BEYOND THE FRINGE

By Larissa Fan

TORONTO'S Christina Zeidler is an artist who is hard to pigeonhole. Zeidler uses a blend of styles for her films that defies easy categorization, combining formal experimentation and narrative elements, film and video, and often switching gears completely from piece to piece. Her work also displays a playfulness and sense of humour that is not often found in the solemn world of experimental film. While this combination may sometimes prevent her work from being taken seriously, that doesn't seem to faze her, and it certainly isn't slowing her down. She has produced a spate of films recently, ranging from an abstract formal exploration (*Fartasia*) to an experimental narrative (*Kill Road*) to a Web project (*Bulk Bin*).

ZEIDLER'S approach to film is low-budget, process-based and do-it-yourself, leaving room for play, lucky accidents and just plain kookiness. Her early works, such as *Desire*, *Soulsucka* and *Galaxy Girls*, are performance-based videos with women in the central roles. *Galaxy Girls*, for example, features a group of female aliens in a park whose movement is almost a dance. While the videos are fun and subversive, emotional depth isn't their strength. Her breakthrough piece came in 2001 with *Traces*, a bittersweet autobiographical tale about the death of her dog, Mica, that delves into emotional territory not explored in her earlier work.

Kill Road

Her recent films, *Kill Road* (16 mm, 14 minutes, 2003) and *Machine Guts* (Super 8, 3 minutes, 2002), are her strongest to date and signal a maturing artist. *Kill Road* is the story of a dysfunctional family that runs into a raccoon while out for a drive. The parents are in denial about the moribund state of the animal—the father (Deirdre Logue) puts it to bed and reads to it, while the mother (Allyson Mitchell) is an energetic sort who thinks all it needs is a bit of fresh air and exercise. Meanwhile, both of them ignore their increasingly despondent daughter (Ali Soles), who eventually decides to take matters into her own hands. The surreal nature of the story is amplified by the fact that the raccoon is an actor in a fur hat and makeup, the father is played by a woman and the characters' movements are pixilated through frame-by-frame animation. With its family melodrama, pastel colour scheme and dubbed voice work, it's a bit like an old silent movie mixed with a NBC After School Special, and altogether unique.

Machine Guts came out of Zeidler's Web project, Bulk Bin, which was produced at The Banff Centre's Big Rock Candy Mountain Residency program. Zeidler made a video a day for a month and broadcast them on the Internet. The videos were necessarily limited by the constraints of the daily deadline and the broadcast medium, a process that forced her to "let go of the preciousness of film for public consumption" and produce quick and dirty works. *Bulk Bin* also involved an intense amount of collaboration, with Zeidler often enlisting the aid of other artists at the Centre. *Machine Guts* is the result of one such collaboration—artist Bill Burns provided the concept while Zeidler wrote the script. Cameron Bailey of Toronto's weekly *Now* magazine called the result "the single weirdest film at this summer's Splice This! Super 8 Festival." Machine Guts features a deer in a business suit (or more accurately, a figure with the body of a human and the head of a deer) typing away at a computer in a dark room, while a voice-over narrates the story of Anne, a bored retail worker. It could be that the deer is narrating what it types, or it could be that the deer is in fact Anne. In either case, *Machine Guts* is weird, original and completely engrossing.

Christina Zeidler is reaping the benefits of her years of experimentation to develop works that are unique and entertaining, with a dark edge. She is, as they say, "one to watch." Both *Kill Road* and *Machine Guts* will be screening at Toronto's Images Festival of Independent Film and Video, April 15–24.

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