The worlds of Jennifer Levonian’s new animations evoke a strange familiarity. One feels at home amid the myriad pedestrian objects so exactingly and sensuously depicted while suddenly realizing that this mundane and comfor-
table reality surrounding us is much more odd, much more uncanny, than what we normally see.

In three new short films, Her Slip is Showing and Buffalo Milk Yogurt, showing at the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery through June 12, and Take Your Picture with a Puma, which just completed a month-long installation at the PMA as part of Adelina Vlas’s Live Cinema: Histories in Motion exhibit, Levonian explores the subtle unhings, forgotten hopes and unfulfilled desires of her characters amidst richly wrought landscapes. The stories these films tell through clever paper animation are often funny – during a recent public dialogue between Levonian and Vlas at the PMA the sight of a wonderfully banal animated lawn sprinkler, from Her Slip is Showing, was greeted with uproarious laughter – and the moods produced by the original musical scores are often bright. But the comedy, the brightness of tone, along with the richly variegated hues of the watercolor figures with which Levonian constructs her scenes, is often not to an almost mournful disquiet. When, in Her Slip is Show-

ing, a small bird watches an ant drag a cocktail olive into an ant hill and then expands its “flight feathers” to reveal the text “Goethe’s last words: More Light!”, we might do well to recall Milan Kundera’s darkly comic quip that these words are merely one graphic mark removed from their opposite. Perhaps whoever testified to the poet’s final articu-
late breath heard “Mehr Licht” while Goethe actually said “Mehr Nicht.”

Perhaps we would simply rather hear “Mehr Licht,” and the im-
maculate attention that these films pay to the prosaic details of our everyday experience is related to considered contemplation of the
text, to the kitset that populates our domestic spaces, to the cultural oblivion of party-hungry American tourism, to the false esbenshade nation that Levonian’s characters paint the symmetrical social etiquette – bears witness to the fact that we systematically avoid the more nocturnal side of things. Even if they sometimes go along with all the nonsense taking place on the surface, though, the characters in these films struggle to find a more authentic place in the world and with oth-
ers while being hemmed in by the narrow sense of life that this surface, this façade, demands. Sometimes the façade breaks down.

Buffalo Milk Yogurt deals most explicitly with this crack in the façade of everyday reality. An initial tone of las
titude and ennui is set by Corey Fogel’s musical score, which produces the stylish cacophony of an unpracticed or
erotic fulfillment, two interpretive possibilities present themselves. What

Levonian constructs her scenes, serve as counterpoint to

Buffalo Milk Yogurt, 2010, animation, 7:32 minutes, Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery


does this negation without negation (one can still read, as

texts out, branding them with their own negation. What

other than the quotidian reality of consumer society. Per-

to find a more authentic place in their world and with oth-
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tempt to resign and reconcile himself to the world as it is.

faced with the grilling lines) of philosophical and lit-

erary signign signifcy? Beyond any narrative (or ep-

ochal) expectation of definitive historical, political, cultural or erotic fulfillment, two interpretive possibilities present themselves. Perhaps we have entered the terrain of post-

historical and post-political economic management, and the man has decided to give up any concern with anything other than the quotidian reality of consumer society. Per-

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tempt to resign and reconcile himself to the world as it is.

But the intellectual and cultural literacy of these films makes such an interpretation untenable. This grilled ne-

gation should instead be seen as a liberating gesture, not

from intellectual and cultural passion but for a passion that steps beyond the roles of the 20th century, perhaps even from the 20th century, at some point, famously or infamously, big hopes for politi-
cal change. Beyond these big hopes, beyond the narrative expectation of fulfillment, we might ask about the miss-
ing fourth, as Socrates does in the first line of the Timaeus, 20d-21d centuries...