

Interview of Robert Huot by Arnaud Lefebvre

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Robert Huot– Go?

Arnaud Lefebvre– Yes.

RH– Well... You know, Scott MacDonald said that he thought all my little films like the “Erotic Duo” and “Cum Foo” and “Dark Scenes from the Barn,” are really part of the Diaries, the Super-8 Diaries. And in fact, “Erotic Duo” is made of two episodes from an early, I guess 1979-80 Super-8 Diary. And there supposedly gonna be an erotic show, but it never happened, I can’t recall the would-be curator, but it originally was a trilogy and I eliminated one of the sections, and, again it was taken from one of the Diaries and made into a separate film, theoretically for this show.

You know, when I made the Diaries, I wasn’t really thinking about showing them publicly, particularly in that I just wasn’t thinking about public venues, I was just making these films cause I wanted to make them. And they’re pretty playful and, you know, I use the word “campy;” because they’re often putting on ideas about filmmaking or esthetics, or whatever. So they’re in general playful, less so “Dark Scenes from the Barn” but they’re generally kind of playful and really, ultimately part of the Diary Film or Films. And my, you know, working with Carol was a big part of it, and with this show at Munson Williams Proctor, it’s making me think a lot about my life as an artist and my partnership with Carol, you know, became a very important part of my whole life in general and my life as an artist, and, you know, working with her, and art and the farming, politics. So she was a very important player in my life and she was a partner often in the films. We made a film based on her beautiful masks, which you’ll see at the Kinne Memorial. We made a little film called “Masks;” and it’s a kind of a pretty little, it’s a kind of a continuous take, not really edited, you know, just one scene after another sequentially.

So, you know, the films, again, they were made with just a, kind of a playful attitude, and, you know, working with Carol, and having some fun. Yeah, there was an erotic element, Carol... I was madly in love with her and her beauty, she was an inspiration, a muse, you know, and I think that’s a big part of it.

AL– But in those Erotic Films, one feels that there is a special universe in the films, something belongs to the film of what you create, because there is a kind of stage, or... So it’s also about something, the film is playful but it’s also about something, there is something happening in the films, and what is it?

RH– What is it? (laugh) What is it... That’s hard to answer, I think. But yeah, they are little stage sets, and...

AL– And things happen in the films?

RH– Yeah.

AL– So it seems there is a kind of “scenario”?

RH– Yeah yeah yeah, yeah. But it’s pretty casual and spontaneous. You know, we set up this scene, and then play! Often costume is a big part of it.

AL– It seems they are kind of references to something else?

RH– Yeah, yeah, yeah. For instance, the music for, at least... Okay, in “Erotic Duo,” the music is music from “Star Wars,” there is a group called Meco, there was a bar scene in “Star Wars” with all these weird mutant-type people [he sings the tune], you know. So it’s kind of referring out to the larger culture, shall we say, and then the second part, the music is Ian Dury “Sex and Drugs and Rock’n Roll,”

so we're kind of mimicking that, we had smoked pot, snorted cocaine, sex and drugs and rock'n roll, and we sort of play at sex, so yeah, it's in a context of a larger culture I think...of course! you know... Again "Cum Foo" is a camp play. Sort of movies of swordplay and karate and all jujitsu and all... We were kind of doodling around in these costumes, you know, and playing! And then I made those big spray paintings kind of graffiti set for that, and as I was saying, you know, it was like ten feet high and twenty feet wide, so it was like a set, a stage set.

"Dark Scene from the Barn" is kind of about a reversal of male-female dominance and also a little autobiographical... One of the scenes is Carol as my "mother" spanking me, you know (laugh), and of course there are scenes from the Iraq invasion, so it's hooking back into what's going on around us, there's a couple of shots of George H.W. Bush, Bush Senior, and there's shots of dead animals and there was also a story called "The Dead Man," I can't remember the author but it was a fairly well-known book at that time, and so there's a scene where I'm a dead man, I'm laying on the floor as like a corpse, so it's making all these different references. So yeah, it's diaristic but it's also referential to things that were happening simultaneously. So it's both private and also hooked into the public culture.

AL— And why did you wait for a long time to make them public, or to show them?

RH— Well that's a good question. As I think I said earlier, when I made them, I didn't think about them particularly as public material, they were part of the Diary in essence, and, you know, we were talking earlier about the whole concept of counterculture dropout, you know, the Timothy Leary drugs, and the counterculture, and leaving the official culture, and as I said, there's an element—not in the films so much—but element of, I'm gonna say "arrogance," in that I felt I could live apart from this paradigm of the artworld and make art that was hopefully somewhat free of the constraints or demands of being a successful artist in that milieu, you know. So the Diary Films and the Diary Paintings were made in a relatively... as independent as possible, without constraints, without feeling the need to satisfy professional or public demands. They were just things that occurred "naturally"—I don't know if naturally is the right word but—that occurred just, you know, kind of out of impulse.

AL— But you showed the Diaries before...

RH— I showed the Diaries actually at the Paula Cooper and at Millennium in New York and did a little traveling, there was a period where we all, Hollis and I, and Larry Gottheim, and my contemporary artists, filmmakers, there was a whole circuit of independent theaters or spaces that devoted themselves to all kind of films. So the first films were 16mm and mostly silent, and I did travel with those and shown those, and I was in the process of departing from the official artworld but I did in that transition period...

