

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sun, Aug. 01, 2010

MoCA's 10th-anniversary festival celebrates the art of short films

BY TOM AUSTIN

Special to The Miami Herald



A Ride on Le Metro by Lew Lautin

This Friday night, the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami will celebrate the 10th anniversary of Optic Nerve, its annual festival of short films and videos by South Florida artists. This year's rendition entails 22 films by 21 artists, chosen by a jury from an open call for submissions. As usual, audience members will vote for their fave-rave film, and one effort will be bought for the museum's permanent collection. In February, selected films from Optic Nerve will be screened on the beach in Bal Harbour.

A few of this year's films, such as Juan Carlos Zaldivar's *Horror (Horror Sickness)*, embrace the era of blood lust, a leap from the camp of *Dark Shadows* to *True Blood*. In Zaldivar's effort, a male actor uses his fingernails to draw blood on a slender young man, sort of an updated and even-more-nihilistic version of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Isidore Ducasse's 1869 notorious collection of prose fragments about sexual debasement and blood thirst. Given that this is the epoch of the vampire -- when every 13-year-old girl wants to be blood-sucked rather than pinned by her beau, when every indulged, pot-smoking, tattooed, mutton-parading-as-lamb South Florida housewife wants to add living death to her cheap transgressions -- a *Nosferatu*-revisited number is right in step.

Some of the other homeboys and girls also reference, well, home. Justin Long's *In Search of the Miercoles* veers from Bas Jan Ader's quest for a miraculous slay-'em-all performance with an ordinary afternoon on the beach under a leering sun. The artist swims out into the ocean, framed by gulag condos in the background and encounters a horse mask on another swimmer's body. Then the horse face becomes a horse puppet on *his* hand, followed by -- what else? -- blood in the water.

Other artists explore terrain that covers the spectrum of art and pop. In anticipation of Oliver Stone's coming *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, Barron Sherer -- the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives at Miami Dade College and the great Cinema Vortex -- has created *Wall Street Neu!*, using the private-jet sequence of the first *Wall Street*. The collective 3PQ contributes *You're Going to Carry that Weight*, which transforms a "static landscape into a fluid real time continuum." (In the short, two guys lift variously proportioned shirtless buddies -- medium to portly -- sitting on a chair.) Charles Chace's *Amplified Proof* is

concerned with art and features images of the artists' muse, in this case a better-known contemporary artist, Tracey Emin.

Two of the films prove that high art can be high fun: Lew Lautin's *Paris: A Ride on Le Metro*, is all quick, madcap images; Susan Lee-Chun's *Let's Suz-ercise! (Chicago-Style)* uses background images of Chicago's "L" train to great effect. Underneath the train, three pretty girls in futuristic leather ensembles dance and work out in unison with leather-clad barbells. The image is Tom of Finland crossed with middle-period Jane Fonda and Robert Palmer's *Addicted to Love* video. The Suz, on the other hand, is three alter egos that explore race and identity politics: Sue (assimilation), Sioux (independence), Su (mediation). Come for the dancing; go away thinking.

Some past Optic Nerve winners have since bit off a chunk of the American dream. The list includes Whitney Biennial winners William Cordova and Luis Gispert, apart from stalwarts such as Francie Bishop Good and David Rohn. This year's juror list includes Anthony Allegro, a professor of motion pictures at the University of Miami, and the jurors have picked a few true gems: Shane Eason's *Works of the Flesh: Second Study* uses found 1960s Super 8 footage from medical schools to examine body modification. Erwin Georgi's *Lines* is an acid-trip light show that's simultaneously riveting and hard to watch, sort of like a good first date.

One video collage in particular, Emerson Rosenthal's *Pseudocoma*, resonated on all sorts of levels. It's visually arresting and nicely done, referencing George Orwell's bitter lines ("Under the spreading chestnut tree I sold you and you sold me . . .") and recasting the expressway at night as a *Blade Runner* nightmare with such LED signs as "Are you watching your speed . . . To see if we are?" For no apparent reason, the video includes a famed image from Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*. This would be, of course, that pivotal scene when the protagonist, wielding a straight razor, appears to slit the eye of an understandably put-off woman.

The surrealistic landmark crossed my life at the University of Miami, as an aspiring filmmaker in the School of Communication during the Suntan U era. Those were the golden days, studying Buñuel among students who drove gleaming Corvettes, a forever-packed swimming pool juxtaposed, on one afternoon, with 16 people attending a Ralph Nader rally on the adjacent patio. The students in the communications department included a big man on campus named Hollywood Howie and a Long Island girl who once posed an intriguing question during a class on ethics and censorship, "Did they take *Star Trek* off the air because of censorship?" She's probably running Paramount by now, and, in the meantime, film, almost any kind of film, is a consolation.

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