

Falling Down a Strange Rabbit-hole

An Interview with Director and Animator May Kindred-Boothby

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Director May Kindred-Boothby's animated silent short film, *The Eating of an Orange* (2025), unfolds outward from a simple premise involving a stranger giving a young woman an orange. But Kindred-Boothby's graduation film is anything but simple. It's a film layered with metaphors, its imagery communicating to the audience through a dreamlike filter.

In *The Eating of an Orange's* abstract and metaphorical seven-and-a-half-minutes, a large manor house is filled with identical people, who all eat the same, move the same, and look the same. However, the stranger gifting an orange to one of the women disrupts this carefully maintained balance of conformity. The young woman begins to explore this strange orange object—she has never seen an orange before. With what some audiences may see as a science-fiction twist, the young woman is transported into another realm, surrounded by symbols of the natural world. The exploration of the orange is also a journey of self-discovery—the orange is an extension of her sexuality. She is, however, forced to make a choice. She must either discard the orange and return to the only world she has known or take a brave step forward into a future filled with new possibilities.

Bristol-based animator and director Kindred-Boothby previously animated director Matan Rochlitz's 2018 animated short documentary, *I Have a Message For You*, which remembers a story his grandmother told him of a woman who survived being captured by the Nazis. She has directed and animated the music videos for Cosmo Sheldrake's "The Feet are the Link" (2024) and "Egg and Soldiers" (2017), as well as "Swarm Swamp Swim"



Fig. 1 | The woman takes a bite from the forbidden orange that has been gifted to her by a mysterious person in *The Eating of an Orange*, 00:02:30, 2025.

(2019) by Tom Rosenthal and Cosmo Sheldrake, and the official music video for LYR, "Adam's Apple" (2020). These have encompassed a range of styles, from individual mono prints for "The Feet are the Link," a combination of styles for "Swarm Swamp Swim" and a charcoal style of animation for "Adam's Apple."

Speaking with *MSJ*, Kindred-Boothby discussed the gradual slide down the metaphorical rabbit-hole, as she imbues the real world in her films with a deepening strangeness. She also reflected on the influence of dreams on her work, allowing the audience to respond individually to the film's specific themes of shame, social norms, and power, and ceasing to be a person during the making of *The Eating of an Orange*.



Fig. 2 | The woman encounters her sexuality in abstract form in *The Eating of an Orange*, 00:03:09, 2025.

PAUL RISKER: Of all the modes of storytelling, why animation?

MAY KINDRED-BOOTHBY: My mum taught me to draw when I was quite young, so I started off doing illustration and then my BA was in illustration, but I wasn't very good at it. Trying to compact everything that I wanted to say into one image never really worked. Then, when I found out that I could make the illustrations move, I was like, "Oh, my God, this is so exciting," and that's what I've done ever since.

Although it's obviously so much work, it is incredible because it's like you are able to show people your imagination, and to create all these other worlds.

PR: And what's the appeal of the short form?

MKB: Obviously, I'm biased because I make shorts [laughs] but I just think they're great. You have so much freedom within them because you do not have to maintain interest for an hour and a half. So, you don't have to do all the other stuff to make that possible. Instead, you can just focus on a bizarre little idea, and of course, you have a lot more freedom in the abstract.

PR: *The Eating of an Orange* is an abstract work that relies on metaphor, but did you know from the beginning that you'd be pursuing this concept, or did it emerge slowly as the idea and the themes shaped the film?

MKB: Well, what normally happens when I have an idea is that it starts off in the real world and then the more I work on it, the stranger it becomes.

I made the film while I was doing my master's degree at the Royal College of Art, which was heavily research-based. So, I did a lot of reading—mainly queer theory actually, and also queer theory about nature. I had a lot of academic theory rattling around in my head, which I quite like to have when I approach a subject or topic, because it's nice to make something that you feel you're really invested in. Then, the initial question was, how do I condense any of this into a story that will actually make sense? But then, once it began, it ended up flowing in quite a nice way.

It started with the idea of the orange and the giving of the orange to someone who'd never seen one before, who lived in this incredibly clean, very controlled environment where the orange was banned. That represented the natural world and also the character, neither of which were allowed to flourish in this controlled environment. So, that was the core of it and everything else grew around it.

PR: There's a nice moment in *The Eating of an Orange* where the protagonist sneaks off one night with the orange, and you sense the delight and ecstasy of discovery, because the orange is an extension of her own sexuality. And yet, the moment doesn't sacrifice but emphasizes her innocence. The scene has a particular energy, and it juxtaposes with the guilt, shame and embarrassment that society has burdened sex and sexuality with.

