

Between the Walls: Images Festival 2013

BY MICHAEL SICINSKI IN CINEMA SCOPE ONLINE, FESTIVALS



A Memory Lasts Forever

By Michael Sicinski

Was 2013 a strong year for Toronto's Images Festival? It's quite possible, although in some ways it depends on where you look and, as per this festival's unique mandate, how one looks. Unlike most other showcases of experimental film and video, Images has been integrating gallery and museum work into its presentations pretty much since it began back in 1988. In this respect, Images has quietly blazed the trail that festivals such as Rotterdam, Berlin, and even Sundance have chosen to follow, encompassing not just screenwork destined for theatrical presentation but also media installation, projection-based performance, as well as single-screen environmental works that demand in-gallery monitor looping, the better to highlight their inherent non-linearity and remove the cognitive cues of "start" and "finish" implicit in a seated screening.

Images, doing its level best to avoid all but the most basic boundaries of genre, divides itself into two programmes only: "On Screen" and "Off Screen." The festival has been ahead of the

curve in combining these modes within a single institutional aegis. Moving through the various spaces Images encompasses, one can certainly sense that Executive Director Scott Miller Berry's overall vision is expansive and artist-driven, following "screen culture" as it's currently evolving. But of course, artists' increased movement toward video and installation has roots in economic realities, not just aesthetic curiosity. Working with celluloid is fast becoming a near-impossibility. Funding bodies and grant panels look upon single-screen film projects with a regrettable degree of skepticism. On the other hand, artists who affiliate themselves with galleries and work within a spatialized 4D context seem to be able to find more support and resources at their disposal, both in terms of private investment and awarded monies, as arts organizations typically long to seem forward-looking and fresh in their priorities. "Transmedia" art and other "post-studio" efforts can often help furnish this appeal—what Stephen Colbert might call "Zeitgeistiness."

Media artists, naturally, do the most interesting work they can within the funding parameters that obtain at a given time, and "working the room," as it were, or transforming entire spaces, is currently privileged over illuminating the lonely, hovering rectangle of the darkened screen. The most gifted, aesthetically advanced artists in either medium will find ways to get their work done regardless—they may just do less of it. But we cannot forget material constraints, and this was on my mind as I imbibed so much exciting work at Images '13, and observed that the overwhelming majority of it was to be found in galleries. Such a lopsided ratio of achievement is not something that I have experienced before, and it prompts me to ponder whether the difficulties that beset avant-garde film and videomakers on all sides are finally starting to win out over their ingenuity and stubbornness, and we have entered in an undeniable new phase of things.

One excellent example of this shift can be seen in the uneven but genuinely compelling work of this year's featured Canadian artist, Vancouver's Althea Thauberger. Her mini-retrospective screening provided a glimpse of a deft, quirky film- and videomaker whose overall vision is still very much coming into focus, but based on available evidence she is clearly someone we need to keep tabs on. In terms of visual approach and employment of oblique performance and narrative elements, Thauberger's art is very much in line with fellow Vancouverites Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, and Jeff Wall; where she finds her specific angle, particularly in her strongest works *Northern* (2005) and *A Memory Lasts Forever* (2004), is in the compact exploration of social dynamics and affect within close-knit identity groups. *Memory*, especially—a four-part poolside reenactment of an incident in which four tipsy teenage girls discover that the family dog has drowned—uses repetition and community-theatre gospel in order to explore layers of diegetic representation, particularly the performance of "sincerity." The rare contemporary media work whose lineage is comprised of equal parts Bruce Nauman and R. Kelly, *Memory* is a major achievement for Thauberger. Nevertheless, neither this work nor any of her others were shown to their best

advantage in a theatrical setting: almost all of them originated as installation pieces, and *Memory* in particular seems to require a presentation other than simply one iteration of the scenario after another.

Elsewhere in Images, the installation works took every advantage of their spatial articulation. At the WARC Gallery, Christina Battle produced her strongest work to date with *fog vortex*, a playful four-part riff on the superstitious belief in geomagnetic disturbances known as “vile vortices” or “Devil’s triangles.” In addition to projecting a triangle on the floor as a preferred vantage point from which to observe the entire work, Battle represents the concept in three radically different but related media. An HD monitor displays a white-on-black Mercator projection map with the hot spots moving like weather patterns; a 16mm sculptural film loop shows a line animation of the globe beset by interlocking magnetic disturbances; and on the far wall, Battle provides a panoramic digital film of a forest’s edge, with fog slowly rolling in and out. The work combines a sense of meticulous chart-and-graph record-keeping with an elliptical, paranoid mood, as if the hypothetical geophysical sleuth might achieve some “answer” if he or she simply watched these maddening patterns long enough.

