Subtle Gems and Flaming Flops

by WARREN SONBERT

The 17th San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival is about to kick off its biggest-ever festival this week.

Spread over six different venues, wielding 117 various programs with some 260 films from diverse corners of the globe, presided over by two festival directors, an executive director, a screening committee and a horde of hard working consultants, advisors and volunteers, the enterprise is daunting to say the least.

Scrupulous attention has been paid to almost every aspect of this festival (the unreadable festival brochure is another matter), particularly in terms of its gender parity, ethnic diversity and unbiased representation. Word has it that the new film by Gus van Sant, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, unveiled recently in Berlin, was turned down by the festival screening committee because of some questionable misogyny in its characterizations. Noticeable, too, is a preponderance of films by Asians, women and junior cineastes. It's great that the lesbian and gay community can show its sensitivity to issues of race, sex and age, because no one else is.

Unfortunately this doesn't guarantee anything but that people won't be offended by glaring examples of racism, sexism, ageism and other inequities in the programming. Perhaps, now that the festival has covered those bases, some enterprising souls should establish a screening committee whose sole purpose it is to weed out mediocrity, as some of us find that equally offensive, especially when it pops up so frequently in a festival that purports to be a showcase of the most distinctive examples of a visual art form.

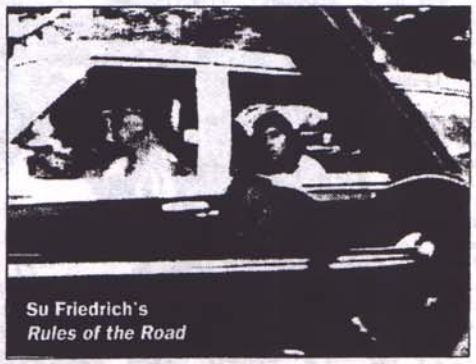
Indeed, out of the 60 films from various programs I was able to screen, I found only nine films—three features and six shorts—that really impressed. Su Friedrich's *Rules of the Road*, a collection of shorts by Hiroyuki Oki, Mathias Muller's *Sleepy Haven*, Stagias and Sandler's *Drag on a Fag*, Maniaci and Rzeznick's documentary *One Nation Under God*, Amos Gutman's *Amazing Grace*, Stahlberg's *Lorenza*, Greta Snider's *Our Gay Brothers*, and Lee/Loren's *To Ride a Cow*.

The Oki shorts are truly daring. Silent, shot in overexposed Super 8 and 16 mm, these precious gems have a way of sticking in the mind long after the lights have come up. Arranged under various titles, the films combine a gentle pornographic quality with the leisurely, contemplative camera that has come to signify the best of the Japanese cinema. The incidental breathing space of the camera work and editing recall the work of the greatest Japanese filmmaker, Yasujiro Ozu.

Young boys cavort on a beach, smoke endless cigarettes, splay across unmade beds and stroke their cocks, all with the petulant nonchalance of beautiful adolescents who have yet to be destroyed by the ideological ruts and no-end boring routines of adult life. To contrast shadows of wheel spokes and grates with gay male erotica sets up an elegant metaphoric sleight-of-hand that underscores the sensual passage between the eternal and the passing, the firm and the ephemeral.

Su Friedrich's excellent 31-minute *Rules of the Road* begins with an unseen protagonist playing solitaire, extends to rambling city drives in various station wagons while a woman's voice-over recounts the disintegration of a lesbian love affair. The bitter after-effects of thwarted romance, cruelly giving way to fights and accusations, is treated with an objective forebearance amidst wistful recollections. The narrator misses her lover's cigarette smoke, a veil of endearing affection. She checks the ashtrays for discarded artifacts of their love, after they split. And, after the unseen and unheard ex borrows the car the narrator, later, ruminates on their mutual love when she turns on the car radio and hears the station that her departed lover had been listening to. This strategy carries more meaning than all the misanthropic finger-pointing we usually get in broken love affair movies.

waterfalls give way to tightrope walkers, the splitting fibres of a rope segue into struggling hands; in another sequence an image of a pair of hands massaging a man's ass cuts to clay walls. This gentle, poetic little splendor is a constant charm. Its precarious montage contains no overall explanatory program, but then it doesn't need one—the juxtaposition of images has no meaning beyond the playful resonances they achieve.



Su Friedrich's *Rules of the Road*

Drag on a Fag, a five-minute video, is part of the "Experimental Sampler" at the Art Institute and two other programs in the festival. It's the sole work out of 15 entries in the program that is not an aesthetic scandal. This bill lists a separate ing for the organization and who now denounce it.

Noteworthy, too, is the 24-minute video *To Ride a Cow*, a welcome exercise in restraint. The video recounts the infatuation of a boy and a girl with the same callous male. Both subjects are off him now, but their lingering yearnings bind them as friends.

Greta Snider's *Our Gay Brothers* is bound to ruffle a few feathers. The voice-overs of a gaggle of gay guys discussing what they like and dislike about women's bodies is punctuated by images of early hard-core porn and vulva metaphors drawn from a variety of everday objects. Snider gets away with murder and gets under the skin by making the fags' least bit interested in balance. She slams mercilessly into gay men's low-level awareness of female anatomy. This registers as an aggressive and dismissive attack that dissolves the sentimental notion of absolute solidarity between lesbians and gay men. But unlike Farthing and Ashbrook's pedestrian *Sex Wars* (also showing in this festival), Snider's film is provocative and convincing—even the title is great! Its whiplash montage underscores women's justifiable anger at the mind set of many gay men. I loved it because it's unfashionable energy is a bracing slap across the face, a welcome departure from the too sunny United Together thread that so desperately wants to hold this festival together.

Equally remarkable were *Amazing Grace* and *Lorenza* of which more shall be written later. ■

Four films by Hiroyuki Oki, plays 6/23, 7:30 p.m. at the San Francisco Art Institute; Rules of the Road *plays 6/19, 4:15 p.m. at the Roxie;* Sleepy Haven *plays Saturday, 6/19, 6:30 p.m. at the Castro with Derek Jarman's* Wittgenstein *and again Friday, 6/25, 9:30 p.m. at PFA in Berkeley with* Mala Noche; Drag on a Fag *plays Sunday, 6/20, 8 p.m. at the Art Institute, Saturday, 6/19 at 8 p.m. at the Roxie and Saturday, 6/26 at 10:30 p.m. at the Roxie;* One Nation Under God *plays Saturday, 6/19 at 4:30 at the Castro, 6/20 at 8:45 at PFA and Tuesday, 6/22 at*