

Midi Onodera talks with Laiwan

From The Displaced View

Midi Onodera was born in Toronto and currently lives there. With many short experimental films behind her, she came to Vancouver in March to premiere her latest film, *The Displaced View* at Pacifica Cinematheque.

Onodera describes *The Displaced View* as "a celebration of the acceptance of self, not only as a Japanese Canadian, but as a woman, person of colour, lesbian, immigrant." *The Displaced View* is an accomplished film that conveys the complexities that construct personal identity and cultural definition. It succeeds in articulating and making visible issues important to the lesbian and gay community with its relationship to the Japanese, and thus, Asian and ethnic communities. It is an important film that can now be cited within a small but growing list of works relevant to our search for identity by lesbians of colour. It is an honest, direct, compassionate love letter.

Laiwan: How would you describe your politics?

Midi: Well, when I was coming out about ten years ago, I was just in art college and the way I came out was not of my choosing.

I was in a gay art show and it got reviewed in *The Globe and Mail*. I was really surprised it was favourable. I was hoping my parents would not see this. A few weeks went by, and I thought, "Oh good, I'm safe now."

Then suddenly, because my parents ran a flower shop, one of their customers came in and said, "Oh, congratulations on your daughter's success." So of course they went through all the old newspapers and found this review. Then they were saying "What is this article?" and I was not prepared to say, "Well, I'm gay" but was forced into saying it and they were very, very upset.

Then for a long time my mother just said, "Oh, you're a feminist, you're not really a lesbian. Do you know what a lesbian means?" That went on for quite a while.

The people I was hanging around with at the time were almost lesbian separatists and I couldn't really see myself going in that direction so I would have these huge arguments with them. I didn't see another way of being lesbian because these were the role models I had.

They were into Holly Near or whatever music, and I was into bleaching my hair and wearing motorcycle jackets. As well I would go to bars and would be the only Asian there and that was quite strange. I knew there were support groups but I never really wanted to join these. So after I broke away from the lesbian separatists, I never really got heavily involved in gay politics. I think it's not only gay sexual politics I'm interested in, there are certainly issues of race.

Laiwan: I feel, for me, it's more like trying to define oneself or one's culture. Being in Canada, being born in Africa and just trying to reconcile the fact that I'm not really "Chinese". But also I'm not any other that has been defined, and so having to redefine oneself because of all the disconnections that have happened over generations like parents moving, grandparents moving. For me, that's what I'm trying to do in terms of some parts of my political work. I think it's very important.

Midi: It's like bringing it all together as far back as you go...

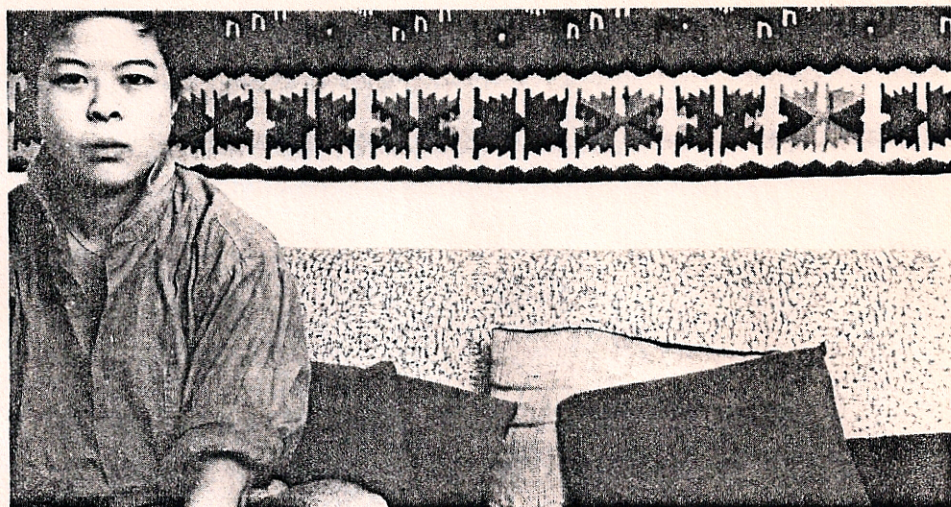
Laiwan: Understanding where one comes from...

Midi: Exactly! Certainly for *Displaced View* I drew on my experiences of coming out as a lesbian and realising there were a lot of prejudices I was faced with in the gay community, and drawing a parallel to see the similarities with what my parents went through in trying to assimilate into "normal, white" culture.

Laiwan: You said in your film, "To fight for my sexuality I landed up protecting my culture." Would you say you discovered more of your culture?

Midi: I would say it made me more interested. Certainly I did the film as a statement to the first generation, to people like my grandmother. But more so, it was like a journey or process for myself to come to grips with all these different parts of myself. Although I don't think the issue of sexuality really comes across very strongly in the film, I didn't want to overshadow the issue of culture.

Laiwan: I think it worked well. Sometimes



cultural aspects should be put forward strongly, as one can make other films on sexuality.

Midi: Yeah, I did, and because *Ten Cents a Dance* was so oriented in sexuality and communication, I really wanted to do something totally different. I couldn't stand the idea of being forced to do a piece of work that says obviously, this person is a gay artist. I just don't want those labels.

Laiwan: The dangerous part is to be ghettoised into a specific area of filmmaking. Just because you're a lesbian doesn't mean you have to make films about being lesbian all the time.

Midi: Right.

Laiwan: Which filmmaker has most influenced you?

