

Exceptions to Predictability

San Francisco / **Janis Crystal Lipzin and Caroline Savage-Lee**

The Fourth Annual San Francisco Art Institute Film Festival in mid-February rarely excited, often bored, and made few new waves. The viewing fare did not disappoint; it just took few risks, settling for obvious visual tricks and time-worn narrative devices. Generally, these observations were the rule, and but for a stunning new film by Chicagoan Sharon Couzin, *Salve*, the evenings revealed the bland predictability of most films chosen for film festivals these days.

Couzin's fourteen-minute film was structured precisely but not predictably, following mathematical premises. The images were composed of cemetery monuments and ornate churches, juxtaposed with the filmmaker's daughter, seen seated on a chair and stating "my father is a mathematician," counting objects, measuring distances, and reading from scholarly texts about Pythagoras and geometric theorems. The fast-paced editing of the component images created a lively interplay between rational and emotional. The geometric/physical actions contrasted with the graceful examination of the products of the rational, i.e., the buildings, always in counterpoint to the ornate Paganini violin music. This is charged filmmaking, simultaneously eliciting emotional and cerebral responses and demanding more than one viewing.

Bastian Cleve's ten-minute silent film, *Zenith*, took strips of film and set them in motion vertically across the screen, creating undulating landscapes and windows in fascinating patterns, like a kaleidoscope fracturing reality by bringing it into and out of recognizability. The sweeping motions possessed a striking kinetic quality, and references to serial

photography brought film back to its origins in the single image.

New York artist Ken Kobland's entry, *Near and Far/Now and Then*, was at once elaborate yet controlled; it is to his credit that he did not succumb to the pitfall of most filmmakers who use an optical printer, the primary device for producing commercial special effects. Although a highly respectable level of craft was employed in his twenty-eight-minute work, the printer wasn't utilized for flashy razzle-dazzle. He applied it, instead, as a neutral means of synthesizing divergent seasons, places and motions, such as when a hand held up small snapshots of the filmed scene visible behind the photograph, and which had been taken during a different time of year, or fragments of architectural subjects were held in front of swish-panning images. A text recalled a commonly observed visual phenomenon: "A man sits on a train and looks out the window. The train speeds along; the nearby objects blur, but in the distance the landscape sweeps slowly past as if on the edge of an enormous wheel. It is as if I am seeing the world from a great height, he thinks. Maybe notions concerning methods of observation form in his mind and dissolve." Then as a voice on the soundtrack was heard clearing its throat, the text suggested and broadened the self-referential visuals to include an anecdotal ramification: "That evening, with six people waiting, he arrives home an hour late, full of excuses."

Works by two local newcomers were also festival standouts: Tom Sime's witty and terse two-and-a-half minute *Sit Still Be Quiet*, in which a single-minded cat was made to do as the title suggests, and Noreen Zepp's untitled first film,



Al Wong, "Moon Stand," ca. 1981, film installation still, at Atholl McBean Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Darryl Yee.

which displayed a ravishing color sense and incorporated a handsome use of the camera obscura near the Cliff House. These artists provided hope that there were some younger emerging film artists in the Bay Area who promised to counterbalance the increasingly commercial and facile fare produced here.

Al Wong's three film installations in Atholl McBean Gallery, later in February, demonstrated a mature artist working with an evolving area of thought. Of the three pieces, *Moon Stand* broke significant new ground for the artist and moved beyond the optical play of negative shadow/positive form, engaging as those are, to embrace a tension between associative content and retinal excitement. The first of the four sections of the film began with a circle of light illuminating a section of the gallery wall. A silhouette of the artist entered to place a microphone as Wong, in person,

simultaneously set up a real microphone against the gallery wall. Laurie Cannon, also in silhouette on film, then walked up to the filmed microphone and pantomimed a Billie Holliday vocal. The artist's eighty-six-year-old father lighting his pipe became the subject of the next section, and artist Madeline Preiser's nervous confrontation with microphone and camera formed the third cameo silhouette. Following these three iris shots, which functioned as mysterious vignettéd portraits, the film showed Wong engaged in a ritual action of ringing a bell and turning off lights, and projecting an image onto a white-faced speaker set up in front of an actual microphone in the gallery space. This sequence escalated into a startling mirror-of-a-mirror type of configuration, confounding the line between film presence and object and suggesting a fertile area for further expansion. □