This movie director's ideas are cast in clay

Will Vinton has molded a successful career in animation

By Hunter Drohojowska

Chris Gulker/Herald photographer

Producer-director Will Vinton, inset, is an acknowledged master in claymation, a technique he uses in his first full-length feature, "The Adventures of Mark Twain by Huck Finn," starring the famous humorist himself. Twain would have approved.

"A man with a new idea is a fool until the idea succeeds," growled Mark Twain. But even the iconoclastic Mr. Clemens, always quick to accept invention, would have considered a new film about his life, "The Adventures of Mark Twain by Huck Finn," to be a daring artistic venture. This is the first full-length feature in "claymation," a technique for animating the characters — Mark, Huck, Tom Sawyer, Becky Thatcher and Injun Joe — in clay. It will premiere tomorrow at 12:30 and 7:30 p.m. at Mann's Westwood Triplex as part of Filmex.

Producer-director Will Vinton is the acknowledged master of claymation, having won an Oscar for his first endeavor, "Closed Mondays," in 1975, and nominations for three subsequent claymation short films. He was in town last week to discuss how he has developed the genre since the 1950s, the start of the Gumby era.

Vinton looked a little out of place in his pink upholstered suite at Le Dufy Hotel. Slightly balding at 37, with a handlebar mustache, twinkling eyes and a range of expressions as mobile as those of his clay figures, he resembled puppetmaker Gepetto more than mogul Steven Spielberg. He has the pleasant, easygoing, small-town manner that must come from living and working in Portland, Ore., just a few miles from McMinnville, where he grew up.

He went to college at UC Berkeley where he studied physics, architecture and film, but after graduation and five years of experience in film production, he returned to Oregon to establish Will Vinton Productions in 1975.

"Clay animation had been written off as crumbly and impractical before we got into it," he said, "but it's a medium as viable as cell animation." Since then, he has made 20 short films, expanded his full-time staff to 20 and is now finishing a project for the king of cell animation: Disney's "Return to Oz," an integration of claymation and other special techniques with live action.

What is claymation? "In its simplest form, it's creating a character or scene out of clay, shooting it, making changes in expression or whatever, shooting it again, frame by frame, just like cell animation." The film about Mark Twain took 3½ years to produce and cost about $4 million, which Vinton claims is considerably less than the cost of an equivalent film in full cell animation. (He points out that Disney's latest animated film, "The Black Cauldron," cost $25 million.)

Animation generally means thinking in terms of visual rather than dramatic skills. But Vinton considers himself to be directing live action in clay. "What makes a good animator is a good actor with a good sense of theater," he said. For "Twain," as for most of his films, Vinton cast "claymators" with an affinity for the personalities of his characters. "For example, Mark Gustafson was perfect to do Huck because he's exactly like that. He knows Huck wouldn't smile and be a goody-goody."

Most of the members of Vinton's staff have been together for years and operate like the repertory cast of a theater. "What makes it exciting is the phenomenon of performing the character," said Vinton. "In each scene, the character has to emote a certain way, the way an actor does.

"There are a lot of parallels to live action," he continued. "We set up a real space and light it, in miniature, of course, but with stage sets and props. As director, I frame a shot and plan it with an animator." Because of the long exposure times, he uses less light and the clay doesn't melt. Ten to 12 scenes are worked on simultaneously, and Vinton reviews the dailies. "We also shoot an entire live-action version (with actors) of the picture before we do the clay version. It helps us minimize the amount of footage that winds up on the cutting room floor."

Vinton's education in architecture is obvious in the incredible detail of the buildings, furniture, trees, clothes and backgrounds. "You enter an entire clay world," explained Vinton, "and you get into the story instead of noticing the different textures."

SHE'S RIDING THE FASTEST ANIMAL ON FOUR LEGS IN ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS EVENTS IN THE WORLD.

A NEW TICKET TO TERROR FROM THE DIRECTOR OF "FRIDAY THE 13TH."

The story of Mark Twain — written by Vinton's wife, Susan Shadburne — is a fantasy account of the author's last journey with the characters in his books on a Jules Verne-type contraption that is half blimp and half river-boat. It is loosely based on the fact that Twain was born at the passing of Halley's comet in 1835, and predicted his own death would come when the comet appeared again, 75 years later. "Every word Twain utters is taken verbatim from his stories or his autobiography," said Vinton. Which leads him to point out another benefit of claymation: its appeal to both adults and kids. "Animation is still strongly imbued with kids' material. But this stuff is a little less reverent in style and seems to have appeal to adults and teens as well. That's why we chose a sophisticated story."

Vinton uses his own three children, ages 12, 19 and 21, as the judges of whether the material spans a wide audience. "But we pretty much please ourselves with the creative stuff. We make films that we enjoy seeing."

Regular visitors to Filmex may remember Vinton from the past. Last year, he showed "The Great Cognito," a short film about a stand-up comic who literally becomes different caricatures of war-mongering politicians. In 1982, Vinton won Filmex's Rosalind Russell Film-making Grant of $5,000 for "Dinosaur." (He was never able to collect the money — "I kept asking them about the award" — but is apparently not the type to hold a grudge.)

"The Adventures of Mark Twain by Huck Finn," however, represents Vinton's furthest advance in claymation. Twain might have approved, since Vinton's new idea has proved to be a success.

"'WITNESS' is the perfect movie...exciting, romantic, and beautiful to look at. Harrison Ford is tough, sexy, and smart in the best role of his career. Harrison Ford is the new Bogart."
—Pat Collins, CBS NEWS

WITNESS