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Reviews of and responses to contemporary & canonical experimental cinema

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STRONG-PUBLIC LIGHTING (Mike Hoolboom, 2004)

Like most of his feature-length work since the late 1990s, Mike Hoolboom's PUBLIC LIGHTING is a compilation of shorter pieces, this time seven in total. It is particularly coherent in the interrelationship of its themes – the nature of photography, the creation of images, memory and actuality – though diverse in its formal and aesthetic tendencies. Two of its component parts – "Army" and "Tradition" – are some of the strongest works Hoolboom has ever produced during his accomplished 20-plus years as Canada's pre-eminent experimental media-maker. Of course, one of the evening's highlights was Hoolboom's own elusive introduction, which set the stage for an evening of contemplation and introspection.

-James Missen

STRONG-ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW (Miranda July, 2005)

With ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW, Miranda July – the influential feminist performer turned multi-media artist – successfully translates her singular vision, humor and skill into her first feature-length film. MYEYWK picks up on an essentially July theme: people trying to connect to one another emotionally and physically, and weaves it through several interlocking narratives centering around the awkward romance between a struggling performance artist (July) and a recently divorced shoe salesman (John Hawkes). As in her previous experimental videos and performances, July eschews a coherent, linear narrative in favor of a stream of interconnected moments – tender, infuriated, intimate dispatches from the slipstream of everyday life. Also in line with her earlier work is her ability to elevate the ordinary to the spectacular. Here, the ostensibly mundane lives of precocious teenagers, professionals, and even perverts, are made heroic. July's first foray into feature film is like a primer for those unfamiliar with the artist's unique voice. In doing so, it simultaneously sets the stage and raises the audience count for many more projects to come.

-Lauren Cornell



from EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP

STRONG-EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP (Shuji Terayama, 1970)

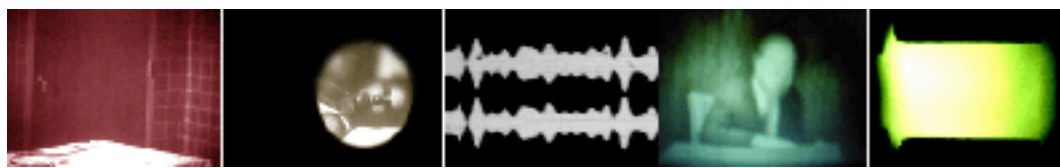
...and what about a fascist nation-state overthrown by a small army of inhumane, sexually mature, adolescent revolutionaries? Pre-teen hustlers drag the beaten body of a senior citizen down a dusty street while a ten-year old boy – our hero with a tickle fetish – waits to be fellated by a middle-aged housewife and an aged granny. Straddling the line between acute political commentary and full-blown surrealism, EMPEROR TOMATO KETCHUP is at once a scattershot, Benny Hill wank-job and the most cutting artistic expression too few will ever bear witness to. Terayama says "Take your pick" and somehow manages to make his position completely ambiguous.

-Michael Baker

STRONG-WATER AND POWER (Pat O'Neill, 1989)

A conceptual wonder for anyone with an interest in Los Angeles history, this collage of ten years worth of time-lapse photography, animation, music, archival film footage, and dialogue utilizes optical printing techniques considered technologically advanced at the time of the film's original release. O'Neill captures the aesthetic of the Los Angeles landscape by juxtaposing images of the desert and mountains of the Owens Valley – the original source of LA's fresh water supply following the drying of the Los Angeles River – with a bustling city of cars, skyscrapers, houses, engineers, musicians, artists and celluloid, and tales of colonization and desire. Though it deals with the concrete matter that any resident or scholar of Los Angeles will easily be able to recognize and take to heart, this portrait of LA remains abstract enough to provoke interpretation from any audience.

-Lisa Fotteringham



from PARALLAX

STRONG-PARALLAX (Alex MacKenzie, 2004)

PARALLAX is a stereoscopic projection of found black and white film footage, re-purposed and manipulated through optical printing, set to a phantom electronic score. Combining technical dexterity and improvised image interference with turntable precision and timing, MacKenzie coaxes twin analytic projectors through a wide-ranging repertoire of optical whimsy, including coloured gels, hand-masking, variable speeds, superimposition, flicker and single framing. Foregrounding the projectionist (played by himself) as a visible actor, the film-event has a uniquely performative gesture, tempting and sustaining antique machines on the edge of failure. The outcome: An ephemeral highwire track through the cinematic unconscious and an elegy to 16mm's passing future. Amid the increasingly commodified, rhythmically challenged, digital age of projected images, MacKenzie exhibits genuine commitment to film's outmoded apparatus, material fragility and musical cadence. PARALLAX is cinema to be played (with); it requires a different kind of engagement, in which the viewer becomes actively aware of celluloid's fragile, fleeting magic.

-Brett Kashmere

STRONG-MAYHEM (Abigail Child, 1987)

A film about the spectatorial relationship to film, MAYHEM constructs a spectacle of bodies: bodies on film, bodies referencing film, the marking of the body itself by the cinematic corpus. All the imagery pours forth, dislocating any single, developing narrative, making no strand isolatable. Instead we see the invocation of an urban space in which all these stories are bumping up against each other, as the filmic bodies bump up next to each other, in an erotics of urban modernity. The orgiastic quality of the text is as much cinematic as sexual. This erotics is one in which past and present, the city, cinema, desire and violence, and the gendered body are conflated. Our libidinal territory has been mapped by filmic representation; film is wish-fulfillment, a flickering stage set with our dreams: dreams shaped and reified by these celluloid visions. The body dwells in cinema as it dwells within the city.

