

Arts & Entertainment

SECTION N

The Atlanta Journal □ THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

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SUNDAY, MAY 7, 1989

IMAGE Festival Explores Video's New Frontiers

By Steve Dollar

Staff Writer

What's thrilling about the 13th Annual Atlanta Film and Video Festival has little to do with celluloid and much to do with video.

This year's six-day event, as always an eclectic showcase for independent artists, signals a major shift toward video as a cutting-edge form for exploring experimental textures; video as a more accessible eye into marginal lifestyles; and video as a frontier for witty personal declarations.

It's not that the festival, sponsored by Atlanta's IMAGE Film and Video Center, is ignoring film as a medium. Indeed, the screenings begin Tuesday at Woodruff Arts Center with the local

premiere of "Building Bombs," Atlanta filmmakers Mark Mori and Susan Robinson's richly ironic documentary about the Savannah River Plant, told through the first-person stories of people who worked there. And it officially opens Wednesday with a gala benefit screening of "That's Adequate," West Coast director Harry Hurwitz's affectionate spoof of silent movies, a noisy Bronx cheer that weds the irreverence of "Spinal Tap" to the pre-talkies style of D.W. Griffith.

The festival's eight other programs spotlight 34 films and videos shot by artists from across North America. "Interestingly, we got more video work than film," says IMAGE director Ruby Lerner. "And of the video work we did get, a lot

of it was quite strong."

Rather than lump pieces under "documentary" or "student" headings, the programming designed by Ms. Lerner and her staff strives for a kind of creative synergy. "This way," she says, "you possibly get people interested in certain themes, issues or kinds of work."

For instance, Thursday night's provocatively titled "Literary Inspirations (Or Full Frontal Existentialism)" is tailor-made, Ms. Lerner suggests, for "card-carrying philosophers, poets and semioticians," who'll get a discount admission to the screening. The program jostles the down-home focus of Atlanta's folklore-inspired Gary Moss and George deGolian with the far-out ob-

13th IMAGE Continued on 11N

13th IMAGE Film Festival Explores The Woolly Frontiers of Videoland

From Page 1N

sessions of Seattle video artist Gary Hill.

Messrs. Moss and deGolian unveil "The Bitter Berry: The Life of Byron Herbert Reece," their "poetry video" on the hard times of Mr. Reece, a North Georgian whose poetry and other writings had to compete with a stubborn case of tuberculosis. In 1958, at age 41, he took his life, leaving behind an unfinished autobiography. With the help of Georgia poet Bettie Sellars, the filmmakers tell Mr. Reece's story for him, using his own words.

Mr. Hill evokes a literary source as well, although the virtuoso volley of technique on display in the 44-minute "Incidence of Catastrophe" makes it difficult to guess that the work in question is Maurice Blanchot's "Thomas the Obscure." The artist's use of effects is stunning, visually lush. Words on a printed page pry loose into waves through a canny use of superimpositions; waves crash into stray thoughts; thoughts spill out of mouths in a kind of Joycean babble. An exploration of the act of reading as a psychic event, the piece courts cliché — that omnipresent water imagery and the artist himself, nude, flailing away on a bathroom floor — but skillfully transcends it.

That the festival can attract the work of a Gary Hill, recognized as one of the country's top experimental video artists, is a sure measure of its value. Other veterans represented include video pioneer Woody Vasulka — whose electronic landscape piece "Art of Memory" anchors the "Ways of Seeing" program May 14 — and Super-8 farceur George Kuchar.

Mr. Kuchar, the clown prince of '60s underground filmmaking, switched to a Super-8 video format a few years ago, producing a series of intimate, offhand video diaries documenting everything from his romantic obsessions to his bowel movements. Without Mr. Kuchar's self-conscious narration, laced with Jewish angst that at once dwarfs and parodies Woody Allen's, this would just be indulgent bad taste. Actually, it is indulgent bad taste, but somehow charming.

The director's latest, "Weather Diary #3," is a highlight of the Saturday night "Goings and Comings" program. Also included on the program is New Yorker P.J. Pesce Jr.'s accomplished "The Afterlife of Grandpa," a student film with cable-ready production values that — wonder of wonders — finds fresh whimsy in a body-reversal theme. As a bonus, playwright Christopher Durang weighs in with "The Visit," a made-for-PBS short that stars Jeff Daniels, Julie Hagerty and Swoosie Kurtz in a comic saga about a high school sweetheart from hell. It's a nifty, entertaining piece. Coming from the pen of Mr. Durang, you'd expect it to be. What's really fascinating about the festival are the zingers bouncing in seemingly from out of nowhere.

