

Japanese-Canadian filmmaker portrays life 'at the margins'

By MARTHA WILSON

TORONTO — When Canadian filmmaker Miki Onodera rose to discuss her work at the Art Gallery of Ontario recently, her most heartfelt thanks was for her parents. Though her mother and father didn't always like her work, she said, their unwavering support had been a reassuring constant in her life.

Onodera, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian, has used her films to show, among other things, the strength and importance of family ties. She has also stirred up considerable trouble. Her films probe touchy issues — gender, race, sexual orientation, national and cultural identity — without offering simple answers.

Onodera is comfortable with dissent. As she expresses it, "A lot of my films are highly controversial; I've come to accept that things will be that way as long as I continue to make the kinds of films I want to make."

Her work was honored last month when the Art Gallery of Ontario screened four of her short works, along with a one-hour documentary and a segment from her first feature-length film, the recently-completed "Skin Deep."

Art Gallery of Ontario guest curator Kass Banning, who put together last month's show, pointed out that Onodera was "the first Asian-Canadian girl filmmaker on the Toronto block," adding that she will be "a tough act to follow."

According to Banning, Onodera's work shows the universality of life experienced "at the margins," demonstrating with heavy irony that people in minority groups have experiences we all should be paying attention to.

Banning adds, Onodera is playing field is the margins, but she doesn't mine them in the usual voyeuristic fashion. She uncannily combines the familiar and the freaky, allowing wild swings between sincerity and artificiality."

Onodera, who came to filmmaking from an art-school background, notes that she was heavily influenced by the bands she listened to in high school.

"I was very involved in the whole punk scene," she says. "It was a big departure from '70s rock n' roll: Here were women making music on their own terms." This influence is evident in her films in which characters are as streetwise as they are introspective.

In addition to last month's screening, Onodera has received numerous other accolades. Her films have been chosen for solo screenings in Canada, England and Germany, and have been shown alongside the works of other filmmakers all over the world. Onodera also received a Best Documentary nomination and a special Multicultural Award citation in Canada in 1989, and an Honorable Mention at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1988.



COURTING CONTROVERSY — Filmmaker Miki Onodera's work deals with gender, race, sexual orientation and identity.

PHOTO BY CANDY FAULKNER

These awards were given for "The Displaced View," an hourlong documentary that examines the lives of Japanese immigrants to Canada, looking particularly at the effects of the internment camps of the World War II. The three women who narrate the film function as the voices of Onodera herself, her mother and her grandmother.

Onodera's new film, "Skin Deep," marks a departure in theme and content. As she says, "Every film is partly a learning experience, partly experimentation." One of her priorities is to keep trying new things.

"Skin Deep" tells the story of a woman who is making a film about tattoo artistry. Though using a woman filmmaker as the central character comes pretty close to home, Onodera is quick to note the differences between herself and the fictional Alex Koyama. "Alex is very driven, so self-involved it's potentially damaging."

However, the Alex Koyama character was not written as a negative one. The film's production notes point out that she is "designed to work against current screen representations of racial stereo-

types." Onodera — who wrote the screenplay and directed — clarifies: "Asian women are portrayed in Hollywood as subservient; they're always bowing. Alex is tough."

Onodera had to be pretty tough herself in order to get "Skin Deep" made. Though the film took her six years to finish, she never gave up on it.

Her current project will be her second full-length film. She is writing it now; shooting is scheduled to begin in two years. Titled "Deadlove," it is based on a legend shared by a number of different cultures: the idea of Jesus' emigration. The film asks "What if Jesus had never died on the cross, but instead went to Japan, married a Japanese woman and fathered children?"

In Onodera's hands, this startling idea spirals into black comedy. She sees it as her task to raise thematic questions. "I'm not trying to shock people," she insists with earnest charm.

As curator Banning notes dryly, Onodera's gusty films are always atypical, "blowing away" all previous ways of thinking about Canadian cinema.