

# MIDI ONODERA

## Interview

Toronto-born and based, Midi Onodera makes films of uncommon ambition. As a project, her films involve explorations of race, gender and desire, motored by experimentations with the medium. Under the rubric of women and cinema, her work occupies a special, *shared* place (as Onodera later points out). Subtle and formally inventive films such as **Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)** (1986) and **The Displaced View** (1988) — 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.

**Sadness 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 Ohama), as she embarks on making a film about tattooing where she meets the intense, enigmatic Chris Black (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 Loafer, Alex's close friend and confidante, and Melanie Nicholls-King as her misused assistant, Montana. In addition to making **Sadness of the Moon**, Onodera is also producing a Super-8 feature film, **Girls in the Band**, directed by Candy Pauker.

**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 the industry like director, filmmaker and auteur, 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 concentrated on one area, like the use of grain 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 *SADNESS 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?

with Helen Lee

*Sadness of the Moon*, Filmmaker: Midi Onodera  
Photography: Candy Pauker

**MO:** Right after *The Displaced View* (in 1988), I wanted to do something that was in a way similar to the themes explored in *Ten Cents A Dance (Parallax)*. 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 to which gender are you talking about?

There's been quite a bit done on male to females, as one would expect in this culture. For instance, mainstream films like *Tootsie* 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 re-assignment 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 characters rather than a theoretical essay applied to something. So it becomes more of a character trait or a character insight than "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 for the audience. If an audience finds the characters interesting then the story will most likely be interesting.

**HL:** TRANSSEXUALITY AND TATTOOING ARE, TO 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 "SUBCULTURAL" WORLDS INTO A THEATRICAL FEATURE, AN UNDENIABLY MORE MAINSTREAM CONTEXT. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES WHEN DRAG QUEENS HAVE BECOME POP CULTURAL ICONS ON ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT?

**MO:** I guess it's great that drag queens are getting recognition, or whatever, in the mainstream. But I think for the most part they are treated as oddities or social misfits. I still think that overall drag queens represent something that is too radical for the average person.

In film, I think again, it all has to go back to character. If you have a good handle on who the characters are, then I would hope it wouldn't matter who they represent in society. I mean, Penny Loafer is a very caring individual who happens to be a drag queen. She deals with all this stuff that the mainstream would consider wild, but the club is her home, and that's where she's comfortable. So I think that each of the characters in the film has a strong base to work from.

At one point, I remember I was talking to some transsexuals who are 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, and therefore you have to represent me in this way. And I said, I understand that, but I can't simply present a character who is positive in a one dimensional way. All I can do is understand that position and hope to achieve something greater than positive imagery reinforcement. I don't like to portray flat characters in my films, I don't like to give people pat little answers because I don't think that they exist. I think that characters are more complex than that. They're not just a positive or negative stick figures. Characters and people are many different things, sometimes all at once.

**HL:** ON THAT LEVEL, I THINK THE FILM IS VERY AMBITIOUS BECAUSE IT DOES HAVE MANY COMPLEX CHARACTERS. CAN YOU DISCUSS WHAT YOU WANTED TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THE CHRIS BLACK CHARACTER?

**MO:** Chris Black was a fascinating character to create. The core of the character was rooted in gender identity. Not only how Chris saw herself but also how the other characters saw and interacted with her. Since gender is such a fundamental component of who we are, I found that I had to strip things down to an essential being of who that person was. Chris developed into someone who is not simply gender-confused but also someone who is complex and contradictory, affected by social norms and values. Chris is multi-dimensional, she is in some ways a victim of her situation, but she is also very strong and determined in what she thinks.

**HL:** WHAT ABOUT ALEX KOYAMA, WHICH I'M SURE OTHERS WILL BE TEMPTED TO SAY IS YOUR MOVIE ALTER-EGO. SHE'S TRULY A CHARACTER YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE, I THINK, ON SCREEN.