Two other highly impressive works were found among the media installations, both of which harked back to the 1970s, the heyday of conceptualism and of early video art. At Prefix Gallery, Uruguay’s Alejandro Cesarco opted to turn the clock of “multimedia installation art” right back, to a time before digital, analogue video, or even celluloid. His *The Reader* (2011), beautiful in its physical simplicity, is a slide/tape presentation projected on a freestanding glass plate screen. The “images” consist of text on a black background; the audio, which alternates with the slides, is a fragmentary reading from a detective novel. Cesarco’s slide-texts are philosophical and analytical, about the act of reading and, in particular, about how the detective genre functions as a metanarrative about the reading process. (The detective, you see, is “reading” the crime, which is a “text” elaborated by the criminal, who is a kind of “author.”) Implicitly drawing on lessons from Derrida and Barthes (especially *S/Z*), Cesarco turns literary theory into a kind of poetic game, much like Michael Snow did in his works *So Is This* (1982) and *A Casing Shelved* (1970).

Greg Staats is a Mohawk artist whose work, based on the show of video, photography, and video-feedback installation at Trinity Square Video, engages questions of landscape, the reclamation and invocation of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) language, and what Staats himself refers to as a “restorative aesthetic” characteristic of Iroquois art and ritual. This could certainly be seen in his densely edited single-channel video *body of shadow* (2010), which focused on a house in the woods as a kind of baseline against which other images—water, sky, quick swoops over people and things, and bright fires against the dark—broke in with a brash cacophonous montage. The work recalls that of Bill Viola, who of course has frequently turned to the creative rhythms of First Peoples for his own formalist ventures. However, Staats’ finest work, and easily the single best piece I saw at Images, was another single-channel work, *liminal disturbance* (2011). A defiantly old-fashioned work that calls on

the searing colour patterns and image synthesis of first-generation video art, *disturbance* locates a great deal of visceral power within those undulating forms. Within the image, one can vaguely discern close-ups of someone leading someone else by the hand, or even one body (or form) connected to another by a rope or (umbilical) cord. On the audio track, we hear a voice slowly speaking Iroquois words, with some difficulty it seems; some sounds are immediately re-formed. (The text is stenciled on the wall adjacent to the monitor.) The video is fundamentally about a struggle of forms to *be*, to differentiate themselves as entities, even if only momentarily, before being subsumed again into the unstable, flickering soup of the raster. In this work, Staats has re-appropriated the lively late-modernist language of Nam June Paik for ends which are radically contemporary yet intimately connected with the spirits of the past.

By comparison, the On Screen theatrical efforts were generally, shall we say, achievements of a different order, many of them destined for eternal, well-deserved obscurity. (However, it must be noted that one advantage the single-channel theatrical artists do have over the installation-makers is programmability: once Images is over, most of these gallery works will get packed up in boxes until another venue comes a-calling, whereas there's always a festival somewhere looking for filler.) But what's great about Images, apart from the chance to see so much (including the duds) and take the temperature of the scene, is the festival's catholic approach to experimental film and video, a truly non-sectarian attitude that is open to museum-reared video types, pop culture-besotted whippersnappers, in-your-face politicos, sex-positive queers, unconventional documentarians, even semi-narrative works of the sort that would not pass muster in certain more, um, straitlaced showcases.

Case in point: so many of the a-g avenues who have so wisely embraced the work of Michael Robinson have stopped a bit short of accepting Jesse McLean, an artist whose "impure motives" —the combination of hermeticism and pop openness, the high-wire mediation of affect, the scrupulous titration of narrative data within overall skeins of mood— resemble Robinson's in many respects. *The Invisible World* (2012) is in many respects McLean's finest work to date: an inquiry into why objects become imbued with worth well in excess of their use value (the film wisely never calls it a fetish), the work shifts between almost pop-Straubian, laser-like attention to select artifacts from a shared '70s/'80s object-vernacular and the artist's own engagement with her grandmother's hoarding and the space (or lack thereof) she left behind. Like other McLean tapes (2011's *Remote*, 2010's *Magic for Beginners*), *World* doesn't really know when to end, hitting a saturation point with respect to its themes. Nevertheless, this is lovely, complex work.

