

# THE IMAGES FESTIVAL OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

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BY JASON MCBRIDE

The Images Festival of Independent Film and Video has always brought together various – even warring – media under one roof, but the 2001 edition of the festival (held in Toronto) seemed ever more relevant in this so-called digital age. While the commercial film industry continues to be riven by the presence of video (saviour or angel of death?), avant-garde and experimental filmmaking seems to have been reinvigorated by the uncertainty of rapidly shifting technologies. No longer the children of Marx and Coca-Cola, we're now, in Mike Hoolboom's words, "the children of Microsoft and Fritz Lang," and the Images programmers – under the guidance of artistic director Chris Gehman – very shrewdly focused their attention on how this transformation has affected the independent film world.



Junko Wada's *Body Drop Asphalt*

The programmers opened the festival with a Japanese digital-video feature, Junko Wada's *Body Drop Asphalt*, which appropriately enough, defied categorization. Framed by a somewhat cloying voice-over recited by a seemingly agoraphobic young woman, it abruptly shifts gears, becoming a parody of literary culture and romantic identity when the woman becomes, literally overnight, a celebrity novelist. The multiple narratives consistently double back on themselves (the credits appearing somewhere in the middle of the film), recasting the film's genre (is it a musical? a comedy? a love story?) and revelling in a dazzling array of digital effects. It's an effervescent vision that suggests hypermodern Japan has an identity complex greater than our own. *Body Drop Asphalt* was part of the festival's Japan Focus, the largest number of independent Japanese films and videos sever shown in Canada.

In contrast to Wada, Shiho Kano's films operate on the other end of the spectacle scale. Reserved, ruminative and spare, these are stunning still lifes, the most haunting of which is *Rocking Chair*. A 16mm short, its crisp compositions consist almost entirely of gently rustling drapes, a mirror sitting on a floor and the titular piece of furniture – their forms quietly mutating as the light fluctuates. Takashi Ishida's *Gestalt*, a prize winner at the 1999 Vancouver International Film Festival, explores similar formal experimentation, but through a dazzling animation made by the continuous painting and repainting of a wall below and beside a window.

Accompanied by J.S. Bach organ music, it's a visual fugue that playfully reconfigures space and perspective.

The delicacy of Kano's work finds a certain correspondence in the films of Leighton Pierce, whose miniature documentaries have been astonishing festival audiences for years. Pierce made his first appearance at Images in 1998 and this year returned with *Wood*, a deceptively simple and lovingly rendered glimpse of his children at play in his backyard. *Wood* was shot on video, and, amazingly, Pierce managed to imbue the images (all fragmentary, slow-motion shallow focus) with the same tender beauty he has exhibited in his film work.

Other filmmakers sought out inspiration in earlier forms of cinema, most notably Zoë Beloff who brought to Images, of all things, a 16mm, 3-D film. Entitled *Shadow Land or Light from the Other Side*, Beloff's film was adapted from the 19th-century autobiography of a materializing medium who could conjure beings from beyond. Aside from its somewhat grating voice-over (again!), Beloff's film is both a charming exhumation of long-dead filmmaking practices and a complex exploration of the symbiosis between psychoanalysis, spiritualism and the movies. It's a work that is defiantly filmic, hearkening back to the magical origins of the medium.

The same could be said of Janie Geiser, whose experimental animations owe much of their inspiration and form to an even older tradition – puppetry. Images presented a long overdue retrospective of this American artist's work; elusive and dream-like narratives constructed from remarkably lovely paper cutouts, dolls, clothes patterns, children's toys and other ephemera. These are eloquent collages that operate in several dimensions simultaneously, their many thematic layers mirrored in the fragile layering of their images. Geiser is extraordinarily adept at manipulating light (her designs recalling, naturally, shadow puppetry) foregrounding the control she exerts over these miniature imitations of life. A comparable effect can be found in the Brothers Quay's latest, *In Absentia*, where light plays menacingly over a doll-house-size madhouse.

Fast-forward to Hoolboom's own *Imitation of Life*. Hoolboom's latest work continues his reimagining of Hollywood iconogra-



Mike Hoolboom's *Imitation of Life*

phy. Employing detournment strategies familiar to lovers of Matthias Muller and Jean-Luc Godard (and Hoolboom's own *White Museum* and *Shooting Blanks*), the Toronto-based film and videomaker plumbs the fascistic impulses of both the dream factory and Silicon Valley. Convergence has never sounded more like a dirty word. A gentler but no less mournful spirit inflects Steve Reinke's *Sad Disco Fantasia*. Relocated temporarily to Los Angeles, the acerbic videomaker says (jokingly, we hope) that this is his final video. Linking the deaths of his mother and cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, porn and Michael Jackson, Reinke mixes and matches hypnotic digital animations with Super 8 and video footage to create a work of ironic, meditative foreboding. It's a work that expertly sums up a festival where the message remains much more significant than the medium. And where film and video are analogous, digital or otherwise.

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