

Proclaimed as "Canada's best unknown experimental filmmaker" by Mike Hoolboom (one of Canada's best-known experimental filmmakers), John Kneller has quite a challenge ahead of him. How does he balance the demands of his new-found popularity with the necessities of his vision?

For years he has toiled at his craft in virtual isolation and obscurity. Once in a while someone from Pleasure Dome, Toronto's alternative exhibition group, would coax him in to showing a film. This was not an easy task considering that a lot of his work was un-projectable, with films that mixed different film stocks, creating varying thickness which would throw even the kindest projector out of whack. Much of his work originated on super-8 or regular-8, meaning that most venues would have to go to a great deal of trouble to find not only a projector but one that wouldn't chew up the film, in many cases the original.

Then there's Kneller's own work ethic: he works and reworks an idea until he feels it is right, which often takes years. The wait, however, is well worth it. Complex layered images that evoke many things, John Kneller's films remind me of something that Germaine Dulac once said: a film is a visual idea. Until recently, many experimental filmmakers remained true to Dulac's edict; now, Kneller has emerged to pick up the gauntlet and run with it. While there is no better description for Kneller's films, this should not suggest that his work is a visual thrill and nothing else. Instead, his work focuses on age-old themes such as the nature versus technology, and suggest links between things man-made and things natural. In *You Take High Road*, for example, he juxtaposes images of leaves with images of stained glass windows; in doing so, he reveals similarities in shape and texture.

Kneller's techniques are often cumbersome. He spends hours rephotographing and layering images using only his camera and optical printer. Before he purchased the optical printer, he experimented with replicating the effect using various methods to rephotograph the footage. Kneller admits that most of the techniques he uses could be produced through digital technology, but finds that his methods are more interesting and a purer way to work. He argues that while it would be easier to turn to the latest video equipment, it wouldn't be purely filmic.

Experimental cinema, in Kneller's view, is the purest form of cinema. At a time when many expect a film to be "about" something, it's refreshing to find a body of work that's about nothing and everything at the same time. When asked what his films were about, Kneller responded that it depended on who's watching them; he certainly did not deliberately set out to make a film "about" anything. "I find I have different experiences with the same film; depending on my mood, I can either let the images wash over me, engage with the film, or do a bit of both. Either way, I have a satisfying experience."



John Kneller: A film is a visual idea.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Kneller's filmmaking is the variety of techniques and processes that he works through in order to create his imagery. There are some that declare that the avant-garde is no longer producing anything new or different, and that's why John Kneller's approach to filmmaking is particularly refreshing. I find it exciting to find someone working in a true pioneering spirit, a spirit that hearkens back to the past with a view to the future. Now that many are experimenting with the latest digital editing system or computer generating imagery, what ends up remaining truly avant-garde is the work that insists on its own inherent properties without borrowing from other mediums.

One of Kneller's theories of experimental film adds an ironic twist to any view of his work. He believes that while experimental cinema was at one time underground, it recently enjoyed a period of popularity, teetering at the edge of the mainstream as advertisers borrowed their techniques. Now, he believes that experimental cinema is heading back underground. He views this, rightly so, as necessary and important for the continuing vitality of the art form. Unfortunately, he is in danger of moving away from this path. Lately he has stopped reworking his films and declared them finished, and much of the work is being blown up to 16mm in an effort to make it more accessible and more distributable. While it's exciting to now have easy access to his work, I wonder if some of his pioneering spirit has mellowed, and that someone working in the avant-garde tradition may be steering away from his true path in an effort to satisfy us, the audience. ■