MIDI ONODERA

Interview

with Helen Lee

Toronto-born and based, Midi Onodera makes films of uncommon ambition. As a project, her films involve explorations of race, gender and desire, motivated by experiments with the medium. Under the rubric of women and cinema, her work occupies a special, shared space (as Onodera later points out). Subtle and formally inventive films such as Ten Cents a Dance (Paradise) (1990) and The Displaced View (1989) — films in which Onodera herself appears — have mined this intersection where female authorship meets the unexpected contours and ironies of lesbian experience, representation and cultural history. Add influences such as early feminist film, new narrative and a queer punk aesthetic, and Onodera seems damn near unclassifiable. And she likes it that way.

Sedans of the Moon. Onodera's first feature film, is currently undergoing completion with anticipated release in 1994. The story involves Alex Koyama (played by Natsuko Ohmori), as she embarks on making a film about tattooing where she meets the intense, enigmatic Chris Block (Keram Malicki-Sanchez). Set in the downtown Toronto art scene, Alex becomes increasingly drawn into a world of body alteration, transsexuality and personal transformation. The film also stars Dana Brooks as Penny Louter. Alex's close friend and confidante, and Melanie Nicholls-King as her missed assistant, Montana. In addition to making Sedans of the Moon, Onodera is also producing a Super-8 feature film, Girls in the Band, directed by Candy Flasser.

MO: Maybe I can start at the beginning. The reason that I got into film in the first place was the fact that film brings together all of the elements that I wanted to explore in photography, writing, and visual art. I guess what I was interested in was making art. There are all these terms that are thrown around in this industry like director, filmmaker and writer, but I still like to think that I am an artist at the core. That's not to say that directors can't be artists, it's just that I feel that my approach to filmmaking is coming from an artistic background and practice rather than a commercial sensibility or motive.

HL: How would you describe the relationship between your earlier films and this new film?

MO: In the very early days, I was really trying to figure out how film worked. So many of the early films are constructed on one idea, like the use of gaze and the element of composition, very formal elements like that. Then I would lay a story on top of the visual component. I guess that's how I came to produce Ten Cents a Dance, which had a formal, technical backbone and a narrative which augmented the theme of the film. That's how I see film working; I like to find a technical device which enhances the content or the theme of the piece.

HL: What was the technical thing in Sedans of the Moon?

MO: The technical thing was the structure of a conventional drama. I realized that the things I wanted to say within that construction were very outside of a conventional narrative. So by engaging in a form that was already considered mainstream and accepted, I could bring in other elements that were completely foreign to that structure. So I hope that by using that kind of framework, I'm being more accessible in terms of an audience, that would actually see the film, and hopefully they will get something out of it because of the content.

HL: Apart from the formal challenge of making a drama, what was the original idea for this film?

MO: Right after The Displaced View (in 1990), I wanted to do something that was in a way similar to the themes explored in Ten Cents a Dance (Paradise). Something that dealt with sexuality and gender identity. So I started examining the links between sexuality and gender, specifically transsexuality. I did a lot of research, just because I didn't know very much about transsexuality and I really wanted to do a thorough job on it. Very early on I found out that female to male, and male to female, philosophies, history and context were completely different from each other. So when you talk about transsexuality, you have to say, well, which gender are you talking about? There's been quite a lot done on male to females, as one would expect in this culture. For instance, mainstream films like Footloose and Mrs. Doubtfire comically explore the cross-dressing theme. But there has been very little done on female to males. It's a similar phenomenon in the medical world. Medical treatment for women is less advanced than it is for men, and a clear example of this is sexual reassignment surgery. Men have very little trouble transforming into women but women still have a difficult time going the other way. So I spent a lot of time on research, writing and re-writing and trying to figure out what the story was, and who the characters were.

HL: So the core of the film was around transsexuality?

MO: Yeah, the ideas and the issues in the film have not changed since the beginning. If anything, I think they've grown and become more ingrained in the character rather than a theoretical essay applied to something. So it becomes more of a character trait or a character insight, as this is my theory and I want to prove it. I think that part of the magic in a conventional drama is the power the characters hold over the audience. If an audience finds the characters interesting then the story will most likely be interesting.