Some examples:

■ "Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby SM." — Produced by the New York video collective Paper Tiger Television, this 35-minute piece reconstructs the Baby M case. Mary Beth Whitehead's status as a "rented uterus," supplies the grist for a wickedly incisive argument against class bias and "the law of the father." Ms. Rosler appears in the guise of Ms. Whitehead, plaintiff Elizabeth Stern, the Sterns' lawyer Gary Skoloff, a sperm cell, Baby M and an ovary. The deadpan impersonations, coupled with tough talk



Robert Vaughn is featured in a scene from "That's Adequate."

about "the industrialization of motherhood," makes for a politically correct rant underlined by subversive humor. (Featured in the Sunday 3:30 p.m. program, "Daughters.")

■ "Sadobabies: Runaways in San Francisco" — Produced by Nancy Kalow and May Petersen, this 30-minute video documentary approaches a near-clichéd subject — the plight of teenage street kids — with deceptive ease. Meeting disaffected punk vagabonds on their own level, it lets them tell a story through improvised songs, drinking bouts and recollections. First, it illustrates their subculture, detailing its colorful personalities as facets of an intimate community. Then, it kicks open a trap door. As products of physical and emotional abuse, these runaways transfer aggression onto toy torture dolls — "sado-babies" — that grimly, wordlessly testify to the emotions the kids are still trying to exorcise. (Featured in the Saturday 1 p.m. program, "Streetwise.")

■ "Crack Clouds Over Hell's Kitchen" — Produced by the Educational Video Center in New York, this high school student video draws on the inexperience of its teenage interviewers, who query crackheads — called "McThirsties" — with a disarming openness. Addicts talk freely, you suspect, because there's no unctuous hype inflating the conversations. A refreshing antidote to Geraldo Rivera. (Also featured in "Streetwise.")

■ "The Mission" — Made by Skokie, Ill., chuckleheads Jim McCarthy and Steve Martini, this 23-minute stroll among the booze-sodden celebrants who occupy the infield of the Kentucky Derby tops David Letterman for middle-American absurdity. (Featured in the Friday 10:30 p.m. program, "Friday Night Late!" to be aired at IMAGE, 75 Bennett St. N.W.)

Balancing out the festival are programs with a firm focus on political issues and personal heroism.

Friday night's main event is the Oscar-nominated documentary "Promises to Keep," a profile of Washington, D.C., homeless activist Mitch Snyder. On Saturday at 3:30 p.m., the program "Faces of Oppression/Faces of Change" offers a mix of film and video, experimental and documentary forms, that confronts topics such as AIDS and apartheid.

The festival is a heady assortment, yet it also provides something of a crash course for folks curious to know what's happening outside the nation's entertainment factories. It's a vital alternative.

"If the feeling is that people equate it with 'weird,' well, there's work that's more entertaining and informative than a lot of stuff you can see on TV or in a movie theater," Ms. Lerner says. "It's a real important showcase for work that wouldn't be seen anywhere else in the community."

The 13th Atlanta Film and Video Festival runs Tuesday through May 14, with screenings in the Rich Auditorium, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St. except as noted. Tuesday: "Building Bombs," 8 p.m., \$8, \$6 IMAGE and High Museum of Art members, includes reception. Wednesday: "That's Adequate," 8 p.m., \$15, \$10 IMAGE and High Museum members, includes reception.

Admission to the remaining programs is \$6, \$4 for students, IMAGE and High Museum members. Thursday: "Literary Inspirations (Or Full Frontal Existentialism)," 8 p.m. Friday: "Portraits of Commitment," 8 p.m.; "Friday Night Late!" 10:30 p.m., at IMAGE Film and Video Center, 75 Bennett St. Suite M-1, N.W. Saturday: "Streetwise," 1 p.m.; "Faces of Oppression/Faces of Courage," 3:30 p.m.; "Goings and Comings," 8 p.m. Sunday: "Daughters," 3:30 p.m.; "Ways of Seeing," 8 p.m. Programs are subject to change. Festival passes are available for \$25, \$20 for students, IMAGE and High Museum of Art members. Information: 352-4225.