**MO:** Is it because she's Asian?

**HL:** PERHAPS. ALSO, AS YOU'VE SAID, SHE'S A BITCH. NOT A TYPICAL ASIAN WOMAN WE SEE ON SCREEN.

**MO:** Well I don't think I'm a bitch, but others may beg to differ. Alex is a bitch, but in a good way. 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 succeed. She's strong but vulnerable, personally. The fact that I decided to make her Japanese-Canadian has more to do with me than anything else. I want to see more Asian women represented in films. I think it's extremely important to see characters on the screen that are not white, middle class heterosexuals. As far as the character of Alex goes, her race is simply another component of her character, as is her sexuality. Alex Koyama cannot be pigeon-holed into the existing screen stereotypes of a geisha girl or a dragon lady. 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 Montana are informed and in a way shaped by their culture and sexual identity through the way they interact with themselves and the other characters.

**HL:** AND MONTANA...WHAT ABOUT THE BLACK/ASIAN PAIRING?

**MO:** Again, on the screen, the kind of representation in either gay films or lesbian films, is almost always geared towards white couples. I don't think there's been very much representation of a mixed-race same sex couple.

**HL:** THEY'RE RARE TO BEGIN WITH, NOT RARE...

**MO:** Rare even in the heterosexual world...

**HL:** RARE WHEN IT'S NOT A WHITE/OTHER PAIRING. IT'S VERY HARD TO FIND ON SCREEN. SO I WANTED TO KNOW HOW YOU DEALT WITH THE OVERDETERMINATION OF SOMETHING LIKE THAT, TO HAVE THE BLACK/ASIAN PAIRING

**MO:** I don't think that I really discussed it with the actors. We discussed it as far as the character point of view, but not what it means in a bigger racial and political context. Certainly I had a handle on what I was doing but it wasn't necessary for me to engage the actors in that kind of discussion. Montana is another person that Alex has completely used. If anything, she's one of the more positive characters in the film, I guess. She's very sure of herself, she knows exactly who she is and what she wants. She is very straightforward all the way through. Of course I am aware of the stereotypes of Black women on screen and like Alex, Montana was originally created to redress that negative and one-dimensional representation of Women of Colour which continues to exist in the media. But that was just a starting point for the character. Montana is much more detailed in the end.

**HL:** YOUR PRESENTATION OF THE TATTOOING IMAGERY IS REALLY INTERESTING. IT'S USUALLY MEDIATED BY BEING SHOWN ON A TELEVISION SCREEN, BREAKING AWAY FROM THE NARRATIVE REALIST STRUCTURE OF THE DRAMA, IN REALLY GRAINY, SUPER CLOSE-UPS. IN THIS WAY, IT SORT OF FUNCTIONS AS A PORNOGRAPHIC OR SPECTACULAR IMAGE, IN REVEALING A SOURCE OF PLEASURE OR DESIRE, OR A KIND OF "UNSPEAKABLE ACT."

**MO:** Initially, my interest in tattooing came about because I realized that it was a form of body alteration, just as piercing is or scarification. And it seemed to me that tattooing was the perfect visual metaphor for transsexuality. On a very superficial level there are links between a sex change operation and tattooing. There's pain in both of them, it's permanent, it's completely fixed and it's up to you to decide if you want to get it. I mean, no one forces a sex change operation on you, and no one forces you to get a tattoo, unless it's in a larger context. But the big difference between the two is obvious. If one gets a sex change operation it is because they want to right a wrong of nature. Transsexuality is not as much about the physical as it is about matching what a person feels inside with what they look like on the outside. Tattooing is an art form.

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

**MO:** (nods) I'd rather not say.

**HL:** PERHAPS BECAUSE YOUR FILMS OPERATE IN MANY CONTEXTS (FOR GAY AND LESBIAN AUDIENCES, ASIAN VIEWERS, AND ALSO WITHIN FEMINIST CINEMA), YOU TEND TO BE AMBIVALENT ABOUT THESE IDENTIFICATIONS. STILL, AS A FILMMAKER, ONE IS DEPENDENT ON THESE COMMUNITY FORMATIONS.

