

The Oregonian

Sunday, August 29, 2004

Oregon Lens

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Over the past few years, members of Portland's independent filmmaking community have won mentions in national magazines, screened at hot-stuff showcases such as Sundance Film Festival and New York City's Whitney Biennial, and drawn fans to showings around town at funky micro-cinema spaces.

But even with this growing national reputation, many Oregonians may still know more about Britney Spears' marriage plans than they do about the work of Portland's passion-rich, budget-poor filmmakers.

That's why Morgan Currie decided it was high time to bring the work of some of Portland's most interesting artists to living rooms all over Oregon. Thanks to Currie and Oregon Public Broadcasting, starting Monday night, viewers in Oregon and Southwestern Washington can meet the likes of Richard Tracy, who turns society's discards into art; tune into music videos for popular bands the Shins and Bright Eyes; take a whimsical trip through grocery-store aisles from the point of view of a shopping cart; and much more.

They're all part of "Oregon Lens," an annual showcase for locally made film and video that has run on Oregon Public Broadcasting television for the past six years. Currie, a 24-year-old associate producer and researcher at OPB in Portland, approached "Oregon Lens" executive producer Steve Amen with a thought: Why not program this year's edition with examples of work that helped earn Portland a mention as one of the top 10 cities for independent filmmakers in *MovieMaker* magazine? With everyone from economic development officials to politicians talking about how important a young, creative community is to a city, why not show off Portland's riches? Why not get these films to people who can't make it to the Northwest Film Center, galleries or other alternative spaces where such work typically screens?

Amen didn't require much convincing.

"Morgan is very tied into the younger, more avant-garde, experimental community, and that's a whole new link I didn't have," says Amen, host and executive producer of OPB's "Oregon Field Guide." While "Oregon Lens" in years past has featured work by an earlier wave of Portland-based film artists

(including Kelley Baker, Chel White and Joanna Priestley), Amen's training in TV news and documentary makes him, he says, lean toward more polished, finished approaches. So when Currie came to him with videotapes of offbeat, rough-around-the-edges work, Amen got an eyeful. Some were just too racy, he recalls.

"We know who our audience is and we want to push the envelope, but we don't want to send them over the edge. But for the most part, they were nice pieces I hadn't seen before."

The program includes "Richart," Vanessa Renwick and Dawn Smallman's documentary about artist Richard Tracy, creator of his own "art jungle" of rescued trash; two looks at passionate collectors, Patti Lewis' "Collectors at Large," and "The Beautiful and the Fine," by Rob Tyler, Adrienne Leverette and Eric Schopmeyer, who work under the collective name Archipelago; Harrell Fletcher's "Forbidden Zone," about a man with Down syndrome and his personal bond with the "Star Trek" episode featuring the disabled character Capt. Christopher Pike; and Ian McCluskey's "Sun Gu Ja," a documentary about Korean immigration to the Pacific coast.

In deciding what to include in the four-night "Oregon Lens" program, Amen found McCluskey's film "more my style, the long-form documentary. He's always done really nice work." Amen, who's 53, laughingly admits he found other pieces more challenging. "There were a few where I was staring at the screen thinking, 'These are five minutes I'll never get back. How old am I? Am I turning into my father?'"

Experimental, not obscure

Currie, herself an experimental documentary filmmaker, says, "It's really, really cool that OPB is doing this. It's amazing to have work on television that's more challenging, but a lot of this stuff is really entertaining. Experimental doesn't mean obscure and infinitely slow."

Like many young people moving to Portland, Currie came here with a degree in something else (philosophy, Smith College) but found herself drawn to the film scene. She interned with Matt McCormick's Peripheral Produce, an internationally known screening and distribution series that promotes experimental and nonmainstream work. Currie formed a professional and personal relationship with McCormick, whose short films have screened at Sundance and at festivals around the world. The "Oregon Lens" program includes "Past and Pending," a music video for the Shins, by McCormick and Greg Brown; and McCormick's witty "The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal," praised by Village Voice critic Amy Taubin as "a send-up of art criticism and urban planning . . . a seemingly off-handed but exceptionally intelligent foray into American vernacular art."

Cat Solen, 23, moved to Portland about two months ago from Chicago. "Oregon Lens" includes "Bowl of Oranges," her music video for Bright Eyes, for which Solen hand-animated hundreds of still photographs. After art school and running an art space in Chicago, Solen thought she'd give Portland a try. "I like to say Portland's like living in a giant art school," says Solen, who rents a room in a house in Northeast. "There are so many people who are working on stuff actively. There's an onslaught of artists here. They kind of take over, they're in every neighborhood. That's rare in Chicago."

Hoping for teen viewers

Solen hopes teenagers watch "Oregon Lens," to see that films can be made in a do-it-yourself way. "Those kids and their parents could see they can do something other than take the normal route, getting a business degree or working in an office."

Portland indie filmmakers Trevor Fife and Reed Harkness are relative veterans of Portland's indie scene. "Oregon Lens" features Fife's haunting "Meridian Days," which showed at Sundance. It's a poetic travelogue made from film and audio Fife collected during a cruise with his grandmother. Reaching thousands of viewers at once is a novel concept, Fife notes, especially since showcases in town that exhibit some of these works "are enthused when 75 people attend." TV exposure, he adds, "is the kind of thing that keeps you in good graces with family members who have no idea what you do."

Harkness is represented by "p:ear," a video/Super 8 film documentary about the downtown Portland art center for street youths. "Portland has such a vibrant independent film community, and I think it's mainly the young, creative, bike-riding types who you see at local shows," Harkness says in an e-mail. Though not much of a TV watcher himself, Harkness is happy to reach a broader audience.

"These are ordinary Portlanders/Oregonians who are passionate about making good films," he says. "I think it's an exciting thing for everyone, the filmmakers who get to show and the community who get to watch."

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