

On April 16, 1999 I presented an evening of film and film performance at the Western Front Grande Luxe. entitled markings: dimension through surface. This evening presented a group of films and film performances bound by their preoccupation with the manipulation and deliberate alteration of the film's physical surface. Stepping outside the strictures and "industry" means of production generally associated with filmmaking by virtually avoiding laboratories, camera rental houses, and (often) final answer prints, the filmmakers represented here indulge in a variety of film stocks, hand-processing/direct film methodologies and variable modes of presentation, while taking full advantage of the potential found in the film's emulsion to create an intimate and symbiotic relationship to the images. Furthermore, and with a tip of the hat to the Fluxus movement, many of these filmers are disinterested in the art object's longevity; deterioration - even destruction - is a natural and often integral part of the piece's life, with shifts in colour, scratches, and breakage informing its meaning. Through tinting, solarizing, scratching and distressing the film's surface, and with experimental and controlled hand-processing of both black and white and colour film stocks, these works are at once stunning, inspired and moving.

Filmmakers included in this series were John Price, Julia Burns, Julian Lawrence, Richard Reeves and myself. With works ranging from those very much about the tactile nature and potential of the celluloid surface to those which use this manipulated surface to reap both the serendipity and the alchemical magic found in hand-processed and hand-altered film stocks, this evening not only inspired the audience, it also inspired the following essay. - Alex MacKenzie

Practice makes imperfect

By Alex MacKenzie

There exists a growing number of moving image film artists interested in the discussion, pursuit, immersion and focus on what has been coined "self-reliant" cinema. By creating a challenge of form and not finance, a space outside of contemporary mass consumer "standards", and a relative freedom from the institution, these artists are finding tools of expression through a broad range of personal strategies. The re-introduction of Super 8 as a viable and inexpensive form is likely the most visible statement of this kind, but this can reach even further to tactics like the construction of pinhole moving image cameras and the creation of homemade film stock. The primary expression of self-reliant cinema, though, seems to begin with hand-processing, where any gauge of colour or black and white movie film is chemically processed by hand outside of a professional film laboratory, usually by the individual responsible for the film's content-potential. Certain factors play a significant role in the results: the qualities of light captured on the film's surface, chemical mixes, depletion and temperatures, film immersion times, and the individual's state of mind, mood, and engagement in the process. There exists a long and largely invisible history of this kind of work dating to a time before commercial labs existed at all when, outside of the film stock itself, virtually the entire process of making a non-commercial film was in the hands of the maker. 1

The companies making the moving image film stock very quickly created a standard on par with still photo labs. While artists practicing in the field of still photography have largely continued to handle the processing of their negative, the film artist has for the most part left that to the laboratories. This crucial stage of filmmaking is slowly being reclaimed and transformed from a non-variable and systematic process performed with little - if any - consultation, and turned into something else entirely. The instant results we take for granted with most of the fine arts (we of course need never send our paintings, sculptures or music to a lab) are now within our reach as processing time is quick - a mere matter of minutes: long enough that we can consider both our filmed actions and the process of their exposure, and short enough that we are near-instantly gratified. Alternately we can hold off on the exposure of these images to the chemical baths, to imagine them a little bit longer, to picture them in our mind's eye before they are real. The simplicity and economy of this action and its great potential are extremely attractive. Film is able to move from being one of the most expensive artistic mediums to one that is well within reach. Many who begin here for reasons of economy end up staying for the power and vast potential of the self-reliant strategy.

The choice to hand-process goes well beyond the simple and justified desire to control the outcome of one's own work and the economic advantages this offers. These filmmakers are looking for something

intimate, genuine and unmistakably personal: a mode of self-expression which is a direct extension and discussion of the way they might hope to live - or imagine - their lives. There is without a doubt a streak of resistance in hand processing. Quite consciously and conscientiously made outside of the system, hand-processors use the celluloid stocks available and mix up potions that transform it in ways never intended to truly exploit those many layers of emulsion.

With this desire for independence and self-reliance comes a largely solitary and private mode of filmmaking. These are moving images that move you; that have an intimacy and personal quality violently wrenched from the heart or quietly slipped from the soul, a swirl of colour and grain cradling their emotion. A tree swaying in the wind can become an explosion of the spectrum, popping and crackling like visual vinyl, glowing and shimmering like setting sunlight on a soft breeze lake, a speedy jittering grain moving like tiny ants across the screen, all congregating in their chosen corners.

