

## Moshe Mahler's 'The Art of Weightlessness' braces for upcoming award season

'I learned a long time ago that you want to work on stuff that you would want to see yourself'

**Adam Reinherz** | SEPTEMBER 6, 2024



*Still from "The Art of Weightlessness," courtesy of Moshe Mahler*

After adopting a weighty subject as a passion project, Moshe Mahler is eyeing a potential Academy Award. The Carnegie Mellon University assistant teaching professor's animated short documentary, "The Art of Weightlessness," was named Best in Show at SIGGRAPH,

an Oscar-qualifying computer animation festival.

The Academy will shortlist 15 films in December. Mahler isn't holding his breath.

"I made this film for a very modest amount, and you're often in

competition with films that might have a budget of a million dollars, for example," he said.

There's also the element of "campaigning," he said. Getting the flick in front of as many Academy members' eyes as possible takes

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time and money. Mahler, 43, is “navigating” the process, but said a potential prize wasn’t the reason for making the film.

“I learned a long time ago that you want to work on stuff that you would want to see yourself,” he said. “Yes, you want it to be appealing to other people, but if you work backwards from like, ‘Oh, I’m going to make this because it’s going to appeal to the Academy to win an Oscar,’ that’s a really bad artistic conceptual space to think from.”

Mahler began working on “The Art of Weightlessness” seven years ago. At the time, he was employed by the Walt Disney Company, which had a lab at CMU’s campus.

“I was working on all these corporate projects, and they were fun and rewarding in different ways, but not necessarily creating art for art’s sake,” Mahler said. “I had been looking for something.”

In 2017, Mahler met Bill Shannon, an artist and performer born with a degenerative hip condition who developed ways of expressing himself by dancing and skateboarding on crutches.

The two connected and decided to pursue a documentary project.

Mahler set up a small studio in the basement of his O’Hara Township home and interviewed Shannon. Several hours of footage were paired down to about 13 minutes. Mahler then began storyboarding. Thanks to a grant, he hired a CMU student and narrowed the film to nine minutes — its current length. In 2019, production started. More grants enabled Mahler to hire more students and help the project progress. Finally, in November, the film, which cost \$15,000 to make, premiered at Pittsburgh Shorts, a festival operated by Film Pittsburgh. Several months later, “The Art of Weightlessness” won Best in Show at SIGGRAPH, a festival frequented by artists and researchers.

Mahler, a member of Adat Shalom Synagogue and Temple Emanuel of South Hills, is pleased with the film’s success and said he’s happy people are appreciating its lessons and reconsidering matters of ability and identity.

Within “The Art of Weightlessness,” Shannon describes aging, his

relationship to movement and how skateboarding and crutches enabled expression. The subject’s voice is paired with animated scenes.

Months remain until a shortlist of films is announced for the upcoming Oscars. Last year, 114 films qualified in the category — shorts must be 40 minutes or less, including all credits, according to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Mahler is moving through the process. Where he and his film will land, he isn’t sure. But that isn’t the point, he explained.

“The Art of Weightlessness” spends nine minutes tackling hefty subjects by demonstrating an individual’s lifelong growth.

“I think the big takeaway is that we think of evolution as the thing that takes millions of years across the human race. But I think there’s more of a microcosm of evolution that happens over people’s lifetime,” Mahler said. “That is part of the meaning and the celebration of what life is. It’s not just that life is hard, it’s what makes life compelling too.”

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