AL— But so, why did you specifically on these Erotic films, why did you keep them private for a longer time?

RH— You know why? I think in part... to a degree protecting Carol, I mean I didn't want her to be seen as some kind of a "porn star," or I was thinking in a way of protection of Carol, I didn't want to embarrass her; not that she necessarily would have been, but that's in my own mind, she's my, my love, my cherished one, you know, so I'm very possessive in a way. Even though I was supportive and encouraged her and her work and her life and her independence, I still was possessive.

AL— But is it not, somehow, all of your art which is very intimate and which becomes public, because all the Diaries they are very private...

RH— Yeah

AL— And there are made to be seen, also...

RH— Yeah.

AL— They are not made to be seen, but they need to be seen!

RH— (laugh)... Well, you know, at this point in my life, I'm an old man, you know (laugh), I'm not gonna be around for very long, maybe I will be, I don't know, probably I will—you know, "The good die young," so I'll probably be around for a while, right? (laugh).

These kinds of, well, you know... I guess I'm still very involved in my love for Carol, and, you know, my great respect for her, my wish for her to get the attention that she deserves for the work that she did. She's still a big part of me, and...

AL— But what makes in those films that it would be more vulnerable, if I'm...

RH— Vulnerable?

AL— Yes, than in other films like the Diaries...

RH— Well I think that the Erotic Films are part of the Diaries, and as you said, some of the Diary might be more erotic than the Erotic Films.

I guess, as we grew older, I guess I felt less and less possessive and protective, you know, of her, and felt... less vulnerable, as far as she is concerned. For me, you know, I think, I have nothing to hide, there's nothing that I can think of or do or say that is particularly awful, or bad, or anything... but I guess, maybe I'm a bit old fashion, I'm still a kind of a, to some degree, even though I'm a progressive modern man, I'm still an old style man in a certain way, you know, possessive of my woman, protective of her, you know, it's kind of... I think that's the way I am, and I think a lot of men are that way, whether it's good or bad, but I think that's a part of it, that kind of male...

AL— Protection

RH— ...

AL— Male protection

RH— Yeah, yeah. So, even though she was willing to play and participate, and I still feel protective of her. So I was reluctant to put it in the public eye, you know...

AL— And so, what would be the place of those films into your whole film work?

RH— (laugh) I don't know!... I don't really think about that... They're kind of beautiful! And, you know, it's part of my "Œuvre," and I leave it up to other people to make those kind of judgments, you know, as to where it fits or doesn't fit. But I think Scott's comment again, that they're really part of the whole Diary sequence makes a lot of sense.

AL— Okay.

RH— Okay?

AL— Yes!

RH— Is that helpful?

AL— Oh it will be very helpful, but I don't know how I will compress that...

RH— (laugh)

AL— Maybe one last question is, you say in those films that there are connections to other things like "Star Wars"... and would you, that's a big word from recent times, but would you see them as postmodern films, or?

RH— Yeah, you know, well, if I understand Postmodernism, if anybody understands it, one of the features of Postmodernism is, as I understand, a kind of eclecticism, that artists who practice that borrow from other parts of the culture and, I think we've always done that. I think if that's a symptom of Postmodernism, I think Postmodernism has always existed in the sense of it's taking from here and

taking from there, and I mean... (laugh) There's a great piece of Carol's, that's "Post Cereal," there's a company that makes cereal and she's got a picture of a cereal box "Post" and it's postmodernism, so it's like a pun on that whole concept. A lot of the postmodernist writers, like... I can't think now that they got involved in Structuralism in language, and there is a, my brain is not working right now, remembering these terms and words, but there was a whole program of analyzing the structure of sentences, and there was signifier, etc., and the purpose of this study was clarification of communication. But the sort of art writers, it seemed, turned that process into obfuscation, of confusion and muddying, the opposite of clarification, of creating a kind of a private language which only the elite could understand, it was almost like when they wrote about art, we artists, we're dumb, we don't understand but they do, they know, you know. Barney Newman said Art Criticism is to artists as Ornithology is to the birds...

AL— But when you describe yourself as a Modernist, what do you mean?

RH— Well, what do I mean, I...

AL— Does it mean that you belong to a certain generation?

RH— Yeah, that's right.

AL— So does it mean that you are somehow shaped by...time?

RH— Yeah, by my time, my place, absolutely. And I guess Modernism, Postmodernism... I'm born in 1935, eventually, you know, I had a really great interest in Science as a kid, and got my degree in Chemistry, worked as a Chemist. My philosophic attitude was kind of a William James' Pragmatism, and... But I was nurtured by scientific methods, that was my study, my work as a chemist was based on scientific method. And I believed, I don't know about now, but I believed in progress, and the future, I believed that our thought and our work could move us forward, as a civilization... (laugh). Now, I look at this situation here with this asshole Trump and where we're going, you know, we're going backwards. I still can't believe the guy is President and how destructive he is, what an egomaniac, it's beyond me, you know, so... You know, I feel, I still feel positive in the things I do, in my relationships with people, but, I don't know... Is Trump part of Postmodernism? (laugh)... No. And the awful thing is that there's seems to be in part of the western world anyway, a kind of move to the right, more rightwing politics and racism, xenophobia, a kind of a perverse nationalism, you know, it's kind of, it's scary... so... But as I said, I think of myself as a modernist because I think that part of Modernism was this idea of progress, the future, belief in science, and that's what I grew up on...

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