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NEW YORK UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL

5/4/04

WEB ARTICLES

By Spencer Parsons

Having done more than any other single festival to remap the territory of the underground, NYUFF takes a step back in its 11th year to survey what's become of the flora and fauna. Low-fi grue and high-concept porn, cosmic abstractions and pavement politics mix it up all over the place from the gutter to the gallery to the gallery in the gutter, spawning lovely and alarming hybrids that should keep tunneling into lands beyond for years to come.



Under the steady hand of new festival director Kendra Gaeta and the watchful eye of executive producer Ed Halter, the festival's impressive slate of features most directly assess what's gone on over the last decade and change. On one end, Jim Van Bebber's long-rumored and mythologized *The Manson Family* displays some 40 years' worth of underground/exploitation history and style on its pockmarked emulsion alone. As formally exacting as it is frankly nauseating, *The Manson Family* is a technical marvel at the service of a bloody, hairy fetish object over a decade in the making. If it didn't exist, *Film Threat* would have to invent it.



The Manson Family.

To the sidelines of a Van Bebber/Brakhage cage match stands NYUFF stalwart and ultra-prolific powerhouse James Fotopoulos's world premiere feature, *Esophagus*. Erupting from scabby film formalism, scaly body horror, and oozing video art, this outwardly twisted and inwardly touching anti-narrative of relationships driven to abstraction probes at the fleshy, toothy outer limits hinted at by his work since the 1999 breakthrough of *Migrating Forms*.

While Fotopoulos's inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial marks but one example of the overground taking notice, the underground upholds its tradition of returning the favor and then some. This year found media pirates in top form, deprogramming classic texts by such artists as Michael Snow (Ben Coonley's witty, shimmering *Wavelength 3D*), Matthew Barney (the anonymous *Cream Master Karaoke*), Karl Rove (notably Benj Gerdes's *Intelligence Failures* and Dara Greenwald's *Strategic Cyber Defense*) and J.K. Rowling (see below) with equal

alacrity.

At the length of a bloated fantasy blockbuster, *Wizard People*, dear readers is at once the most breezily casual and tenaciously ambitious of this year's hijackings. In the cigarette-scarred voice of a dotty, tangent-mad poet, Brad Neely narrates an alternate soundtrack for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* into deranged curlicues of philosophy and metaphor that hilariously collapse into confusion and profanity. The joyous surprise isn't just that it's funny enough to (nearly) sustain the running time, but that it possesses such artful character and musicality in a performance so seemingly dizzy on its own fumes. Start sweet-talking that star-tattooed video store clerk now, dear readers, to hook you up before Warners waves its cease-and-desist wand.

Peggy Ahwesh and Bobby Abate stage another kind of smash-and-grab with their stunning festival-opener, *Certain Women*, a consciously anachronistic DV occupation of 1950s melodrama adapted from the Erskine Caldwell novel of the same name. At some far peninsula from the expected grime of *The Manson Family*, the unnervingly poignant *Certain Women* represents the underground's newer territory, as much for the delicate estrangement of its colorful, docu-porn sheen as for its conspicuous casting of so many figures from the community around the festival.

That the casting makes for good cinema rather than scenester indulgence offers a potent reminder that NYUFF has earned its rep not just by showing good stuff, but by bringing together and nurturing an enthusiastic network of filmmakers from all over the country — and, increasingly, the world — to trade notes and throw down gauntlets. It's a great place to find collaborators and couches to crash on, to get in arguments about the smartest uses of obsolete technology, the meaning of "experimental" or what's the right occasion for wearing those free underpants from fest sponsor Tylenol, the ones with "OUCH" printed across the rear.

And it's a rumination on community — specifically early punk's DIY family — that fuels the most beautiful and moving film at the festival, Roddy Bogawa's 16mm essay *I Was Born But...* Beginning with the death of Joey Ramone and ending with a late concert by the lamented Joe Strummer, Bogawa's patient lyricism wraps its brain and heart around how one's chosen community affects personal and ethnic identity. Nostalgia for punk would seem a betrayal, but here serves to reiterate an underground's most urgent message, one that's also directly articulated by the voter registration cards in the festival's goody bags: regime change begins at home.

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