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At 30, LIFT is a local treasure and a global resource

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The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto screens 30 shorts from local talent to celebrate its anniversary

Grainy black-and-white footage from London's Soho, circa 1950s perhaps, shows a blonde bombshell strip-teasing with flourish. Dull-looking men perched around nightclub tables are watching. Staged for the movie camera, the performance is a wonder to watch in its now outdated formality and statuesque posing.

Bookending this scene are grainy, home-movie shots of villas in an Italianate countryside, suggesting a life of prestige and luxury.

This is *The Grand Design*, a film by the prolific, Toronto-based filmmaker Midi Onodera, that tells the tale of an old woman who took brazen risks in her youth while seeking a kind of fame which eluded her. It is a dry, short film, likely to go down as one of the most memorable of the 30 short films commissioned by Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto for its 30th anniversary.

The artist-run co-op - like many of the acclaimed filmmakers who have walked through its doors, from experimentalists such as Ms. Onodera to feature directors such as Bruce McDonald and Atom Egoyan - is so treasured within Toronto's film community that it's easy to take it for granted.

LIFT offers equipment rentals, filmmaking classes and a place for filmmakers to meet and feel a sense of community. It played a central role, for instance, in the wave of new narrative filmmaking in Toronto in the 1980s, not only for equipment, but simply as a place for filmmakers to crash. Today, despite the many workshops open to the public and its staff's deep technical knowledge, do-it-yourself is still LIFT's *raison d'être*.

This week it is hosting three nights of screenings at the Art Gallery of Ontario's Jackman Hall to show commissioned works from the sort of directors die-hard cinemathèque habitués namedrop. People like the self-analytical Alan Zweig or avant-garde experimentalists R. Bruce Elder and Mike Hoolboom.

Or Chris Kennedy, who was a programmer for Toronto's Images Festival from 2003-2006 and whose eight-minute short *Towards A Vanishing Point* is a trip to Mexican pyramids through an abstract filter of lunar landscapes and other starkly juxtaposed images. The mid-century, abstract feel is spot on.

The new commissions are meant to capture the spirit of Super 8, the film stock used for generations of home movies and student film classes. For most, Super 8 harks back to the past, even to an era when filmmaking co-ops like LIFT were pretty much the only way for young or first-time directors to make a film.

The commissioned artists were given no other guidance. Beyond the Super 8 look, the idea is to show where their work is currently at. It's "really a snapshot of where 30 artists are now," said executive director Ben Donoghue.

All the filmmakers have been members or have had some contact with LIFT over the years. Rising rent pushed LIFT out of its old facility near other arts institutions in Liberty Village in 2008 and into its new site at Dupont and Dufferin streets, where it has a larger workshop space and an expanded digital-media lab.

Yet film-based equipment and filmmaking workshops remain a mainstay, as reflected in the 30 films. Mr. Kennedy, for one, is interested in enlarging grainy images in his work (such as the shots in *Towards A Vanishing Point* of tourists climbing down the pyramids) in ways only possible with film. "For me, it's not really nostalgia," he says. "I mean, I'm in my 30s. So, nostalgia to me would be a VCR."

For Toronto-based Tess Girard, whose five-minute *Just Passing Through* trains its eye on the details of landscapes, working in Super 8 for the project did feel like old times. "I haven't shot Super 8 since film school," she says. "For me it was a really good opportunity to get back to that more organic look of filmmaking in Super 8."

The same for Mr. Hoolboom, whose eight-minute *Forest Walk* is a meditation on a stroll with father and son. Known primarily as an experimentalist in video, Super 8 for him got back to his earliest exposure to films as a kid.

With the increasing prevalence of digital tools in filmmaking, Mr. Donoghue says that the co-op now has to cater to our digital times. However, with its cinematic cameras and other film-based filmmaking tools on hand, LIFT has become a rare resource for directors from around the world still working in film.

"Although we are now fully digital - we've supported [high-definition] video for the last few years - we do have some really unique film-based facilities, from optical printers to 14-foot, 4,000-pound animation stands," Mr. Donoghue says.

"As that equipment is becoming rarer internationally, we're seeing not just local filmmakers, but national and international folks travelling to use equipment. Over the last month, we've had a filmmaker here from Seoul, South Korea - we had the closest [optical] printer he could find to do the work he needed to," he adds.

In recent years, film art has moved into gallery installations as much as regular cinema screenings. "So if you go to the Power Plant [gallery] and see a 16-mm projection and loops, or at the AGO or a lot of the TIFF [Bell Lightbox] installations that are on film, that's all equipment we're building, maintaining and installing in galleries," Mr. Donoghue says. LIFT gets roughly half of its funding from public grants and the other half from fees and other self-generated revenue.

Mr. Hoolboom adds that "what's been unusual to see in the last half-dozen, maybe ten, years or more has been the explosion of artists' film and video work in the galleries."

This has made the expertise of filmmakers and technicians using LIFT all the more important. "It's a knowledge that's passing away," Mr. Hoolboom adds. But as seen in the commissioned work, it's a format that still very present.

30 x 30: Three Nights of Films for 30 Years of Filmmaking is a three-night series of shorts running Jan. 19 - Jan. 21, 8 p.m., at the AGO's Jackman Hall, 317 Dundas St. W. Admission is \$8.

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