MKB: That was definitely the intention. There's so much shame around sex and sexualities, especially around queerness, female sexuality and other forms as well. There's a lot of shame in all of it or an imposed shame and that idea of innocence is definitely

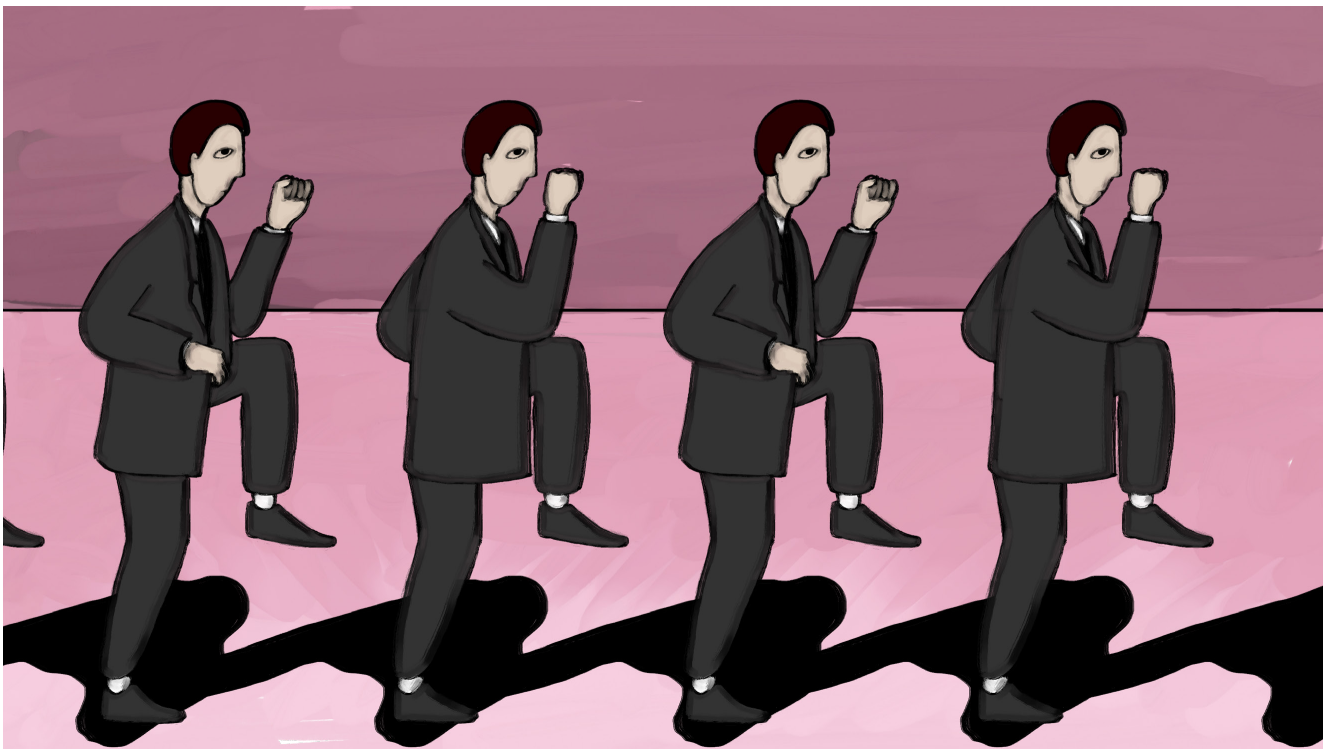


Fig. 3 | The men come marching in in *The Eating of an Orange*, 00:04:11, 2025.

what also drew me to the orange, because what's more innocent than enjoying eating an orange? How could anyone object to that? And it's sort of like the same thing where we parcel off pleasure in different ways, and some of it's demonized and some of it is allowed by this abstract social construct. So, I wanted to make it very playful and innocent.

PR: The audience should pay close attention to the physical movements of the characters, which are an integral aspect of the film. At times, it's as if the characters are levitating, and there is also this otherworldly and spiritual feel to the film. What was your thought process behind these different aspects?

MKB: [...] I wanted the characters other than the protagonist to have quite long necks because they were all spying on each other all the time. So, it was this idea of them peering around corners and always being able to see. In my mind, their necks had evolved because the culture of their world was to always spy on and shame each other—that's one of the things about shame, right? There isn't a force that inflicts this onto someone. It's a social engagement that we do to each other, which is a big part of the story's point.