The first rule of this handmade crafting of the film is to surrender any notion of predictability or guaranteed outcome. These filmmakers learn that being precious with the image is neither an option nor a desire. Wanting the play of light, chemical, temperature and nature's own laws to build levels of chance into the frames, a conscious effort is made to allow the unknown to impact and effect, and then in turn and in time to react to this.

Practice makes imperfect, and it becomes apparent that this is much more desirable and inspiring than the known or predictable. The possibilities are finally as limitless as paint on a canvas, with the added dimension that the filmmaker selects first the image and only then how it will be impacted upon. This is an infinitely surprising road, forever taking them to a place not yet even imagined.

Regaining control by managing all stages of this process brings one closer to understanding the potential inherent in the celluloid and therefore being ever more attuned to the secrets it holds. By the same token, in removing oneself from the equation and allowing the chemical wash to take on a level of responsibility or consciously letting go of that control, all elements may converge, with the filmmaker acting only as a medium. The serendipity which plays a large role in the images being made begs the big question: to what degree are you the inventor of the work you make and how much is it a genuine experiment in emotion and technique - in catalytic creativity? 2

And then, why stop at conventional processing chemicals? Once the decision has been made to alter the surface of the emulsion in an unorthodox way, a whole world of transformative potential opens up. Anything that sticks to film without preventing its passage through the gate of the projector can be used. Inks, fruit and vegetable dyes, textured stamps, nail polish, markers, and paint barely scratch the surface of possibilities. Scratching the surface, too, is as much a part of the process: sandpaper, needles, straight razor blades, rubber cement, hole punchers, acid baths and bleach can remove or obscure the surface of the film to great effect. Alternately, the film can be left in organic elements for long periods to slowly erase or transform the image. Rotting grapefruit rinds, urine, acidic earth, menstrual blood and brine are a few I have observed to astounding results, and are primary examples of working with the immediate environment and the tools at hand.

A flattened image on a strip of celluloid is what the film companies will tell us is a memory forever captured on their film stock. But the rest is up to the filmmaker and the memory remains a variable. The actual handling of the image in the processing also brings this otherwise intangible art closer to the tactility of painting or sculpting. By manipulating the negative we are painting on this tiny canvas and etching its surface to transform on the screen as these frames skip by 24 times in a second. The impact made on the camera and its contents will determine what light will fall when next that memory is mechanically conjured. With hand processing, things can - and often do - take unexpected turns, and this so-called memory can be transformed entirely, reinvented, and even erased. Here we find a way of approaching work that removes the need to conserve the illusion of a moment, instead encouraging, even demanding, its transformation: breathing new meaning in while never holding it too dear, never too precious with the image, because it could very well be gone. The bleach may be off, the developer depleted, the toner faulty, the light leaking in. It is this knowledge of the play in the image that can ultimately transform the action of filming. In thinking ahead to the development stage as variable and unpredictable but never certain, the magic of that exciting possibility that we may be left with nothing can be incredibly liberating.

We are playing with tools of a bygone era, already quickly fading into an antiquated past. A simple beam

of light reveals every frame as a tiny, distinct painting, crafted by the hand of the maker and through reason, passion and magic becoming what we see before us: drawn, scratched, painted or marked, removing and adding colour, layers of texture, and then the dancing image... Touching or feeling, brittle or fleeting, here now and then gone again. A nostalgia is inherent in this work, in the scratched and grainy surface of the film and in the history of the mechanism. The ephemeral nature of this strategy - the transient image in its chemical immersion, the inevitable and gradual erosion of the film stock after countless screenings - is primary to this working method. These images are not made to be put behind glass and frozen forever, but rather their lifespan demands slow deterioration, every fresh scratch a new action on our eyes, every jump in the projector a new emotion. The life of this small and delicate film is a reflection of how we live our lives, where meaning only exists for as long as those who once witnessed it remember.

1 The choice to shoot and process on a reversal stock implies a decision to create an original work. Should one wish to retain a "clean" negative, reproduction must occur by contact printing the original immediately. Filmmakers working in hand processing pursue both of these strategies, but the discussion here is centred around the former, where issues of ephemerality, transformation and the eventual demise of the work are central.

2 Serendipity can be defined as the faculty of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for, of making fortunate discoveries by accident. "We are indebted to the English author Horace Walpole for coining the word serendipity. In one of his 3,000 or more letters, on which his literary reputation primarily rests, and specifically in a letter of January 28, 1754, Walpole says that "this discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind which I call Serendipity, a very expressive word." Walpole formed the word on an old name for Sri Lanka, Serendip. He explained that this name was part of the title of "a silly fairy tale, called The Three Princes of Serendip: as their highnesses traveled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of . . ." (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition Copyright © 1996, 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company.)