HL: Transsexuality and tattooing are two different degrees. taboo subjects. And they also have, as I'm sure you've found, very developed communities. Can...
YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE REPRESENTATIONAL PROCESS OF RECRUITING "CULTURAL" PRODUCTS INTO A THEATRICAL FEATURE, OR UNDERLYING MORE MAINSTREAM CONTEXT. WHAT IMPACTS DO THE role OF WOMEN HAVE ON THESE PRODUCTIONS? DO WOMEN HAVE BEEN POISED FOR CULTURAL ICONS ON ENTERTAINMENT TOWARDS?

OH, I guess it's great that they're queens are getting some of us to think of them. But I think for the most part our role tends to be that of ancillary or social figures. I think that overall drag queens represent something that is too different for the average person.

In film, she is that, did it all go back to character. If you have a good handle on who the character is and what you want them to do, I think that is something that you have to think about society. I mean, Penny Lancer is a very caring woman who happens to be a drag queen. She deals with all that stuff that she pretends would consider normal, but the club is her home, and that's where she's supposed to be. So I think that both of the characters in the film are in a sense "the drag," and she's responsible because you have the power to make a film and I don't think the power to portray the characters that you have always been known for. I don't think that's necessarily true.

At one point, I remember I was told to do some small scenes as a woman who was involved in the performing arts, and one of them said to me, you know, you have a huge responsibility because you have the power to make a film and I don't think the power to portray the characters that you have always been known for. I don't think that's necessarily true.

ON THAT LEVEL, I THINK THE FILM IS VERY AMBITIOUS. IF YOU DISCUSS WHAT YOU WANTED TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THE CHIEF BLACK CHARACTER?

The concept of the character was rooted in gender identity. Not only does Cross carry herself but she also has this character and her life is centered around her. Since gender is such a fundamental component of who we are, I found that I had to strip things down to the essential being of what that person was. I think this is a huge responsibility that we all have, not just in portraying characters that are not gender-identified but also in portraying characters that are, because it's our job to make people see the world through the eyes of the people we play. By doing this, it's not just a way to tell the story of a character, it's also a way to tell the story of society.

WHAT ABOUT ALEX KIJANYA, WHERE I'M SURE OTHERS WILL BE TEMPTED TO SAY IS YOUR MOVIE ALTER-EGO. HOW ARE THE CHARACTERS YOU'VE NEVER BEFORE SEEN, I THINK, ON SCREEN.

OH, it is because she's Asian?

Perhaps, also. Also, as you've said, she's not a typical Asian woman... She is on screen...

WEI: I don't think I'm a bit of a bitch, but other people may see it differently. Alex is a bit of a bimbo and a gonzo. And again, that's not all there is to her. She's working in the male-dominated world of film and she's very clear about what she wants and very determined to get it. She's strong but vulnerable, perceptive. The fact that I decided to make her a drag queen is the most of the reason why I'm not doing anything else. I want to make a show that represents women in film. It's extremely important to me as a character to be on screen that are not white, middle-class heterosexuals. As far as the character of Alex goes, her body is simply another component of her character. Her body is not an entity. Alex Kijanya cannot be pigeonholed onto the existing social stereotypes of a black girl or a drag artist. There is much more to her than that. Unlike some contemporary films which simply use People of Colour as a 'colourful' addition to a white cast, Alex and Montara are informed and to a degree shaped by their race, and they don't want to be written as a white character. They want to represent a new sense of normalcy. Transgenderness is not as much about the physical as it is about everything that is person feels inside with what they look like on the outside. Transgender is an art form.

DO YOU YOURSELF HAVE ANY TATTOOS? AND IF SO, WHERE?

(I couldn't) I'd rather not say.

Perhaps because your films operate in many contexts for gay and lesbian audiences, Asian view- ers, and women, and this tendency to be ambivalent about these identifications. Still, as a filmmaker, one is dependent on these communities of viewers. And you don't want to come across as a queer film that is just for queers. Doesn't that count for something?

I suppose it counts for other gay men who are pro- ducers and film directors who want to make films. If you're lucky there will be some money left over for women to make some films. It comes down to simple economics. Distributors and sellers don't see that films produced by women have an audience. They are seen as marginal products with a negligible dollar return.

HOW DO YOU VISUALIZE YOUR WORK AND SPECIFICALLY THIS FILM, TO BE POSITIONED (IF AT ALL) IN THE NEW QUEER CINEMA, WHICH AS LESBIAN FILM CRITIC LIKE B. PARKER BICE AND JAY PATTISON HAVE POINTED OUT, HAS BEEN ABOUT THE BODY.

