

**ART AS A FORM OF CONVERSATION:  
Avant-Garde Film/Video Artists from the USA**

A series of 3 programs curated by Katy Martin  
Dashanzi Arts Festival - 798 Galery District - Beijing, China - May 2006

**Introduction**

A conversation is going on among artists in the USA, and another one is going on among artists in China. These shows bridge those conversations. If you look at video art from both countries, you will quickly see that we are all thinking about the same issues. In both countries, there is a huge interest in the body – the body in relation to urban space, to perception, politics, and cultural signs and signifiers. Also, artists are asking, in a time of social change and a new global economy, how is our sense of self re-created? Is culture passed down, like a visceral memory, or is everything open to redefinition?

*Art as a Form of Conversation* offers a rich survey of the ideas and images American artists are working with today. Some of the works are deeply personal explorations of family. Others question the boundaries that divide so-called opposites (public/private, self/other, male/female, to name a few). Still others follow in the tradition of Warhol, using humor and performance to put a new spin on popular culture.

These programs bring Chinese audiences leading American film/video artists who exhibit in major museums and festivals around the world. Of the 13 artists included, three are currently in the prestigious Whitney Biennial; two are in the Tribeca Film Festival; and others have been prominently featured in the New York Film Festival, the Berlin Film Festival, Oberhausen, Rotterdam, and other important festivals where they have won top awards. We are also showing emerging video artists.

**Program #1**

***NOTES, LETTERS, FAMILY HISTORIES, AND SONGS***

Total running time: 73 minutes

SAUL LEVINE

**WHOLE NOTE**, 2000

12 minutes, super 8mm film on DVD, silent

"A portrait of my father in the last days of his life.

'Nothing is as whole as a broken heart' - Hassidic saying." - S.L.

SAUL LEVINE

**AUGUST MOON AND SEA**

1997, 4 minutes, super 8mm film on DVD, silent

A summer evening portrait and reflections on the beach

SAUL LEVINE

**AMAZING GRACE** (from the series **LIGHT LICKS**), silent

2000, 3 minutes, super 8mm on DVD

Inspired by medieval Jewish mystics who looked at the sky, reflected in bowls of water. The round surface acted like a lens.

KATY MARTIN

**DAFFODILS**, silent

1981, 3 minutes, super 8mm on DVD

"A poem to my husband in the early days of our romance" - K.M.

ANDREW LAMPERT

**#6 OKKYUNG** (from the series **THIS IS OUR MUSIC**), silent

2004, 7 minutes, 16mm film on DVD

A portrait of Korean born cellist, Okkyung Lee, one of New York City's most exciting musical voices.

LARRY GOTTHEIM

**THE OPENING** (from the series **CHANTS FOR HAND**)

2006, 7 minutes

The film is a cinematic song for the filmmaker's son about his Haitian heritage.

ELYSE MONTAGUE

**THROUGH THE SKIN**

2002, 18 minutes

A personal testimony on the transgender experience. Combining home movies and performance pieces, Montague jarringly discloses the conflicts between his changing female body and his sexual identity.

ABIGAIL CHILD

**THE FUTURE IS BEHIND YOU**

2004, 21 minutes.

Anonymous home movies, beautifully shot, are shaped into a fictional narrative. The footage is from Germany in the 1930s, and the filmmaker has composed letters - read in the voiceover - that set small, everyday gestures against a

sweeping historical backdrop. What is said, and what is never spoken of?  
Parallels with events unfolding today are subtle but resonant.

**Program #2**

***PERFORMING OURSELVES***

Total running time: 70 minutes

SCOTT DRAPEAU

**PATTON IN THIRTY DAYS**

2005, 9 minutes

To make a work of art, do something on a regular basis. " I sing to myself on a regular basis, usually something by the musical artist, Mike Patton, so I carried a camera around with me to capture myself doing so. I limited the amount of time spent shooting and editing to less than 10-15 minutes a day. After thirty days, I had created a 9-minute piece of organized chaos." -S.D.

VINCENT GRENIER

**TABULA RASA**

2004, 8 minutes

A teacher's advice to students on how to avoid fights is set against the cultivated neutrality of institutions. Shot in a high school in the South Bronx, one of NYC's poorest neighborhoods, the film moves between abstraction and representation, calm amidst underlying tensions.

VINCENT GRENIER

**HERE**

2002, 7 minutes

A poetic haiku of color, war, and child's play.

A hidden landscape of subdued violence.

