

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC,
DANCE AND
PERFORMANCE

VIDEO/FILM:

Art Films Come Out of Obscurity in Kitchen Series

BY KATHLEEN HULSER

The art film is like a mushroom, it grows in dark places, nourished by obscurity. For the Fourth Annual Filmworks at the Kitchen May 25-27, curator Amy Taubin has culled both exotic and familiar strains of the art form from sources on both coasts.

The general obscurity of these films can be traced to several factors. Although, these days, film has an acknowledged place in the art world, a corresponding market for it has never really developed. While many filmmakers would be happy to sell a few prints, individual collectors aren't exactly deluging them with requests. This has its good side in that the films are somewhat insulated from the corrupting pressures of art world huckstering—far from auction, pursuit of fashionable reputation and other accoutrements of large-scale "success."

The museums, however, do have collections of films and ongoing film programs which point up another factor in 'his obscurity. When art films are screened there, audience, notwithstanding the museum imprimatur, remain quite small. It seems that time is the obstacle: the commitment required to watch even these short films apparently discourages many people who are happy to trot by equally "incomprehensible modern" paintings comforted by their freedom to look as little as they please. As a result many of these films exist in a never-never land, languishing in a can to be unspooled only a few times a year at places such as Millenium, Anthology Film Archives and the Collective for Living Cinema.

The Kitchen audience with its avant-garde proclivities seems to be open to virtually anything, so this major year-end retrospective dares to be wide ranging, including works by established artists Bruce Connor, Stan Brakhage and Robert Breer, an exceptional batch of Super-8 films, and documentaries by Chris Choy and Peter Krieg. Several works on the May 27th program explore dream worlds, relying on highly personal material to shape their black and white visions.

WATERY MEMORIES

In "Gently Down the Stream," filmmaker So Friedrich rows her boat down the canal of memory. The film image is mostly restricted to the upper corner of the screen, bracketed by an "L" of black space which bears a text scratched into the film itself. The "L" is nestled into this "L" as if seated in a chair seen in profile; a commentary on the supportive relationship of text and picture, and a job at the stiffly upright character of words on screens, casually hand-written but



A frame from "Aunt" a film by Lasse Maloney and Peter Wolke exploring the history of an artist.

nevertheless locked into a straight-backed chair of a space.

While dreams have a name as the most unfettered arena of the unconscious, Friedrich stresses the stubbornly repetitive confinement of her dreamscape, notably in a haunting portrait of a woman in a practice wherry. The grim rower strains back and forth in her slide seat, invisible oars slicing through an imaginary lily void. In the finale of this not-always-for-pleasure cruise a soothing shot of waves evokes the primal reassurance of expansive waters.

"Primal Scene" is a primal teaser of a different sort, unfolding its theme of voyeurism within a film devoid of human presence (except the implied human hand of the camera/operator). Filmmaker Mofj Brinckmann exploits the tension between the flat surface of the screen and the rumpled comfy texture of billowing feather beds, huge square pillow and covers strewn about. The camera movements are hesitant, circling the subject from above or at oblique

angles, shy at peering under the covers like an uninvited guest. This could be taken as a wry allusion to the absence of humans, though gone of the beds are occupied they all appear to have been in recent, heavy use. When a Victorian headboard drifts into view with its massive mahogany expanse as severe and moralizing as the era that spawned it, the film takes an ominous turn.

Paradoxically, Brinckmann weds this potent imagery to a rock and roll soundtrack which while at first puzzling in its lassitude and insipidity, ultimately makes sense as a way of situating these preoccupations of puberty. Teen music is appropriate to obsessions awakened then, the sexual curiosity of adolescence.

SNUB-NOSED DREAMER

"Alright You Guys" also flirts with the boundaries of adolescence and adulthood, following a sunny, snub-nosed girl who playfully tries on several identities. Filmmaker Leslie Thornton bounces the deliberate and the spontaneous off one

another, mixing staged sequences with cinema verite morsels into fragments. The girl is as ambivalent about her "real" self as the film is about its form. At one point she confides her dreams, sprawled in an armchair squinting unsurely at the camera placed smack in front of her. Later she dons another persona as amateur tap-dancer, slowly moving off-center as if to once again reflect ambivalence about the centrality of this new identity. The film is full of lovely formal echoes: it digresses in its tale, just as the girl dawdles in her search.

In all three works, the freedom to digress, to experiment, to puzzle the audience is a critical element in their poetic effects. A sense of wonder and emotional nuance flourishes when anxiety about immediately swaying the spectator is reduced. In a hurried world, these films offer a place to linger.

FILMWORKS, The Kitchen, May 25-27, Tel. 925-3615, 484 Broome Street.

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