



... Words from a Sansei.

by Francie Duran

Midi Onodera is a Toronto based artist. She has made 18 short films all dealing with issues of isolation through sexuality and ethnicity. Her work is minimalist in design and often combines documentary elements with those of fiction.

The Displaced View began because Onodera felt the need to address her cultural history in terms of the internment of the Japanese and Japanese descendants living in Canada during World War Two. As a third generation Japanese Canadian (Sansei), Onodera examines the relationship between the three generations, her's, her mother's (the second generation, Nissei) and her grandmother (first generation, Issai) in an experimental documentary format.

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What were your goals and priorities before the film was made and how did they evolve into the film, if they did change?

I wanted to address the Japanese community. They were my priority audience even though it's obviously designed for a universal English speaking audience. It's designed in such a way that the Japanese audience is the more privileged audience. For instance, my grandmother's first language is still Japanese, even though she has lived in Canada for over 80 years. It doesn't mean that she doesn't understand English but that's her primary language. That's the same for a lot of people in her generation and that's the audience I wanted to focus on. Hence the subtitles down the side and the lack of translation of the spoken text.

I thought that that really added to the film. I'm so sick of seeing concessions made for English speaking audiences.

The thing that I really hate about films that deal with other cultures is that they always have this heavy droning voice over. It's this very academic sounding, usually male voice explaining what is happening in this picture. I think that that is condescending. I think that Canada has a very diverse culture and although English is our primary language I don't think that we should exclude the other languages involved. So it was part of the process for me to focus in on that primary audience but then as well comment for myself on the inability to understand that language. So its sort of double edged. Because I'm third generation I don't speak Japanese. In the film I talk about the lack of communication. It goes beyond words, beyond language and I think that in a close family arrangement or whatever, you break beyond that element of language and go beyond it and you have a sort of basic or pure communication. That's the other thing that I was trying to get at by presenting it to an audience that was not Japanese speaking. They felt the same sort of uneasy feeling that I feel when I hear Japanese. Language is a barrier. So the goals didn't change. As well, I utilized the form of documentary. That was very important to me because I wanted to involve as many people from the Japanese communities across the country as possible. I wanted to have the sense that it was a community based project. We conducted interviews across the country, we went back and shot in BC through the Rockies and it involved people in those various communities.

What was their response to the film?

Very good. There was one section in the film where it's dealing with a small community of women in the interior of BC, a place called New Denver. That was one of the campsites and it's about the only place now that there are Japanese Canadians living there from the wartime.

It was an internment camp?

Ya. When I first went for the research trip in the winter it was hideously cold and I'd never been in the mountains before. It was quite an experience. They were quite nice. I think that because I'm Japanese and because the Japanese community in Canada is so small everyone knows each other or knows of each other. They were very, very supportive of what I was doing in the beginning but didn't quite understand what I was doing. When I went back and showed them the film before I'd actually officially premiered, I took it back myself and they just loved it. They loved seeing themselves. They loved the fact that their boat was being used in that shot. They loved seeing themselves go through a daily kind of ritual and I think they felt validated in a certain way to see themselves like that. I think that they were very pleased by the project.

As a filmmaker you have a tremendous amount of control over your subjects. How did this effect your responsibility as a film-maker as to the stories that you were telling? I mean you must have, well you had a very personal connection to them because the stories are about your mother, grandmother and yourself.

The whole thing about using a documentary format is that when people look at documentary or cinema verite they look at it as truth, as this is really what happened. Even if you are involved in film yourself there is always that unconscious feeling that it is somehow more truthful. What I was trying to do in *The Displaced View* was almost dispel and highlight those notions of truth because although the stories are personal... some of them are personal, a lot of them are from research. What I've done is I've cre-

ated a fictitious family that sort of represents the different generations. I didn't find that I had a moral obligation to represent an individual as, this is their story, this is their past. It is a collective kind of experience that I then ordered in terms of the generations.

It must have been a relatively difficult process to make the film, I would assume anyway. Did you find that that was a good distancing device to actually get through the project? You mentioned spending years researching and years that you'd wanted to make the film.

Because of my previous work I had never tackled anything as ambitious as *The Displaced View* until that time. It was travelling across the country, it was using crews from different provinces, it was a lot of incredible work. In terms of my other films... they don't really deal a lot with racial or cultural identity. Mostly they deal with sexuality and alienation and the feeling of being an outsider. So the only sort of major leap I suppose I had to make with *The Displaced View* is the fact that these people were related to me or I was more responsible to that community because of my family ties. I did still feel like an outsider because I never really as a child had a lot of involvement with the Japanese community. I am Japanese physically if you look at me and I'm accepted. Internally I still felt that I had a lot of things to work out in terms of trying to understand their point of view, especially since it was 40 years ago, during the war. I've never been through a war and I certainly don't know what that experience is like. I don't know what that experience is like in terms of the breaking up of a family forcibly. So it was very difficult for me to place my 1980's perspective into what they were doing 40 years ago. Then I realized through the process of the film that I can't do that, I will never know what it was like. I can listen to the oral history, I can interview the people, I can be there in that location, but still I will never know what it was actually like. But I will know a certain amount of oppression that I face in 1988 or in 1990. Maybe it's not the same kind of oppression that they faced 40 years ago but there is still this link. It is still the sense of being an outsider.

You told me before that you made the film primarily for members of the Japanese community, so optimally what context would you like your film to be viewed in, or does it matter?