**MO:** Personally I don't like to be labelled or categorized and I don't like my films to be either, but I understand that people like to keep things simple. As far as which community I am dependent on, I can't say that there is a specific one which I feel fully connected to. I think I travel on the fringe of things. I don't feel completely comfortable with any label except as an independent filmmaker. I feel that who I am informs my work but I am not catering to one specific community or agenda. If anything I guess I enjoy playing with people's preconceived notions of labels.

**HL:** HOW DO YOU ENVISION YOUR WORK, AND SPECIFICALLY THIS FILM, TO BE POSITIONED (IF AT ALL) IN THE NEW QUEER CINEMA, WHICH, AS LESBIAN FILM CRITICS LIKE B. RUBY RICH AND CHERRY SMYTH HAVE POINTED OUT, HAS BEEN ABOUT THE BOYS.

**MO:** They're right, New Queer Cinema is about gay men. 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 mak-

ing films, it's obvious. Women have a much harder time in the film industry. There are very few women in this country who are directing features and it's not because women are less talented, it's because women just have a more difficult time in all aspects of the film business. So if you understand that, then one can clearly see why there is a lack of lesbians producing films. 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 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.

**HL:** REALLY? FILMS LIKE POISON (BY TODD HAYNES), AND SWOON (TOM KALIN)? OR THE LIVING END (GREGG ARAKI)?

**MO:** 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 if anything, I guess my sympathies would go more towards women filmmakers. I don't think that lesbians are going to make a big dent in Queer Cinema. But maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. The men who are producing films within Queer Cinema are doing so within the boundaries of conventional narrative and although I politically support their work I don't see anything terribly cinematically innovative.

**HL:** FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS "THE NEW QUEER CINEMA," I DON'T THINK YOU COULD CALL THOSE FILMS CONVENTIONAL. CERTAINLY, THESE FILMS AND THEIR MAKERS HAVE ALL ACHIEVED HIGH PROFILES, AND HELPED TO CREATE A NEW-FOUND VISIBILITY AND REPRESENTABILITY. THEY'RE GAY AND MALE-CENTRED, BUT ALSO QUEER. DOESN'T THAT COUNT FOR SOMETHING?

**MO:** I suppose it counts for other gay men who are producing films or who want to. Maybe if we're lucky there will be some money left over for women to make some films. It comes down to simple economics. Distributors and some funders don't see that films produced by women have an audience. They are seen as marginal products with a narrow dollar return.

**HL:** COULD YOU CONJECTURE ON WHAT THIS NEW WAVE OF CINEMA IN THE 90S WOULD LOOK LIKE, CREATED BY LESBIAN DIRECTORS? IE, THIS FEATURE BEING PRODUCED BY CHRISTINE VACHON (PRODUCER OF POISON AND SWOON), MAYBE? OR OTHERS, LIKE CANDY PAUKER'S FILM WHICH YOU'RE PRODUCING?

**MO:** First of all I don't know if one can categorize films based on the sexual identity of the director or producer. If that is what a "new" lesbian cinema is about then I would not like to be categorized in that way. Once an audience starts expecting certain themes to continue in a filmmaker's body of work then it gets into a grey area of expectation and eventual censorship. There are a lot



*Sadness of the Moon, Keram Malicki-Sanchez  
Photography by Candy Faulter*

of aspects that I want to develop through my films and not all of them 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 ones that are "in" politically. The same goes for the form which I choose to engage in - for instance, *The Displaced View* was exploring the boundaries of documentary film and *Sadness Of The Moon* deals with a conventional narrative structure. I don't know what my next film will look like.

the most significant support has come from my partner, my producers, Phillip Ing and Mehernaz Lentin, 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.

*Helen Lee is a Toronto-based filmmaker, writer and critic.*

**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, NEVER MIND ALL THOSE OTHER SUBCATEGORIES: INDEPENDENT, WOMAN, ASIAN, LESBIAN, JAPANESE CANADIAN...DID 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 as 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 US makes a big 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,



## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Tired that the black popular is always defined from a U.S. perspective?  
Tired of the designation Asian, Afro, or Indo American while passing through the States?  
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Tired, at the same time, of simple 'multi-culti' celebration?  
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