

BECAUSE THERE ARE STORIES YET TO TELL

Manitoba Aboriginal Shorts

curated by Jenny Western

Curatorial essay accompanying the Because There Are Stories Yet To Tell program in the Open Vault: Independent Film Week series at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque, November 27 – 30, 2008

When successful, the cinematic experience provides an opportunity to tell a story that has never been told before. Here in Manitoba we are geographically situated as a cultural meeting site and have been so for thousands of years. This unique environment has allowed for encounters between a variety of people and the formation of many exceptional tales. For the past 25 years Cinematheque has been a resource for many Manitobans to share their stories in the face of a corporate film industry situated far away from this place, its history, and inhabitants.

In commemoration of the Cinematheque's 25th anniversary, the Winnipeg Film Group has organized four shorts programs to highlight the work of Manitoban filmmakers within designated categories including narrative, documentary, experimental/animation, and Aboriginal. While the first three classifications indicate film genres, the inclusion of the latter is perhaps less decipherable. Since a falsified notion of Aboriginal identity has long been perpetuated by Hollywood movies, what better place than in Manitoba to celebrate the work of local Aboriginal filmmakers who are undoing these stereotypes through the medium of film? Encompassing narrative, documentary, and experimental genres, these films present a range of cinematic styles and speak to the multiplicity of meanings behind the inference of "Manitoba Aboriginal Filmmaker" as a singularly defined entity.

For several of these filmmakers, the stories they evoke begin with a sense of environment as many of the films situate themselves within a local landscape. Winnipeg's downtown area is easily recognizable in Jeffrey Bruyere's *OK, Now What?*, Johnson Apetagon's *Happiness*, Colleen Simard's *Home*, and Amanda Smart's *Vermis*. While Bruyere and Smart examine the perils of a city life edged with darkness and wit, Apetagon and Simard contemplate the dichotomy of Aboriginal life lived in an urban/rural divide. As the synopsis of *Home* states, "[The film] deals with the conflicting worlds of Aboriginal people... which is better? Rural or Urban? There is no better, of course, only the chance to change the future." Reil Munro's short documentary *Journey My Heart* also touches on a sense cultural duality as viewers begin to slowly comprehend that the woman jogging through snowy Winnipeg streets is in fact training for competitive pow wow jingle dress dancing. Perceived as binaries, traditional and contemporary are in fact one complete reality in *Journey My Heart*, just as the meeting of urban and rural is a reality in Simard's *Home*.

The medium of cinema is employed by other Manitoba Aboriginal filmmakers to investigate the convergence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Steve Loft's *2510037901* reflects on Loft's own Aboriginal and Jewish

backgrounds as his Indian status card number is tattooed onto his body. In *Zwei Indianer Aus Winnipeg* Darryl Nepinak uses Manitoba as the backdrop for a cinematic interpretation of a late mid-century German pop song whose title translates as “Two Indians From Winnipeg.” With a nod to the modern European interest in the supposed romanticism of North American Aboriginal culture, Nepinak playfully subverts the theme and makes it his own. Kerry Barber, (Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in) Yukon-born but currently studying film in Winnipeg, addresses the shared physical characteristic of “bannock bum” with good-natured humour in her short documentary *My Indian Bum*, asking various people to discuss the condition in contrast with bums of different races.

Other Manitoba Aboriginal filmmakers choose to recount stories that expose the reality of life in our province, often deflating widely held misconceptions in the process. In *Morning Radio* Vanessa Loewen subtly illustrates one family’s internal issues through the interactions between its two teenaged daughters and the man who has been hired to drive them to school. Ervin Chartrand’s *504938C* tells of a man’s troubled past and subsequent rebirth after a period of incarceration. *Living Tree* by Zachery Longboy is a short piece created to raise HIV and AIDS awareness in the 1990s, while his longer running *Stone Show* dances between documentary, experimental, and narrative.

Darryl Nepinak’s experimental short *Ming So* also blends together many issues and ideas surrounding Aboriginality and film. Backed by the sound of a women’s drum group, this film depicts six silent spirits hanging out in a downtown Winnipeg alley. Names like Wisdom Keeper and Women of the Heart (as well as Kaigee Beetumup and Sum Ting Wong) would likely have placed these characters on a windswept plateau somewhere in the imagination of mainstream cinema. Instead Nepinak has his characters in jeans and t-shirts, playing cards and posing for group photos. Interspersed with these scenes are flashes of promotional jargon normally reserved for movie trailers. However *Ming So* uses endorsements such as “Outstanding, astonishing!” attributed to the Washington Redskins and “Brilliant, excellent!” exclaimed by the Cleveland Indians. With the elimination of a few letters, the film’s title even becomes an exoticized subversion of the enticing Hollywood movie slogan “Coming Soon.”

Ming So, like so much of the work by Manitoba’s Aboriginal filmmakers, depicts cinema that is engaging, funny, fresh, intelligent, bold, and original. With the existence of festivals like the Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival and the Toronto-based imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival as well as alternative theatres like Cinematheque, audiences are grasping that Aboriginal stories are far more diverse than what has been presented in those seemingly classic Hollywood oaters. Building on the work of veterans like Zachery Longboy, young film-makers are creating new films with exciting possibilities, yet there is always the need for more films and more stories. It is my hope that this program of films will encourage audiences and filmmakers to continue in the tradition of using this land as a place of meeting and exchange because there are far more stories yet to tell.

- OK, Now What? by Jeffrey Bruyere | 2008 | 1:30
- Happiness by Johnson Apetagon | 2007 | 7:00
- My Indian Bum by Kerry Barber | 2007 | 4:45
- Home by Colleen Simard | 2000 | 2:45
- Vermis by Amanda Smart | 2007 | 6:00
- 2510037901 by Steve Loft | 2000 | 3:00
- Morning Radio by Vanessa Loewen | 2006 | 6:00
- Journey My Heart by Reil Munro 2007 | 8:30
- Living Tree by Zachery Longboy | 1993 | 0:30
- Stone Show by Zachery Longboy | 1999 | 9:00
- 504938C by Ervin Chartrand | 2005 | 6:00
- Ming So by Darryl Nepinak | 2005 | 3:00
- Zwei Indianer Aus Winnipeg by Darryl Nepinak | 2008 | 2:45

Jenny Western holds an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Winnipeg and a Masters in Art History and Curatorial Practice from York University in Toronto. While completing her graduate studies, she was offered a position at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba where she worked as the Curator of Contemporary /Aboriginal Art for nearly two years. Jenny has served as an independent curator for the Label Gallery, a venue for the emerging artist in Winnipeg, and as a curatorial assistant at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. In 2006 Jenny received a Fine Arts Award from the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation to complete her research on contemporary art and cultural hybridity in Canada. She currently serves as the Art Collections Coordinator at the University of Manitoba and as the Adjunct Curator for the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.