Several of the best works screening in the festival have played elsewhere. Fern Silva's sumptuous tone poem on differential mass, *Passage Along the Plume* (2010), Scott Stark's exploration of the volatile Texas landscape, *Bloom* (2012), and last year's Turner Prize

winner, *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* (2012), Elizabeth Price's surprisingly snappy indictment of corporate negligence, were certainly standouts in their group screenings. But as one would expect from the Images programming team (this year headed up by executive director Scott Miller Berry, Kate MacKay, and Elwood Jimmy), there were several notable discoveries, films and videos that one would expect (or hope) to see turning up in other avant-garde showcases throughout 2013 and beyond. The most notable among them is *Ten Minutiae* (2012) by Peter Miller, a US filmmaker based in Austria. Working in a similar vein to British experimentalist Guy Sherwin, Miller has made a delightful film comprised of a series of one-take bagatelles. Several are "trick films" involving fire and magic; others play with superimposition, warped perspective, or the flattening of space. In a year in which a number of disappointing entries featured a Viennese postmark, Miller hit the mark simply by having fun.

Combining a punk ethos with an understated attention to form that recalls the best work of Su Friedrich, Canadian/First Nations filmmaker Thirza Cuthand's *Sight* is impressive in its modesty of means: on screen, we see rough, grey film images of travel overlaid with handwritten notation in coloured pen, material we could grasp only by examining the film strip itself. Describing Cuthand's cousin's descent into mental illness and eventual self-blinding, the film is bracing, direct, and at the same time outward-facing in a way not all semi-autobiographical work can be. Finally, one very noteworthy video work: *Oracle* (2012) by Torontonians Mani Mazinani which, much like the Staats piece, is very much in dialogue with video art's earliest manifestations. Based on footage of the performance of its own soundtrack, *Oracle* disassembles the image into scan lines, pulses and fields, and solid 2- and 3D blocks of televisual light. This is a work that could be slotted into a compilation of classic, medium-defining works by Woody and Steina Vasulka, Peer Bode, or Joan Jonas, and it would seem right at home.

So yes, among the short works, those are the standouts. Other short films and videos *could* be mentioned, since they are reasonably okay, mostly accomplishing what they set out to do. Only a small handful of the fifty or so pieces I saw were genuinely bad. But by and large, the short experimental format could not hold its own against the innovation on display in the gallery art. Too many shopworn genres crop up over and over again in the short films, implying that few short-form makers working toward theatrical presentation really have a sense of where to take this hundred-plus year-old medium.

By contrast, the Images Festival was able to locate feature-length works for the On Screen programmes that exhibited variety and ambition, works that, like the McLean video, would be overlooked or out of place at most any other avant-garde event (except Ann Arbor) but nestle right into the mix at Jackman Hall. One of the feature presentations, Jane Gillooly's *Suitcase of Love and Shame*, has garnered considerable acclaim since its recent world premiere; it's certainly unique, and indubitably a film of our time. The artist purchased the eponymous

curio on eBay, which turned out to be reel-to-reel audio equipment and hours of audio letters between a married man and his secret lover. Gillooly provides a visual track of the equipment itself (shades of Errol Morris), blurred locales, and misty, undefined lights cascading through the frame. The tapes are often embarrassingly explicit, and as far as the poetry of obsession goes, Abelard and Heloise this couple is not. I came away feeling as though I'd eavesdropped on a sad intimacy, and gained no insights that justified the invasion of privacy.

By contrast, Adele Horne's *Maintenance* (2012) is a highly formalized, stagy experimental doc that foregrounds the willing participation and the social analysis of its participants. Horne's film is about household labour, in particular cleaning house. Why is it work that is held in such low regard? How do people cleaning their own spaces (their own funk) conceptualize the experience differently than professional cleaners? What does the action of cleaning (an automatic effort) tell us about our psyches? Each sequence is comprised of fixed-camera views; we watch the subjects sweep, do laundry, manage piles of papers . . . It's like a James Benning remake of *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). And, in fact, Benning shows up, washing a screen door.

But I've saved the best (or at least the most fun) for last. One of the most consistently engaging experimental filmmakers to have emerged on the scene in the past few years is Jodie Mack. Currently stationed at Dartmouth, where she's been given unprecedented access to impressionable minds, Mack has gotten attention for a series of herky-jerky, Constructivist (anti-)animations organized around close-ups of various swatches of material; based on underlying patterns and moving a mile a minute, these films are like crazy-quilts unfolding in time. For her latest project, she has gone off the deep end: *Dusty Stacks of Mom: The Poster Project*, a documentary featurette about her mother's defunct rock 'n' roll poster business in Florida, is Mack's most ambitious work to date. Not only does she include extensive stop-motion animation technique for the first time, resulting in a kind of grungy Svankmajer atmosphere, Mack also sets the film to Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon." With brand new lyrics, all about the poster warehouse. Sung live, karaoke-style, by Mack herself. With a self-deprecation and a charm that is matched only by the keen precision of her art, Mack could be just what the avant-garde needs. Crisis? Turn up the music! Dead end? Bring me that trampoline . . .

