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# ***BETWEEN THE LINES***

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**MIDI ONODERA**

**KINGSTON  
INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL  
VISITING  
FILMMAKER**

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## A Recovery Process

Visiting filmmaker Midi Onodera talks about finding an identity through film.

by Patsy Kotsopoulos

"Am I a Japanese-Canadian or a person of Japanese descent?" asks filmmaker Midi Onodera in her 1988 film *The Displaced View*. While the film is a personal exploration of Onodera's own identity, its theme of cultural displacement speaks to the experiences of many Canadians who are, like Onodera, the children or grandchildren of immigrants.

"Finding an identity through film is something that I'm interested in," said the Toronto-based filmmaker in a telephone interview last week. *The Displaced View*, one of the films featured at this year's Kingston International Film Festival (Nov. 1 - 4), was a result of that interest.

"Racial identity never really played a large part in my analysis of who I was because I did grow up in practically an all-white neighbourhood; I didn't have very many Japanese-Canadian friends," offered Onodera. Making the film was, she said, a part of a "recovery process", an attempt to come to grips with her cultural identity.

Part of this process involved recovering the suppressed history of the Japanese in Canada. Their internment by the Canadian govern-

ment during WWII and the effects of this on one family are subjects of the film.

And while Onodera's own mother and grandmother play important roles in *The Displaced View*, she was quick to point out that the film is a "fictitious construction". Onodera explained that although the stories recounted in the film are indeed true, and they actually happened, she has "taken other peoples' stories and molded them" to create a fictional narrative. "I'm using real people like my grandmother, my mother and myself in the film as vehicles in which to explore those stories."

"Finding an identity through film is something that I'm interested in."

- Midi Onodera, filmmaker

In this way the film is, according to Onodera, "a slice of oral history" rather than a representation of documentary truth. Indeed the film is as much about the practice of documentary filmmaking as it is about Onodera's quest for a cultural niche.

"The film is a comment on the documentary form. We still view documentaries as the truth. We

view it as more authentic than dramatic or narrative films," said Onodera. In *The Displaced View*, the filmmaker challenges those notions, using documentary conventions (e.g. "real" people instead of actors, "facts" rather than fancy; footage that looks "found", not staged, etc.) to present a fiction.

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Onodera is among several visiting filmmakers to the Kingston International Film Festival. She will be participating in a panel discussion on race representation, and will present a paper on the roles of experimental filmmakers, women of colour and lesbians in independent film production. She will also speak on the relationship between political ideology and personal filmmaking as it relates to her own work.

"As an independent filmmaker, I'm interested in confronting my worst fears through film - [my work] does come from the personal - although the political is certainly a part of that. But, on the same end," said Onodera, "I don't believe in films that insist that they're promot-



Onodera's grandmother and mother in *The Displaced View*.

ing social change. Films which use the medium as a political tool."

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*The Displaced View* is billed as part of the festival's "Made in Colour" series as well as its "Women Filmmakers" series. Onodera expressed concern about such categorization, saying, "As far as the film festival circuit goes, there's always that tendency to categorize.

For me, I'm a filmmaker first and foremost. All of the other things - my being a Japanese-Canadian, being a woman, being a lesbian - are all influences that affect me and it's in my work.

"So as far as people slotting other people into categories, it's an easy thing to do. It's easy to say 'She's a woman filmmaker' and create a panel of discussion around that. But you always have to go back to the work."

Midi Onodera's next project, a feature that addresses the (de)construction of gender identity, is called *I.D./I Am*.

MICHELLE McLEAN