" The world is always bigger than one's immediate understanding of it. I am interested in exploring the tensions that are revealed in this gap. I look for situations and people that struggle in particularly eloquent ways with these tensions. ... I like to draw attention to the fact that we are all peculiar results of larger cultural and social constructs that get mixed up in a myriad of permutations. I also like to draw out the poetic insights such collage engenders." - V.G.

BILL BRAND and KATY MARTIN

**SKINSIDE OUT**. 2002, 10 minutes

*Skinside Out* features paint on skin, carried out in an expressionist mode on both of the filmmakers' bodies. Shots from the studio are juxtaposed with footage of a construction barge along the Hudson River. The emphasis is on the pleasure of looking -- at the edge of repulsion -- and the implications of making public an essentially private gesture.

LEWIS KLAHR

**TWO HOURS TO ZERO**, 2005, 9 minutes

Klahr explores the pleasure and power of narrative compression by using vintage comic books to tell a fast-paced elliptical crime story.

PEGGY AHWESH

**THE STAR EATERS**

2003, 24 minutes

The story of *The Star Eaters* merges the enigma of the night sky, its intoxication and desire, with the exhaustion and emotional decay of the boardwalk in Atlantic City. The film is told from the point of view of a woman adrift in the gambling joints and false-glamour of Atlantic City and her relationships with various hustlers, the ocean, her ex-lovers, and her own memory. The themes of the film are gambling, risk taking, transgression, and the quest for meaning.

PROGRAM #3

***RE-IMAGINING OURSELVES (IN SOME OTHER BODY) -***

Total running time: 72 minutes

BILL BRAND

**DOUBLE NEPHRECTOMY**

1998, 4 minutes

"This double portrait cinematically projects my sister's wound onto my own body and psyche. Shortly after she received a kidney from a friend, I filmed the scar that resulted from removing both her damaged organs. This video projects that image of her two-week-old scar onto my own body, visualizing my complex feelings of knowing I have been spared the gene that caused her disease. In the video, I find, on my own body, the imagined scars we share." - B.B.

BILL BRAND

**INTERIOR OUTPOST**

2003, 10 minutes

"Here, my body is explicitly a screen on which I project photographs from the family archive to articulate my experience of difference within the family experience of illness and death." -B.B.

LOUISE BOURQUE

**GOING BACK HOME**

2000, 3 minutes, from 35mm original

"Turmoil of unsheltered childhood: the dwelling as self." -L.B.

LOUISE BOURQUE

**JOURS EN FLEURS**

2003, 5 minutes, from 16mm original

The film strip itself was soaked in menstrual blood. "The title is based on an experience from my coming of age in Acadian French Canada where girls would refer to having their menstrual periods as 'être dans ses fleurs.' As a result of incubation in menstrual blood for several months, the original imaged inscribed on the emulsion undergo violent alterations. The shedding of the unfertilized womb depredates the fertilized blossoms and substitutes its own dark beauty." L.B.

LESLIE THORNTON

**ADYNATA**

1981, 30 minutes

Definition: *a-dyn'-a-ta* (from Greek. *a*, "without" and *dynasthai*, "to be able" (= "powerless") "*A declaration of impossibility, usually in terms of an exaggerated comparison. Sometimes, the expression of the impossibility of expression.*"

A film in which the artist imagines herself as a Mandarin lady of 1861. The work of Leslie Thornton has been highly influential, and questions how we think of ourselves within a global/post-colonial context.

"In *Adynata* she investigates the *mise-en-scène* of Orientalism—the conglomeration of sounds and images which connote the Orient for a Western viewer/auditor. Here, Thornton's work converges with the theoretical explorations of such figures as Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Roland Barthes (*Empire of Signs*), and Julia Kristeva (*About Chinese Women*). The film's organizing image is a formal portrait of a Chinese Mandarin and his wife taken in 1861..." -Mary Ann Doane, Film Historian

KATY MARTIN

**GUILIN ROAD**

2005, 15 minutes

"*Guilin Road* is a meditation on how we identify physically with the people and things we look at. It combines observations I made in Shanghai, China with footage of me, painting, in my studio in New York." - K.M.

BILL BRAND and KATY MARTIN

**SWAN'S ISLAND**

2005, 5 minutes

"*Swan's Island* explores gesture in painting, and how it relates to the hand held camera. In its choreography, *Swan's Island* is a duet. The person filming and the person filmed are moving as one, and yet they are separate, each an island. Seeing and being seen are inextricably bound with emotions of love and loss, longing, and a sense of place." - B.B. and K.M.