

Abigail Child's B/side

By Gary Morris

Since the 1970s, experimental filmmaker and poet Abigail Child has been engaged in a kind of cultural archaeology. Unearthing found footage from such disparate sources as industrial films, vacation and home movies, porn loops, and snippets from forgotten B-movies, she recycles and updates approaches to cinema that have a freshness and sense of wonder that recall the movies' silent days. While this approach suggests the reactionary, the result is in fact quite the opposite. Child's work, which plays periodically at such venues as the Whitney Museum and the San Francisco Cinematheque, is the subtlest form of agitprop, powerfully exploring very modern issues of gender and class through early (and present-day, for that matter) cinema's primary artistic strategy: montage, both visual and audio. Also like silent film, Child's work shows an unself-conscious delight in the visual.

The all black-and-white *Perils* (one wants to supply "of Pauline") is a typical effort, engaging the viewer with a dizzying parody of silent film that shows her characters in a variety of portentous poses and fragmented melodramas. Child's juxtapositions in this work made between 1985 and 1987 are more whimsical than disturbing, with rapid-cut mock fights and mysterious rituals interrupted briefly by simple titles ("1," "2," "Earlier") of the kind found in silent film. Her use of sound is wildly inclusive and constantly challenging, incorporating everything from fugitive piano figures to drama-queen screams in overdub and adding a pleasurably disorienting layer of meaning.

Surface Noise

Mayhem (1987), running 20 minutes, works some of the same territory but adds bits of film noir imagery to its secretive story of inexplicable crimes. Child tantalizes the viewer with stark black-and-white images, again rapidly intercut with all manner of bizarre footage of people running frantically up and down stairs or making out on a rooftop. Japanese hard-core porn from what looks like the 1930s adds to the fragmented fun, as a naked lesbian tryst is interrupted by a masked man. Significantly, a straightforward male sexual fantasy is upended as the dykes force the masked man to cater to them. Apparently inspired by that heady duo the Marquis de Sade and Russian formalist filmmaker Dziga Vertov, *Mayhem* has a shotgun editing style that rains over the viewer like confetti.

Perils and *Mayhem* are part of an ongoing series of shorts — "detachable" in the words of their creator — called "Is This What You Were Born For?" Another entry in that series is *Mercy* (1987), clocking in at a mere 10 minutes but packed with powerful, often arresting images. Child's whimsy is in full tilt here, interweaving shots from home movies, industrial film, and various kinds of found footage into a witty collage. The film authoritatively inverts the Kodak Moments syndrome in its brief running time. A faded color scene of a soldier running to the arms of his family, probably shot in the 1950s, carries the voiceover "How does it feel to see your son become a man?" Child answers that question with images that bring up many more questions: two sweaty pro wrestlers going at it; a bronco busting a steer; high school boys wrestling; masses of faceless men at some undisclosed event; and more charmingly, little boys in a dance class. The spiraling of images has an almost vertiginous effect, but some of them linger long enough to unsettle, as in the shot of a naked man from what looks like old medical footage becoming increasingly agitated as a siren wails ever-louder in the background.

Child says, "I started as a leftist documentarian, but I quickly grew tired of the limits inherent in the documentary structure." *B/side*, at 38 minutes a long work for Child, is a documentary of sorts, in the author's words "an experiment in entering imaginatively the delirium of the Lower East Side." The delirium focuses on Dinkinsville, a tent city that erupted during Mayor David Dinkins' era. But typically, there's nothing straightforward about this record. Child is a discreet observer, dispassionate in her recording of the daily rituals of life in this desperate dystopia. Women washing in the streets, setting up their lean-to's, haggling over merchandise — these prosaic events are recontextualized through Child's rhythmic editing and strong compositional sense, which brings a poetic power to the events it chronicles. Actress Sheila Dabney plays the numb Everywoman wandering with a kind of hopeless grandeur through the film's grim tableaux.

Surface Noise

Again, as with Child's other work, *B/side* has a silent movie connection. It's a reversal of, and comment on, Walter Ruttmann's famed *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927). Where Ruttmann celebrates, Child challenges and sometimes mourns. A recent work, *Surface Noise* (2000), described by its maker as "outtakes of outtakes." explores some of this same terrain. A layered collage of images with an equally fractured soundtrack, it explores Child's perennial themes of the fascism of gender limits and the ways people exist in public and private spaces. Her skillful sound manipulations, a hallmark of Child's work, are on full and florid display here. And in spite of her emphasis on found footage and sound, she's true to her egalitarian roots, giving credit to her collaborators Zeena Parkins, Christian Marclay, Shelley Hirsch, and Jim Black for their contributions to the equally collage-like score.

Below the New: A Russian Chronicle (1999) continues in this realm as the filmmaker visualizes a country and a culture decimated by history. Unseen narrators describe the present state of Russia with its "disappeared middle class" and hopeless poverty and increasingly fractured dreams of a future. "You are living in an imaginary space," says one of the narrators, and Child conjures this space from her rabbit's hat of found footage and interviews, rendered less frenetically than in some of her earlier works but with equal intensity. Historical footage of Russian soldiers dancing in celebration to some victory and smiling schoolchildren at play coexist with brutal war imagery; scenes of citizens in rundown apartments; and, most eerily, an astronaut floating in the entropy of space far from culture or, it seems, meaning. "We have a collective amnesia now," says the narrator, but in this film, as in all her films, Abigail Child helps us remember.

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