

Scott MacDonald on the Spirit Of Canyon Cinema

Scott MacDonald In Person

Sunday, November 23, 2007 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

The 1960s saw the emergence of a wide range of approaches to cinema that offered alternatives to Hollywood commercial filmmaking. By 1961, Bruce Baillie and Chick Strand had begun informal screenings in the Bay Area at a mobile venue they were calling “Canyon Cinema.” Soon, Canyon began publishing the *Cinemanews* and in 1966 became a distribution organization, emerging over the next forty years as the most dependable alternative film distributor in the country. The filmmakers who were part of Canyon and contributed to its success also created a remarkable body of films that were widely influential and continue to provide considerable pleasure. In celebration of his recent book, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, film historian Scott MacDonald presents a selection of significant films from its vibrant early years. (Scott MacDonald and Steve Polta)

Waterfall (1967) by Chick Strand; 16mm, color, sound, 3 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

A film poem using found film and stock footage altered by printing, home development and solarization. It is a film using visual relationships to invoke a feeling of flow and movement. Japanese Koto music. (Chick Strand)

Kirsa Nicholina (1969) by Gunvor Nelson; 16mm, color, sound, 16 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“That Gunvor Nelson is indeed one of the most gifted of our poetic film humanists is revealed in *Kirsa Nicholina*, her masterpiece. This deceptively simple film of a child being born to a couple in their home is an almost classic manifesto of the new sensibility, a proud affirmation of man amidst technology, genocide, and ecological destruction. Birth is presented not as an antiseptic, ‘medical’ experience (the usual birth film focuses on an anonymous vagina appropriately surrounded by a white shroud) but as a living-through of a primitive mystery, a spiritual celebration, a rite of passage. True to the newest sensibility, it does not aggressively proselytize but conveys its ideology by force of example. With husband and friends quietly present, the strikingly pretty young woman, in fetching terrycloth and red socks, is practically nude throughout; her whole body is seen at times, and for once the continuity between love partner and birth-giver is maintained; she remains ‘erotic.’ We never once forget that she is a woman and that the new life came from sexual desire....” (Amos Vogel)

My Name Is Oona (1969) by Gunvor Nelson; 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

MacDonald: It seems a film about you making a connection with this child and all that (familiality and mythically) she represents to you.

Nelson: Well, I knew I didn’t want a normal, “cute” picture of Oona. I think the world she was in and my childhood world are combined there. As a child, you’re pretty secure in your own world, but the rest is very mysterious and scary; maybe there are monsters and trolls lurking out there, even if you’ve never seen them.” (Gunvor Nelson interviewed by Scott MacDonald in *A Critical Cinema 3*.)

Riverbody (1970) by Anne Severson and Shelby Kennedy; 16mm, b&w, sound, 7 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“The film’s fascination lies with the suspense of that magic moment, halfway between two persons, when the dissolve technique produces composite figures, oftentimes hermaphroditic, that inspires awe for the mystery of the human form.” (B. Ruby Rich)

Take Off (1972) by Gunvor Nelson; 16mm, b&w, sound, 10 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

MacDonald: What reactions to the film do you remember?

Nelson: In the early ‘70s, when the film was just finished, it seemed as if the more militant feminist women didn’t like it because they felt it furthered the same images that they were against. But in general I think that both men and women have enjoyed the film, once they understood what I was doing with it.

Even when Ellion takes off all her clothes, and her head, her arms, she still has a core of self that nobody can touch. I felt this personally very strongly. When I was growing up, I felt that Swedish society might have all these rules and regulations on how to behave, but those were minor compared how strong I was as a person. *That* they couldn’t alter. Ellion communicated something of that feeling: she could give herself away, but still have her *self*. (Gunvor Nelson, interviewed by Scott MacDonald in *A Critical Cinema 3*.)