They're right. New Queer Cinema is about gay stuff. I don't see that there are any women within that definition. But isn't that always the way? I mean if one looks at the gender split between men and women making films, it's obvious. Women have a much harder time in the film industry. There are very few women in this country who do directing features and it's not because women are less talented, it's because women just have a lot more trouble in all aspects of the film business. So if you understand that, then one can clearly see why there is a lack of lesbian and gay feminist productions. Queer cinema is about men. It is not about women. And really much of the queer cinema that is being produced concentrates solely on sexuality rather than sexuality as being part of a character interacting in a larger context. Personally I don't see a lot of queer cinema that I find incredibly interesting.

REALITY? FILMS LIKE POISON (BY TODD HAYNES) AND SWOON (BY TOM KALIM) OR THE LIVING END (GREGG ABASHI)?

I think that it's really good that they're being produced, but I still think that one has to question the absence of lesbian films. So, really, I guess my sympathy for gay films is not as strong as it should be, because I think it's important to represent women in film and that is what it is because as a film that it is in the way the things they interact with themselves and the other characters.

AND MONTARA... WHAT ABOUT THE BLACK/AIAN FACING?

Again, on the screen, the kind of representation in either gay films or lesbian films, is almost always geared towards white women. I don't think that's necessarily true. I think that women are more complex than that. They're not just passive as active little figures. Characters and people are many different things, sometimes all of these.

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of aspects that I want to develop through my films and not all of these directly relate to a specific sexuality. Again, my own sexuality is just a small part of who I am. I don't want to be limited to produce a certain type of film. I want the freedom to explore themes and issues that I find interesting, not just the "in" politically. The same goes for the form in which I choose to engage in... for instances. The Displaced View was exploring the boundaries of documentary film and Sardness Of The Moon deals with a conventional narrative structure. I don't know what my next film will look like.

HL: How much have filmmakers like Su Friedrich or Chantal Akerman, lesbian filmmakers who are truly iconoclastic in my mind, been precedents for you?
MO: Chantal Akerman was a major influence for me in the beginning. I found her work, especially her earlier work, extremely exciting. There was a raw energy and an aggressive exploration which flowed through her films that I could relate to. It wasn't that I wanted to produce work that was similar to hers. It was more about having the confidence to break down the barriers that existed for women during the formalism movement. By the way, Su spelled backwards is "us" and we all influence each other.

HL: How is this context different, for a Canadian filmmaker, your own mind all those other categories: independent, woman, Asian, lesbian, Japanese Canadian... do I miss any others? Who supports you — where do you find your support? Women filmmakers, especially, are not getting many opportunities in making feature films in Canada.
MO: I'm sure you missed a few categories, like meat-eating and pet-owning, but I don't know if it's specifically different for Canadian women making features as opposed to American women. Private film investment is still not too high as I believe it is in the States. There is very little foundation support for filmmaking in this country and just the population difference between Canada and the States makes a huge difference in how we make our work. Here, there is a very big division between art films and commercial films whereas in the States and in Europe I think that these definitions are less rigid.

As far as support, financially I have been very fortunate to receive funding from the arts councils and smaller community organizations like the Toronto Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal. Personally, for this film, the most significant support has come from my partner, my producers, Billie Kay and Helene Leton, my parents, friends and peers. This is extremely important to me because without the ongoing emotional support of those around me, it would probably be impossible to take risks in my work.

Border/Lines seeks substantive, critical articles on our racialized cultures that are situated from "here," that's Canada. Pieces on specific Canadian cultural practices such as film and video, art, music, as well as everyday negotiated publics, ethnographic sites and archological projects are especially encouraged. Articles can range from the vicissitudes of dim sum in Vancouver, to dance music in Scarborough, to Bloor St. W.'s barber shops, to Italian garages, bands, race wars at funding agencies, on the streets, in the classroom, between the sheets, to black little league hockey in Rimouski.

Please send inquiries, proposals or manuscripts to Border/Lines 163 Bloor Street Suite No. 301 Toronto Canada M5S 2H7 Attention: Kees Van Orden and Gerald Walcott Deadline for completed manuscripts: September 1, 1994