

William MacGillivray's
"I Will Not Make
Any More Boring
Art"

"I will not make any more boring art" is the title, appropriated from a 1970s conceptual art piece by American artist John Baldassari, of William MacGillivray's new film. It's an ironic title for a talented director and recipient of many tributes for such works as *Stations* and *Life Classes*. Has he been accused of something we didn't know?

On its hundredth anniversary, MacGillivray pays tribute to his alma mater, the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design (NSCAD), a centre of international repute for radical experimentation in art education.

Concentrating on the period between the 1960s to the early 1980s, MacGillivray explains that hundreds of artists came to experiment in various arts disciplines with an emphasis on video and performance, all under the banner of conceptual art. Conceptualism takes many different forms while concentrating essentially on the ideas of the artist rather than their physical object/product, as exemplified in this film.

Before the title, the film opens with a close-up of a television screen. A hand reaches in, clicks on the switch and we are greeted with a wild-eyed, raving English character. "We all need our super hero. We all need our 007. I believe in fairy tales. I believe in Arthurian legends. There might be for one brief shining moment something that the world never forgets; something seen that we can all share in, ... it might already be taking place here in a place called Halifax."

Cut to some grainy b&w footage of the legendary German avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys being awarded an honorary degree from NSCAD. (This, by the way, is three years before the North American general public "discovered" him at the hugely popular Guggenheim retrospective in 1979.)

Beuys is introduced by the soft-spoken Garry Neill Kennedy, the arts administrator/artist responsible for turning the conservative NSCAD on its ear in the late 1960s. Kennedy seems an unlikely revolutionary. In a television interview, shortly after he arrived from the United States, and in MacGillivray's interviews, we meet a shy, soft-spoken man who rarely looks up to face his questioners.

Yet this is the man who attracted an impressive stream of artists to NSCAD as teachers and students. Many have since made their mark in the art world. Rare footage of Vito Acconci, Sol Lewitt, and Joseph Kosuth is blended with current interviews with Dan



Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko with director Bill MacGillivray

Graham, Les Levine and Robert Frank.

Original documentation of "performance art", "body art" and "video art" is used extensively and effectively. Certainly some of the early-dated video and performance pieces are self-indulgent, reinforcing the general notion that conceptual art is boring. *Heartbeat*, for example, records the sound of a... you guessed it. But most of the art produced in this time period is a visual or intellectual treat. In *Camera in Jeopardy*, a 16mm camera is turned on and placed in the middle of a road to record the oncoming busy traffic. A car comes straight at it (and us!)-smash! The end of a film about the subjective viewpoint in the extreme.

Art Sucks by then-student Martha Wilson discusses art as a process that sucks identity, as she eats a photograph. We cut to the contemporary Wilson, who left NSCAD to set up Franklin Furnace, an important artist-run space in New York. Wilson continues to do performance work, with a marvelously-silly characterization of Nancy Reagan, who talks about the "value of appearance and the appearance of value". After all, "if the picture is okay, the facts will fade."

Former student Ian Murray is represented by a clever film loop from 1969. *Waves in a Row* is compelling as each frame repeats a crest of water which constantly bombards the viewer. From his Toronto studio, Murray sums up: "Until I was nine years old, I was either going to be an artist or a priest. That's when my mother brought forward the argument - You can become a Jesuit and be both!"

The film shifts to Germany's "Dokumenta",

the most important international contemporary art event held every five years. With his large, multi-panelled canvas as backdrop, Eric Fishel recalls his days at the college when he first explored figurative and narrative painting. (A good beginning to a lucrative career - his paintings can now fetch up to \$200,000 each.)

Interviewed in Germany and also from the graffiti-lined streets in Soho, Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko remembers how when he was a young student in Poland NSCAD was talked about as the exciting centre for art. On his own work (high-beam slide projections on buildings) Wodiczko is boring in a formal European academic manner.

Meanwhile, back in Canada, in a cluttered studio lined with videotapes, dirty ashtrays, and coffee cups, video/artist and teacher David Askevold describes his Visiting Artists program. MacGillivray's voice-over states that, for better or for worse, this program had a profound impact on the college. But when asked to describe his own work, Askevold smiles slyly. No clues are given as the film cuts to footage of his enigmatic tape called *Nova Scotia Fires*, an eerie piece with close-ups of flames and a haunting synthesized sound track.

On the other hand, Dara Birnbaum speaks forcefully about her action-packed video installations that deal with suppressed political news footage and women stereotyped in the media. As a teacher at NSCAD, she and artists like Jeff Wall and Martha Rosler were encouraged in their analysis of the media.

Part of the charm of "I will not make any more

boring art" is the fact that it's almost like a scrapbook, a family album of poignant memories. It's clear that MacGillivray feels very close to the material and he treats his subjects with due respect. In his easy, personal manner MacGillivray is often in front of the camera, chatting comfortably with the artists. The film is smartly-shot by Lionel Simmons (whose cinematography credits include another Festival favourite *La boîte à soleil*) who often allows his camera to be as informal as the situation.

Perhaps most importantly the artists are allowed to speak for themselves and much of their art is featured. Sculptor June Leaf has a particularly charming scene, as she rattles on about why the two men in her mechanized sculpture are linked at the groin. "I figured out the reason why men don't get along with each other. It's because they have two dicks!"

MacGillivray adds his own artistry with several layers of texture, with solid results. A well-researched range of stills pepper the pace, beginning with a vintage portrait of the college's founder, Anna Leonowens (the same "Anna" whose relationship with the King of Siam is fictionalized in the *King and I* - another quirky and little-known fact from this east coast phenomenon).

Editors Angela Baker and MacGillivray slide and bump the scenes together with improvised musical threads. Later, we learn the rich score was composed by CCMC, Toronto's own much-acclaimed sound group including artists Nobby Kubota, Al Mattes and Michael Snow.

Counterbalanced with the beginning, the film wraps up in 1987 with Garry Neill Kennedy once again bestowing an honorary degree on filmmaker/visual artist/musician Michael Snow. He accepts the award graciously, congratulating NSCAD for its involvement with something "as ambiguous as art. My sincere congratulations and very best wishes to those of you who are graduating in ambiguity".

Cut to Snow performing with the CCMC and then a finish with Brian MacNevin's early-1970s videotape/performance *Audio Visual Feedback*. A close-up of the monitor, a hand reaches in to turn on the switch and that crazy world of art keeps on going and it's anything but boring ...

Jan Perdue •

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