Well, you know they always say any publicity is good publicity. You see again with my other films, *10 Cents a Dance* for instance, took off and that sort of put me on the map.



from **The
Displaced
View,**
M. Onodera
Productions,
1987.

I suppose. There's always the tendency for people to want to categorize you and want to place you in certain pockets. If you expand out of those pockets then that's not very good and they call you a sell out or whatever. A few weeks ago I was doing this panel at Innis and one of the questions was: When did you move out of experimental film to documentary?, and I said: well I never moved. I'm still an experimental filmmaker. A lot of people viewed *The Displaced View* as selling out, selling out artistically because it implemented the documentary format so then they began to call me a documentarian. But I don't view it that way at all. I view it that I'm an artist who is using film to express my views. And documentary is one part of that and it's not a straightforward documentary by any means. It's utilizing the different genres at what point you want to. It's figuring out what audience you want to address and then utilizing the genre, utilizing the form, utilizing film. Ideally I would just like it to be seen in terms of a general audience. I hate the idea that things are categorized in terms of, like lesbian and gay film festivals, that'll only show work that is produced by lesbian and gay men and about issues of sexuality and sexual orientation and coming out of the closet. After about 15 years you sort of get really sick of this. If you've gone to enough film festivals of that kind you think: Oh my God, all these people want to know about is sex and, you know, I think there's more to life than sex. So for instance, *The Displaced View* is not readily accepted in the lesbian and gay community because it doesn't directly address sexual orientation. I've gotten a lot of comments that it's just not lesbian enough. It goes into the whole debate that what the hell is a lesbian film, what the hell is a gay film and do you define that by the sexual orientation of the filmmaker, the subject matter of the film. What are these criteria that you use? Then, for instance, race and representation conferences and festivals are becoming really hot right now and so they lump onto *The Displaced View* and forget about all of my other work. I have to keep reminding them: no, this is not always what I do. That was one film. It's always that push/pull kind of thing. Then there are women's festivals and you say: well I work with men. Oh well, you work with men. You're not eligible.

It's very difficult when you make a film to design an ideal audience because, for myself, I always know that these audiences are so separate and they all have their separate concerns. I feel that it's my position to address a lot of these concerns.

So that's how you deal with other people's categorizations and, I put it in quotation marks, "marginalization?"

You know I never quite understood what that meant, "marginalization". Oh well you're a very marginalized filmmaker aren't you? What does that mean? From the perspective of, let's say, structuralist film-making, I would not be considered marginal. I would be considered mainstream. From a mainstream perspective, I possibly would be considered marginal in sort of a more avant garde kind of way, but then the avant garde is saying that I'm mainstream. So then what is the definition of mainstream or marginalism and who is saying this? Am I marginal because I am a Japanese Canadian filmmaker? Am I marginal because I am a woman working in a fairly male dominated industry? I never quite understand what those definitions mean.

I don't think anybody does, but people feel the need to slot you places. It's how the whole structure works, so that you can call people up.

Ya exactly. You wouldn't believe how many calls I get now about multiculturalism this, racial difference that. Oh well, give Midi a call. You know I never wanted to discuss race and representation as focus in my work. That's a part of my work, but there are other agendas that I have.

Well you aren't 20 different people. You're one person made up of many variables.

It's much easier to deal with someone whose political life is solely that, is solely for job equity or racial equality or whatever. But once you expand out, there is a tendency to negate those parts

of yourself and for others to ignore that part of yourself. What I've been finding in terms of race and representation conferences and panels is that there is a very large absence of lesbian and gay content. Not to say that there should be, but that there are lesbian and gay men who are also of colour and also producing and are being simply relegated to the lesbian and gay component of things. Why is that in terms of a lesbian and gay context there are hardly any people of colour? It's this very weird thing that happens.

Is film primarily your main artistic interest? I know you studied at Ontario College Art.

I think if I had to go over my education again I'd probably do it the same way. The thing that OCA gave me was not so much technical aspects, because at the time the film department was nothing. It was all men and you couldn't even get in there without actually knowing someone and hanging out with the guys. But what it did give me was the sense that I could say something through art, that I could actually find a voice through art. I guess one of the major reasons that I got pushed towards film rather than painting or photography was that for two or three years I was on independent studies. I'd only drop into the college to use equipment. Mostly it was just doing things and having a group of four teachers who were my advisory panel. I'd either make a film or do a series of paintings or both and just show that at the end of the year. One year one of my painting instructors said that, I was writing on the canvas at the time and making up little stories: "You can't do this. You can't do this on a painting. You're going against the whole tradition and the whole school and blah blah blah and art theory." I just kind of looked at him and I just thought, just forget it, I don't need this. Then I realized that film was all those things that I was trying to force painting and photography to be. It integrated all of those elements that I wanted to work with. Text, composition, colour, language form, all of those elements that can be evident in painting and photography. So it was a natural kind of thing for me.

Do you like the whole process of film making itself?

Ya I love it.

I know that some people don't like film for its 'non-immediacy'.

I find video, which is supposedly the most immediate in the instant kind of media, to be very isolating and so abstract. You can't hold a video tape up in the air and see what your images are like. The whole power, I think of film, is that it is still images and that you can actually see these still images. It was just really good timing because over 10 years ago you could still buy super-8 film anywhere, you could still get black and white super-8, you could still pick up a super-8 camera for fairly cheap. If you had 100 bucks in your pocket, you were on your way. You could make a film. But its not like that today. It's very difficult because the cost has just risen so much. ☹