-Jodi Ramer

STRONG-FOLLOWED BY... / SUR LES TRACES DE... (Presented by Available Light Screening Collective and Curated by Nicole Gingras)

Montreal's Nicole Gingras made her third appearance as guest curator for Available Light with an eclectic program of 14 recent Canadian videos – which was perhaps two or three works too long. The evening, split in two parts, was preceded by an extensive bilingual Q+A with audience members on fiction, fable, and varying modes of address in contemporary video. Strong performative pieces included Erica Eyres' THE HUNTERS GUIDE TO BEREAVEMENT (2002) and Thirza Cuthand's ANHEDONIA (2001) and worked well alongside Jeremy Drummond's conceptual SUBURBAN DISCIPLINE (2002). Other works seemed better suited for gallery installation (Adad Hannah's DINNER IN FLORIDA, 2002) or the animation festival circuit (Victoria Prince's CLAY GIRL, 2002).

-James Missen

STRONG-EROS AND WONDER (Bruce Elder, 2003)

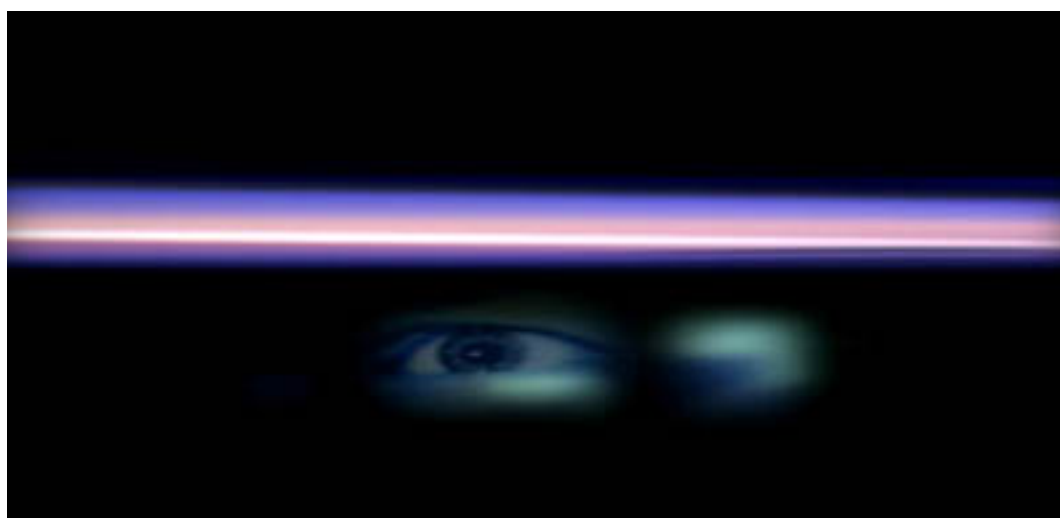
EROS and (Oh I do)... WONDER!

Long shot of a room, static camera; naked woman on an armchair, legs pulled up, folded in, her arms as protection; a dressed man walks in, makes the woman put both feet down, sit with her legs and arms open, spreading her nakedness, exposing her vulnerability; satisfied, he walks out.

This ONE shot so stands out from the form and content of the film itself – and my reading of it – that I cannot wash away its deranging imprint on my otherwise fond memories of this film.

Bruce, for the feminist experimental-film-crusaders out there, please explain!

-Gerda Cammaer



from PDX_01

STRONG-PDX_01 (Nomlg, 2003)

PDX_01 is a journey along the thin rails that divide realism from abstraction and on into the nether regions of holistic experience that refuse delineations between the two. The subjective spatiality of audiovisual perception becomes a blank canvas: what we perceive as being empty and void is in fact what fills our perceptual environment. And when the lines dissolve and darkness takes hold, our only refuge is a lonely screen emerging from the mist, reminding us that all journeys are little more than smoke and mirrors if we don't remember all the points along the way.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-OPUS PIA #1 (Takagi Masakatsu, 2002)

When we say there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, there's an understanding that it will never be found. The magic lies in the potential realized by the convergence of opposites that OPUS PIA #1 reveals: rays of golden sunlight refracting through drops of falling rain. And this revelation works through the framework of sound/image relationships striving for a synthesis that highlights the power of fluidity between things ordinarily understood to be separate and unrelated. This is alchemy, and the result is pure gold.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE WORKING (Live performance by Phill Niblock, 06 February 2005 at Latvian House, Toronto)

Pleasure Dome's Tom Taylor began the night by relaying Phill Niblock's message to the 100-ish folks in attendance that his audio-visual performance would be close to two hours in length (!). Unfortunately, many in attendance seemed to take that as a cue to make an eventual early evening exit, as the crowd had thinned significantly once the house lights hit our eyes. Nevertheless, those who stayed endured (in a good sense) – three huge screens spectacularized a succession of images of workers in the underdeveloped world; four massive speakers spit out Niblock's signature tones and groans – a seductive, intricate assault on the senses. "Dense" would be an understatement.

-James Missen

STRONG-LA REGION CENTRALE (Michael Snow, 1971)

The shadow of the camera mount captivates me the most: fleeting glimpses of that which makes the film possible. But when I recognize that I occupy the position of the mounting, I realize that the glimpses I crave are those of myself. This craving is literally realized by the afterimages of the introductory Xs, moving as my eyes move across the first minute of each section of the film. This is an unparalleled reflexive strategy that serves to embed me within the film rather than cultivating a reflective distance. Indexicality has never been stronger than here, and this is what makes the film's climactic slip into abstraction all the more potent.

-Randolph Jordan

STRONG-MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON (Maya Deren, 1943)

"I had a dream last night. You were inside the house. You were calling my name. I couldn't find you. Then there you were, lying in bed. It wasn't you. It looked like you, but it wasn't."

-Fred Madison, LOST HIGHWAY

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