Midi: I think there are so many. I really like the work of Chris Marker and his film *Sans Soleil* was so moving and beautiful. I was very influenced by that film for *Displaced View*, with his treatment of the "outsider" and culture and interpretation, and I wanted it to be that rich in terms of colour and form. I don't know, I also like Paul Morrissey. There are a lot of filmmakers I like.

I'm beginning to see a lot more commercial work, but not that I really like it.

Laiwan: Have you been back to Japan?

Midi: No, never been back to Japan. One day, I'll get there. Certainly I hope that *The Displaced View* will go there. I certainly have a desire, but it's strange because my parents have absolutely no desire to go, and it's because of how assimilated they are. I think because of the film getting more notice in the Japanese community, it's pushing my parents to go forward to become active, because it doesn't look good if they're on the sidelines and I'm doing all these community things.

It's strange also because if you're white hardly anyone says, "Oh, have you been to say, Ireland?" It's again because our physical make-up that people are always asking, "Where are you from? Have you been to so-and-so?"

I know I won't fit into Japan at all, but I would still find it interesting. From doing this film (*Displaced View*), I know these are my roots and it sort of stopped when my grandmother and grandfather came over.

Laiwan: I think the difficulty of people like us who have been displaced is that you are no longer "Japanese" as I am no longer "Chinese". People say, "Oh, you're Chinese" and expect all these other things come along with you like a package. It's not so because you're not defined that way any longer. There's been a series of movements where I'm no longer at that point where I can say, "I'm Chinese." For me, being born in Africa, I could call myself "African", but if I did, people would say, "Well, you're not black". It's all these assumptions people have about what one should look like. I think to be third generation

Japanese Canadian, to be displaced for so long, the generations within that situation have to be defining or developing for themselves what culture means to them.

Midi: Exactly, and for me, sexual orientation is a larger part of that. I don't see myself as only a lesbian filmmaker, or only a Japanese Canadian filmmaker. It's all one and I can't cut off one side of myself. On the other hand, last night (at the film screening) I was thinking, should I say I'm gay, knowing that the audience was almost all Japanese, and if I do what does this mean? I realised I guess I do have to say that. Every time I do, it's like coming out all over again and it's the same fear of being rejected or being shut down because of sexual orientation. I'm glad I did it, but it's still like, "Oh, my god!!!"

Laiwan: What are some of the difficulties of being lesbian in the Japanese community?

Midi: Oh, god!!! I don't think that the Japanese Canadians deal with sex at all as any kind of issue.

Laiwan: I think it's the same with the Chinese.

Midi: When Richard Fung* and I were talking about the film, and how he was dealing with sexuality in his work and how I wanted to approach it in mine, we came up with the same thing. It's like, it's fine as long as you don't talk about it. It makes one nervous about presenting that whole side of oneself. I'm not sure how the Japanese Canadian community would react to *Ten Cents a Dance*. It deals entirely with sexuality and as well I'm in it, so I'm representing them in a way because the image of Asians on film is minimal still.

Laiwan: What is a future project?

Midi: It's really in the early stages. I'm just starting to write again. I'm interested in having characters in the film who are Asian/North American, but I don't want to make that a central issue. I want a more multi-dimensional character on screen. I am doing something for the CBC, it's a series called "Inside Stories" which is an anthology series about different communities in Toronto. The story I did deals with a father/daughter relationship. The father is an extremely stubborn person and has been influenced by the war almost to the degree that he alienates his daughter. The daughter breaks away and comes out, writes a book dealing with her feelings about her father, then they get back together. I think it was difficult for CBC to have gay content within an ethnic community, but I'm glad they're having the courage to hopefully go through it.

Laiwan: So the characters are Asian...

Midi: And there's that lesbian Asian character!! The sexual orientation of that character is not the central focus. The central focus is her coming to terms with her culture through her sexuality. Hopefully, it'll get on the air.

*VIDEO ARTIST: RICHARD FUNG

Richard Fung is a video artist from Toronto. In October 1987, he, with filmmaker Midi Onodera, curated *Underground Canada* for Canada House, London, England. This exhibition was a controversial program of film and video made by Canadian lesbian and gay artists.

Fung wrote in his curatorial statement: "When I began looking for recent gay and lesbian video for showing in London, I had few assumptions about the kind of work I would discover.... I expected to find a lot more, to uncover new works, perhaps. This was not to be. The overwhelming reality is that, in Canada, independent video on lesbian and gay themes is by a small handful of artists in a few major cities, most notably Toronto.... I was not prepared for an almost complete absence of work from the Prairies, and so little from Vancouver, Montreal and Halifax. These cities are noted for their vibrant gay as well as art communities."

"Unfortunately, I was not surprised that there was much more work by men than women and almost nothing by people of colour. There is, of course, a question of working priorities. Issues of gender and race override those of sexuality for some producers. More significantly, however, is the limited accessibility of resources to women and people of colour in the art world. This is a well known fact seldom acknowledged fact."

"Economics is just one factor that allows gay men a higher profile than lesbians. Since the late seventies there has been a growing gay male presence on television and mainstream movies. AIDS has added an unfortunate dimension to this visibility. Though lesbianism continues to feature in pornography geared to heterosexual men, they receive only recent and limited attention in Hollywood. They almost never appear in the circuit of comedies and soaps on which gay men have become a common, if token and problematic, presence."

Richard Fung has produced videos that importantly explore various facets from his experience as a gay, Chinese, male artist. *Chinese Characters and Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Asians* both premiered in Vancouver in 1987 in two different programs, Visual Evidence and Asian New World, at the Video Inn. Hopefully, both Richard Fung and Midi Onodera will return to Vancouver in the near future to present more of their own work and possibly, curatorial projects.

Laiwan