Keeping It Real at the Reel Asian Film Festival

by Catherine Hernandez

The Toronto Reel Asian Film Festival is unlike any other film festival in Toronto. Films from all over the world are shown here with the common denominator being that they feature the work of an Asian artist (be it the director or the talent) or that they tell our stories from our point of view. That means no *Snow Falling on Cedars* or *Miss Saigon* stories that are filtered through a stereotype for the sake of commercialism. These are our stories.

The energy at the Reel Asian is incomparable. Does the Toronto International Film Festival have devotees slurping noodles to the sound of the Bee Gees? I think not. And at every showcase, you were guaranteed audience members cheering for their colleague's work.

It was the perfect place to track down two Asian female directors to get the scoop on their art and their inspirations.

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Midi Onodera

With eyes weary and bums sore, it became obvious that most of the people coming to see the spotlight on Midi Onodera's collection of work had already sat through the previous 86 minute long film. Although sleep had beckoned and dinner was delayed, they did not want to miss this. Thank God they didn't.

What followed in the darkness of that theatre was a lesson in the artistic process. At first, I did not know what to make of Midi's pieces. We as an audience wanted to make sense of what we were seeing; perhaps finding a story where there was none. But with each piece, there was a different convention or tool she was experimenting with and with each tool, one could sense the progression of the artist behind the work. *The Bird That Chirped on Bathurst* used cacophonic sounds intercut with repetitive images that at times tried my patience. *The Displaced View* and *Slightseer* played with the use of subtitles; the latter using brail. *Ten Cents a Dance* used the split screen in order to convey the disconnection between parties; be it between two potential lovers or between a phone-sex worker and her client. Now, Midi is starting another journey, this time into the realm of digital technology, using digital toy cameras and creating DVDs. Her newest project, released late 2001, is *Alphagirls: an interactive DVD*, which features Canadian performance artists exploring the medium of digital technology.

We met at her studio one rainy November night to discuss her work and the artistic process.

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Is experimentation important to you as an artist?

I think art is about challenging yourself as well as challenging your audience. So I think that if you're not pushing on a creative level and an artistic level by experimenting with different ways of working then your work becomes static; for me I always want to push myself. It's the only way that I'll be able to break through to something.

How do you keep that creative spirit alive?

I think I'm really attracted to technology. In the earlier films that you saw, I used quite formal film elements, but now it's to the point where I'm playing with the digital realm.

You have cast yourself in many of your films and the audience is sometimes confused as to whether you are sharing your experiences as Midi or if you're serving as the actor. How do you feel about blurring the line between the private and the public?

Well as an independent filmmaker, I feel my work is quite personal even though I may not be in the films themselves or it may not directly be an experience I've had. But somehow it has to be filtered through someone. And of course, I'm the maker of these films so it's filtered through me.

What advantages and disadvantages does future technology hold for artists like you?

I think it can't be ignored. We're almost at the stage now where film is veering into a sentimental or an over romanticized form. It's far too expensive to just use film as a forum to communicate your ideas. I think there's so much technology that makes image making really accessible that it's very exciting. And I think that artists and emerging artists should feel really excited around this time. When I started making films, Super 8 was the format to use because it was so cheap. You could make your mistakes, you could make a film over the weekend, and you didn't need a crew in order to figure out what you wanted to say. But I also think that you have to know the past. Film has a history of over a hundred years. If you say you are a filmmaker but work in video, you should have a strong background in film.

One of the common features of performance art is the lack of repeat performances and its exclusivity (in regards to location and audience). What inspired you to use such a modern medium for performance art in *Alphagirls*?

When the [DVD] format was first brought out in the commercial realm, I explored it as far as what was technically possible. I discovered there were so many ways one could utilize that form and do it in a very non-linear way. I think I'm attracted to non-linear forms to begin with so the format seemed absolutely ideal.

And how did the performance artists react to this? Had they had any experience with this technology before?

No. None of them. It was interesting...basically they left all the technical concerns up to me. They came up with ideas based on themes I had laid out for them. I also chose artists whose work was extremely different from each other so that it's sort of like a sampler. So if you're not familiar with performance art, you can experience it for the first time this way.

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What is the importance of the Reel Asian Film Festival to you? Do you think that if more experimental films were widely accepted by other festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival, that the Reel Asian would still exist?

I think that festivals like Reel Asian are important because they bring people of a specific community together. I'm kind of pro and con about festivals. I'm pro because they are necessary but also con because they are necessary. I think it's important to have your work seen in as many different places as possible. What I would hate to see are mainstream festivals saying, "We don't have to program any Asian work or gay and lesbian work because they already have their own festivals."

Catherine Hernandez is a performer and writer that works out of Toronto. She is currently working on a novel about the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during WW2. Check out her website at www.boomwallah.com/kating.

Mark McNeilly is a Toronto-based photographer. You can check out his other pix at his website, www.boomwallah.com.

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