Then, I wanted the movement of the space itself and her own movement throughout the film, to become more fluid and looser as she begins to think that there's maybe a more fluid way of doing things, as opposed to this binary, black-and-white world that she's been living in.

I'm also just a massive movement geek—I really love it. If I'm ever in a train station waiting for a train, then I'll be looking at how everyone is moving. I think there's so much

characterization in how people walk and move, which is something that we pick up on all the time. These social cues of people's mannerisms and how they present themselves through movement are something that we all make judgments on, and it feeds into our perceptions of people, but on a very subconscious level.

PR: Thinking about layers of consciousness, I've always appreciated the period when you're neither awake nor asleep. It conjures up an array of fascinating imagery that doesn't necessarily form a narrative. Instead, they're a series of free-flowing images that are in a constant state of metamorphosis. I felt *The Eating of an Orange* captured this experience or sensation.

MKB: I have very vivid dreams, and they inspire me quite a lot. I'll sometimes just dream something, and I'll be like, "What the hell was that about?" But these dreams are like amazing visual worlds.

There's something called hypnopompic hallucinations, where you wake up, but one part of your brain is slower waking up, so the dream carries on around you, like it's implanted into the world. I'll wake up and can see the bed, but then past the bed, the dream is still happening. It depends on how sleepy I am, but it takes me a minute, and then I'll think, "Ah, yeah, okay. Now I'm awake. That was a weird dream." And that was the inspiration for the transitions between the two different worlds in the film, which fold together. I was trying to capture that sensation of this liminal, world bending, and dreamy place.

I don't know if you've ever got into dream interpretation, but it can be quite interesting what represents what, but on a

personal level. So, you dreamt of a wolf last night. Well, what do wolves mean to you? From there you can figure out a narrative of what the dream might mean based on your initial responses to it, and I guess that's something that I was trying to do with this film. I was trying to find that balance of saying without saying too much. So, a lot of the symbolism will mean different things to different people, but hopefully, it will get the message across in a lighter way, without being too prescriptive, which I think is how dreams work.

PR: Filmmakers have told me there are three versions of the film—the film that's written, the film that's shot, and the film that's edited. Is there a fourth version that's created by the audience?

MKB: This was very much what I wanted for it, because even though I'm coming at it from my own place, we are all affected by the themes of shame, social norms and power in our own ways. So, I wanted to make something that was about the specifics of what I wanted to make it about, but was also relatable to anyone. I wanted it to be more about critiquing that social construct as a whole, rather than necessarily the specificity of anything that was to do with my experience.

PR: Human beings seek out connection, but these relationships can either be healthy or toxic. *The Eating of an Orange* is an exploration of coercion and control versus freedom for self-discovery and self-growth. The tree is also a powerful symbol of growth that communicates the character's emotional and intellectual experience.

MKB: It was something that I thought about quite a lot because I definitely didn't want to make something that felt like it was anti-community or anti-connection or anti-collectivity, because there are a million different ways of doing that and loads of them are really beautiful. So, I was hoping the woman who gave her

the orange and then disappeared beyond the wall would represent the possibility of that connection that's outside of what she has known. And also, the little slug creatures, the plants and the tree itself, would be another form of an ecosystem. We don't have to reside in a way of living that doesn't work for us—there are other possibilities.

Having made it on my masters, there was a very limited time period. I had so many ideas, like what would happen next after she climbed over the wall and what would she find? In the end, I had to curb my enthusiasm.

PR: How do you look back on the experience of making *The Eating of an Orange*?

MKB: It was very intense because it's a seven-and-a-half-minute animation and I made it in about five or six months. So, I worked for very long days, drawing for fourteen hours a day most days for a large chunk of that time. Looking back, it feels like a strange dream because I was like an animation machine—I ceased to be a person. And I was living on a canal boat in London, in quite a small space, which is beautiful, but also intense in itself. I'd go for walks and think, "There's a world out here." So, it was a very surreal experience and the next thing I do, I'm going to aim for more of a sustainable practice.

PR: What drives you then, as a filmmaker and animator, through all the challenges a film will throw at you?

MKB: People want to make films for lots of different reasons, but one of the reasons why I really love filmmaking is because, like storytelling, it is so powerful, and it can make us reflect on the world. If you can leave people questioning things about the story, then they will also hopefully be asking questions about the world and how we function within it. That, to me, is what makes it really exciting. ■

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