

GRAVITY WAS EVERYWHERE BACK THEN

Director Brent Green's mix of live action and stop-motion photography is what drives this endearing experimental first feature about a husband and wife during the final days of her terminal illness. It's based on a true story, according to Green's narration, of Leonard Wood (Michael McGinley), who undertook the construction of a new, vertical addition to his modest Kentucky farmhouse in order to place the sickbed of his young wife, Mary (Donna K.), "closer to God." Green begins the story as the two meet and takes us through the painful endgame from her diagnosis all the way to her quiet death.

Green employs live actors and an intricately built set, but shoots them frame-by-frame. The result is a stop-motion effect that at once adds a storybook feeling, and when combined with Leonard and Mary's delicate, reserved relationship, something very tender is created. They scuttle around the space in the syncopated rhythm of animation, and they are able to achieve such beautifully supernatural behaviors like swallowing a whole fish during dinner or pulling tiny guardian angels out of the air. Green never forgets about the beautiful optical qualities of each carefully composed frame.

Something about this type of cinematography, though, is inherently creepy. Has the macabre influence of the Quay Brothers forever stereotyped stop motion? Or was it the Nine Inch Nails videos? Either way, a gloom hovers over each scene, and Mary's eventual death is the darkness at the end of an already dark tunnel. Despite Leonard's best efforts, the tale continues to sadden. The near exclusivity of scenes between the young married couple have the great effect of familiarizing their patterns to us so well so that the final loss of Mary is felt even more so by viewers. Her death marks the end of the only relationship we've witnessed throughout the film, and it is all the more visceral for it.

The set design, which Green designed and built himself, is a kind of meta representation of Leonard's own struggles. One of the first things mentioned in Green's voice-over of the real-life Leonard is that he was "running everything down to zero to leave something wonderful behind." It's indicative of the way Green has built his film, staking everything on the homemade magic of his farmhouse set and the simplicity of its inhabitants' story. Green achieves exactly what he set out to do, and despite the quiet simplicity, this film offers a rich, profound experience. *Michael Lee*