WINNIN VIDEO

San Francisco Tom Kent

Eighty separate works by sixty-five individuals and groups were entered in the video section of this year’s San Francisco Art Festival. The works range in length from one minute to sixty minutes, and purport to cover almost all genres of videocart, from straight-wander-the-streets-with-the-camera-on-portapack verité, through community action/public access programming, to the high art of Terry Fox’s elegant and shamandic Children’s Tapes. The quality of the entries displays a similar spread, touching all the bases between work good enough for anybody’s museum, to work I can only charitably describe as video eyewash. There are, of course, the usual dollops of simple and processed feedback, colorized and synthesized abstraction, “Intense,” “angulated” studies of interpersonal disconnection, records of dancers or dance troupe hamhandedly disarranged via keying, matting and all the other nifty little detours available to those with access to the proper equipment. This year there is even a bonus, of sorts: an unintentionally hilarious, very slickly produced FR documentary about the founder of a bible college in Oakland, whose great dream is to meet David Ben-Gurion and to plant a forest in the Negev Desert.

All this tape was looked at by a jury of three: David Ross, deputy director and video curator of the Long Beach Museum of Art; Suvi Wilder, video artist formerly associated with Video Free America, and one of the makers of VFA’s monumental Continuing Saga of Carol and Fred; and myself. The jurors had three prizes to award: the California Video Resource Project/San Francisco Public Library Purchase Prize to simplify — CVRP buys a copy of the winning artist’s tape for $125; the Louise Riskin Prize from the San Francisco Art Commission, $250 to be awarded in a lump or apportioned any way the jurors saw fit; and $300 worth of free video editing time or other services donated by General Electronics in Oakland. After twenty-five hours in what bondage (the term is a coinage of Bonnie Engel, whose nonprofit corporate front), the Public Eye, was responsible for organizing the video portion of the Art Festival this year, as well as last year — said bondage interrupted only by a little sleep and a little food — the jury parcelled out the loot as follows:

-CVRP/San Francisco Public Library Purchase Prize to Mon Jone Gox and Mike Heller for Fuzzy Wuz He, a devastating and precisely focused satire on videodit and video artists in general and, in particular, on the smokescreens of technomysteries jargon far too many video artists ape their time chewing out rather than addressing the problem at hand — i.e., making art.

-Video Editing Time/Services from General Electronics to Darryl Saplin for his documentary work on his performance piece Spillman Bisects The Pacific.

-$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Joel Harmann and Craig Schiller for their documentary of the San Francisco Museum of Art’s Artists’ Soapbox Derby — this award was a dead certainty: if every other foot of the tape was unwavestable garbage save for the Interview with Don Potts, it still would have been well worth the fifty skins.

-$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Terry Fox for Children’s Tapes — another dead certainty; I find Terry Fox’s video even finer and more powerful than his live performances, and I’m a sucker for his performances.

-$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Joel Glassman for Dreams, a brooding, eerie and absolutely masterful thirty minutes of video. Glassman has been moving toward Dreams for some time now, and having arrived, I hope stays in the neighborhood for many years Dreams is all dark castles and bat lightning, full of falls and ants and bees and decaying sheep, black rooms and seedy laughter giving way to demented weeping, orchestrated into an intense, riveting Black Mass of the soul, the finest example to date of a rapidly emerging style I’m just patsy enough to label “gothic video.” (David Ross calls it “German expressionism,” but to hell with him — this is my article).

-$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Max Almy and Barbara Hammer for Superdyke Meets Madame X. Ms. Almy is a video artist and Ms. Hammar is a filmmaker-turning-video artist. They found that the Hammar wants to make a tape but hasn’t all the equipment she needs to do it: Almy has. Their confrontation/collaboration turns literally into a record of an intense and overwhelming, unshakable humanity. Virginia is hard to watch; Bloom’s assault is so viciously brass-knuckled you expect Virginia to jump up at any minute and go after him with the nearest blunt object, or at least leave the studio. But she never does; she stays tied in her chair with a kind and patient smile, a beautiful and stupendous woman.

-$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Terry Fox for Shave And A Haircut, which records Schiller’s evolution (or de-evolution, depending on your cultural politics) from Hairy Hippie to exquisitely toned, extremely straight out of Gentleman’s Quarterly; or Improvisations To Music, in which actress Andrea Kessler responds off-the-cuff to selections from Stravinsky, Tin Pan Alley music she has never heard before.

In addition to all the above prizes (nine — count ’em), the San Francisco Museum of Art has promised a show to the winners or any selection thereof, the details of which have yet to be worked out.

At this point, it’s anybody’s-guess whether next year’s Art Festival will include video or not. The Art Commission seems determined to treat videoart as an orphan form whose presence in the Festival is all right so long as someone else does all the work necessary to put it there. To date, someone else has been Public Eye Engle and such volunteers she has been able to charm, cajole, bribe, seduce, possibly threaten with large chunks of time and energy to the cause. And while all those people obviously test out on the nifty side of normal, it’s doubtful they’re whacked enough to crank themselves into the same tired mechtrander three year in a row. Actually, the best take on the whole situation comes from The Amazing Rhythm Aces — the Art Commission and video comprise “a third rate romance, low rent rendezvous.” Naturally, this creature has some ironies you could comb through every Art Festival since the first one in 1946 and be hard-put to come up with examples, that is, when used as art to Fox’s Children’s Tapes, Glassman’s Dreams, Hermann’s White I Was Waiting, Bloom’s Virginia, etc. and so forth, straight down the line. You’d probably find a few things. Here and there...