

Nelson Henricks shines

By Johan Hultqvist

Last night I was reminded of what makes the Images Festival so exciting for me: I can go and take in a scheduled event with no expectations and come away with that wonderful feeling of having been not only transported but, more importantly, transformed, if only ever so slightly. I must admit that up until yesterday I was unfamiliar with Nelson Henricks but after Friday's "artist spotlight" screening I'm eagerly awaiting his future work. In the video art community Henricks is very well-known and admired but he deserves to be a household name. It became clear from the post-screening mingling that I was not the only, shall we say, above-average consumer of all things art in the audience discovering his beautiful and highly intelligent films on Friday night. And since the Joseph Workman theatre was far from packed Images was obviously doing the right thing in trying to introduce Henricks to a wider audience.

Henricks' videos are short, dense and elegant like zen adages. His complex work begs to be contemplated and analyzed but like all great art it has an undeniable, immediate beauty that transcends the underlying philosophy. His earlier work is built on narratives, his more recent is less linear, but all of it is infused with a healthy dose of humour. The New York Times once described the Japanese author Haruki Murakami as a magician who explains to you the trick he's about to perform and yet you can't figure out how he pulls it off. The same is true for Nelson Henricks. He has a very musical ear; some of his films would stand up as songs. He is also an excellent writer who consistently manages to juxtapose the wonder and the absurdity of life. In Planetarium (2001), which revisits the eve of the 1969 moon landing, he writes: "Mom said, 'the moon does look different tonight'. Then we went inside and ate donuts."

Conspiracy of Lies (1992) is based on the narrator having found a set of documents on the street, including detailed household budgets and various lists. The clever title serves as a warning to the viewer: we don't know if we're dealing with pure fiction or if the filmmaker actually did find those pieces of paper. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that we cannot be sure. That's the opening any good storyteller looks for because by becoming uncertain we also become suggestible: anything has the power to be true.

Comedie (1994) is a brilliant little gem and the funniest film in the retrospective. Apropos entropy, the narrator confesses: "I worry about the universe's suicidal tendencies." But Comedie is not a series of clever physics jokes. If anything, it reminds me of the metaphysical speculations in some of Jorge Luis Borges' compact "ficciones". The narrator starts seeing patterns in the irregularly spaced tiles on the walls in the subway. The narrator is convinced that there is a code, a message, a language and eventually he finds that it's a transcription of a piece of music - i won't tell you which. Suddenly, everything has the power to potentially be a symbol for something else. Henricks touches on our obsession to find order,

which we in turn take as a sign of meaning or divine design. But the fact is that chaos is a human invention. In Nature, everything has its place. For example, there is no such thing as waste in Nature. But this kind of order cannot be expressed as mathematics; it requires the language of poetry or prayer. We are part of Nature and yet we abuse her. Where does this self-destructive behaviour stem from? Maybe the universe's suicidal tendencies are no laughing matter after all.

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Window (1997) and Time Passes (1998) bring to mind the writing of Paul Auster. In Window the camera captures the same tree outside the same apartment window during the four seasons. It makes me think that of Harvey Keitel's character Auggie in Paul Auster's Smoke who year in and year out sets up his tripod in the exact same spot at the same time every day outside his Brooklyn smoke shop to take a picture of the intersection. The street becomes a living, breathing organism, never the same in two photos. In Time Passes time, ahem, passes in the form of shadows sweeping over facades and clouds scurrying across the sky, all accompanied by the sound of a frenetically scribbling pen. "They write in order to disappear", a voice says, as if describing most of the writer protagonists in Paul Auster's novels. I think most artists live for the moments when they become so completely absorbed by the creative process, moments that can last for hours, that they lose track of not only time but also themselves. The narrator dryly states: "To transfer oneself onto paper is a considerable task."

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The longing for transcendence grows stronger in Crush (1997), in which the narrator states that he is "immensely dissatisfied with being human". Crush is about longing for a higher self, longing for liberation from the human form, longing for gills and fins and dissolving edges. "When i'm free of the past I'll be free of the future", the narrator says. What does that mean? How do we free ourselves of our past? Perhaps by staring at things. In Satellite (2004) Henricks encourages the viewer to "stare at something until it is meaningless", a statement that might sum up the poetics of fantastic Toronto surrealist poet Stuart Ross. When something becomes meaningless we have a chance to see it as if for the first time. Nelson Henricks helps us do that. And seeing something for the first time is a chance to create meaning.

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