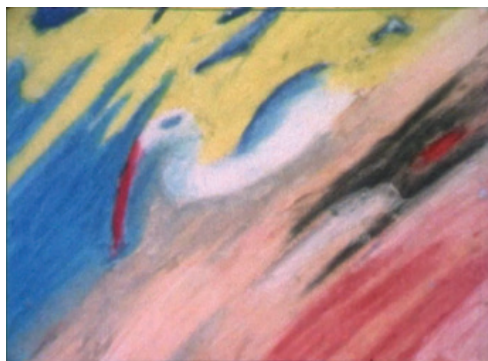
Pastel crayon in *In the Big Yard Inside the Teeny-Weeny Pocket* (2022)

Peter Millard's *Fruit Fruit* (2013) also evokes the loose, playful qualities of uninhibited crayon drawings. Working with oil pastel and acrylic, Millard redraws anthropomorphic fruits with thick, unruly lines that multiply and distort, exploding and reviving his edible characters with the energy of a child who just discovered he is – on paper, at least – a benevolent dictator. Pastel crayons are too blunt and greasy for detailed, obedient drawing, and *Fruit Fruit* uses them to present a mischievous take on the painterly still life. Inspired by Jean-Michel Basquiat's irreverent use of oil sticks and Karel Appel's instinctive handling of paint, Millard's pastel animation conveys the pleasure of colouring outside the lines.

Marcus Armitage's *My Dad* (2014) channels the childhood associations of pastel crayons into a darker coming-of-age portrait. Combining buttery oil pastel drawings with newspaper clippings, the film depicts a father's ethnonationalist sentiments through the eyes of his young son. The child's perspective is established with bright primary hues that depict a vibrant, ethnically diverse neighbourhood marred by racially charged brawls and anti-immigrant protests. The crayon strikes the paper with increasingly aggressive force, until drawings are torn to excise "foreign" neighbours and businesses from the picture. That such violence is carried out in candy-coloured pastels is an effectively unsettling choice. The child's initiation into a racist worldview, as the film suggests, stems from an innocent desire for a parent's affirmation and approval.

Pastel films frequently eschew narrative clarity in favour of associative and improvisational structure. Their soundtracks tend to be sparse in dialogue and

laden with wordplay, musical cues, and atmospheric sounds. In Bärbel Neubauer's *Mond und Tiger* (1984) a hypnotic score composed of gurgling, dribbling sound effects drives the rhythm of improvised drawings. A parade of prehistoric creatures arrives as bare skeletal shapes, gathers greasy flesh, and departs as shadows that seed the next apparition. A long-necked animal bends into the shape of a mountain and pools into a lake, as figure and ground become interchangeable in a creamy primordial soup. The film feels like a hallucinatory vision or a mirage shimmering on a desert horizon.



Dream logic in *Mond und Tiger* (1984)

As a medium, pastel shares certain qualities with dream logic. Its powder coalesces and scatters like a half-remembered image; its soft edges loosen the sharp outlines of waking sight; its densely packed colour carries the sensuous impact of unnamed feelings and nebulous fantasies. Crafted with pastels, the films in this program invite the spectator to dream alongside them.