

'Radical Light' sees area through fractured lens

Jesse Hamlin, Special to The Chronicle

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In Dion Vigne's bopping "North Beach," a five-minute 1958 film that exults in the textures, colors and motion of the neighborhood, a kaleidoscope of fast-cut images and patterns fills the screen: gritty sidewalks and sped-up traffic, elegant balustrades and weathered wood doors, bay windows, brick walls, fish on ice and piles of oranges.

Steve Anker had never heard of Vigne when he and fellow curators Kathy Geritz and Steve Seid began researching what became "Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000," a major multi-pronged project of the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive.

Ten years in the making, it includes a hefty book, an exhibition and a six-month film and video series, co-presented by San Francisco Cinematheque, featuring about 150 works. "Radical Light" documents and celebrates the rich tradition of experimental film and video that found fertile ground in the freewheeling Bay Area, a hub of artistic exploration and technological innovation. The series gets rolling Sept. 17 with sound and light performances by artists who came of age in the new millennium.

"Vigne only made a few films, but they're very lively and original and very much of their time. They're great documents of the Beat era," says Anker, who began this project while director of San Francisco Cinematheque and is now dean of film and video at CalArts in Southern California.

"North Beach" screens on the Sept. 19 program "Landscape as Expression," introduced by filmmaker Ernie Gehr, whose "Side/Walk/Shuttle" is one of many films inspired by San Francisco's vertiginous streets, vistas and light.

"One of the catalysts for 'Side/Walk/Shuttle' was the topography of the city with its steep hills and fantastic views of the Bay Area, as well the pull exerted by gravity, not only on architectural structures, but also on human creatures as they walk up or down those hills," e-mails Gehr, who now lives in New York. "Coming from flatland (New York City), this interaction with an urban environment was a new, intriguing, and amusing experience I had to confront daily after moving to an apartment on top of Russian Hill."

Warner Jepson was another find, says Seid, PFA's video curator. He made sound and video works with synthesizers, like the one invented by his colleague Stephen Beck, to create color-modulating psychedelic works that Seid calls "absolutely stunning self-portraits."

Jepson will perform on a device called the Templeton Mixer on the Oct. 17 "Procession of Image Processors" program that includes two of Beck's films: "Illuminated Music, #1," with its morphing colors and fractal-like forms, and "Cycles," a 1975 collaboration with Jordan Belson, known for his swirling cosmic abstractions.

Many of the works were preserved by the PFA with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and other funders. "In many ways this was a project of resurrection and preservation," Anker says. "A good amount of both the films and videos that we uncovered were lost, hidden and, in some cases, decaying."

The series traces the development of radical Bay Area filmmaking from the 1940s surrealist works of poets and dramatists like James Broughton and Sidney Peterson, Harry Smith's painting-on-celluloid abstractions and Sara Kathryn Arledge's painted glass slides.

Those artists laid the path for the Beat films of the '50s; the taboo-breaking works of the hippie era; George Kuchar's sexualized and over-the-top melodramas; the political and conceptual work of artists such as Terry Fox and the Ant Farm collective.

Anker calls the radical film tradition here "an underground experimental art response to commercial media." In '49, Peterson made the compelling "Lead Shoes" with his students at what's now the San Francisco Art Institute. It's a weird, violent and comic work touching on incest and patricide, using reversed, distorted and sped-up imagery (you have to laugh at the rats scurrying out of the beheaded deep sea diver's helmet).

The San Francisco Museum of Art showed the film at its Art in Cinema series, a seminal program that introduced audiences here to the avant-garde films of Buñuel, Man Ray and others. They inspired artists like Broughton graphic artist Frank Stauffacher, who ran the series, to make their own films.

"There have always been innovative screenings in the Bay Area, usually started by artists," says Geritz, the PFA's film curator. One was Canyon Cinema, which evolved into a major distributor and the San Francisco Cinematheque. It was started 1961 by the Bruce Baillie, who will be on hand at SFMOMA Sept. 23, along with fellow filmmakers Robert Nelson and Lawrence Jordan, for a screening of their stuff.

In November, the Cinematheque will show "Found Footage: From Junk to Funk to Punk" at the Victoria Theatre. The films include the late Bruce Conner's 1961 masterpiece "Cosmic Ray." It's a mesmerizing collage of mostly found footage - go-go-dancing nudes, missiles, battleships, early Mickey Mouse animation - set to Ray Charles' rocking "What'd I Say?"

Then there's "Schmeerguntz," at PFA on Oct. 13. It's a satirical 1966 film by Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley that tears into female stereotypes, juxtaposing Miss America beauties and glamour-girl ads with images of mothers cleaning soiled baby bottoms and pregnant women vomiting in the toilet. You won't see that at the Cineplex.

Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000: The film and video series component runs Sept. 17-March 31. Pacific Film Archive, 2575 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, and various San Francisco venues. \$5.50-\$10. (510) 642-0808. www.bampfa.berkeley.edu.

E-mail Jesse Hamlin at datebookletters@sfgate.com.

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