Kristallnacht (1979) by Chick Strand; 16mm, b&w, sound, 7 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“...I don’t know why but I’m still obsessed by all of that ...the holocaust. I suppose because it still goes on. And Anne Frank to me is symbolic of all innocent victims, male and female. And that to me... the film is just sort of a memorial to her and to all people who get caught up in things out of their control and done under... Two or three years ago I went to her house in Amsterdam. I’d never been to Europe before so the places I had imagined as a young girl during the war when the news came back from the camps had remained in my mind... stuck in past time. And of course Anne Frank’s diary affected me a great deal So when I went to Amsterdam I could just, I just, I took all away the present and I could just hear those hobnail boots down that street; and when I went to the place where she had been hidden in the attic, I was just chilled. So that experience is relatively recent news to me. ‘Kristallnacht’ too, refers to a night in which there was a mass killing of Jews because someone in the Nazi party had been killed so they just went to the ghetto and started killing people. ‘Kristallnacht’ is the name of that night...” (“Chick Strand at the Cinematheque, March 6, 1980,” reprinted in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* by Scott MacDonald)

Ornamentals (1979) by Abigail Child; 16mm, color, silent, 12 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“...Forthcoming *Ornamentals* (title from Blake, also seed catalogues), the details of a mundane life that give constant pleasure, Ed Dorn’s delight in ‘the apparencies’. All to be viewed over and over and over and

“Trying to find the connections. Making the connections. Staring reality in the face. First tearing apart words, then building up sentences. First chopping, flipping, reprinting backwards, forwards, upside-down, then... always a return to the body. The body. I’m always surprised at her size. So large a grasp, a grasping. Our generation moving towards reconciliation ...if movies can save the world. save the world. The power of imagination. Look at the skyline and you see how debased our imagination has become. Beauty is not enough, Tony Conrad says, meaning a superficial loveliness. There is another more enduring, born from intellectual honesty. This is transformative beauty. Laodicians gag at its ugliness. Such is the work of Abigail Child. Beauty is so difficult, Beardsley tell Yeats. So very difficult.” (Henry Hills: “Child Labor,” *Cinemanews*, 1978, vol. 2, reprinted in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* by Scott MacDonald)

Quick’s Thicket (2004) by Diane Kitchen; 16mm, color, silent, 7 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“Forces of wind and light provoking nature’s occurrences.” (Diane Kitchen)

“During the years when Diane Kitchen was at the helm of Canyon Cinema (she arrived in 1974, left in 1977), the nature of the organization changes in a variety of ways. Kitchen made efforts to remedy what seemed to be the deterioration of Canyon’s distribution business. The long-discussed separation of distribution from the nonprofit sectors of Canyon took place [...]: the Cinematheque, now housed at the San Francisco Art institute, became a separate organization, and the *Cinemanews* became a different kind of a publication. Kitchen seems to have been well aware of the small-town spirit that had been so important to Canyon early on, and she worked quickly to revive something of this spirit in what were challenging circumstances.

“[...] Kitchen was successful in her attempts to reenergize the *Cinemanews* [...]. Under Kitchen, the form of the *Cinemanews* was regularized [and] the feel of the periodical became more predictable. Each issue was approximately the same length; the front and back covers included photographs of filmmaker (many of which were part of what was called the ‘Filmmaker Portrait Series’), still from films, and artwork by Canyon members. Kitchen was able to create a consistent look for the *Cinemanews*, without sacrificing its antiestablishment feel: each issue included a range of typefaces and page designs [...] so that considerable variety was created with a minimum of confusion. In a subtle way Kitchen even emulated the self-effacing, community-oriented spirit of [Bruce] Baillie and [Emery] Menefee, who generally did not list themselves as editors of the *Cinemanews* [...]; after the first three issues in which she lists herself as editor, each subsequent issue ‘was put together by Diane Kitchen.’” (Scott MacDonald: *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*)

On Tuesday, November 25 at 7:30 pm, Scott MacDonald will appear at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley to present the program Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor.

This program will include works by Bruce Baillie, Ernest Callenbach, Bruce Conner, Robert Nelson, Anne Severson, and Chick Strand.

For information, please see www.bampfa.berkeley.edu or call 510-642-1412