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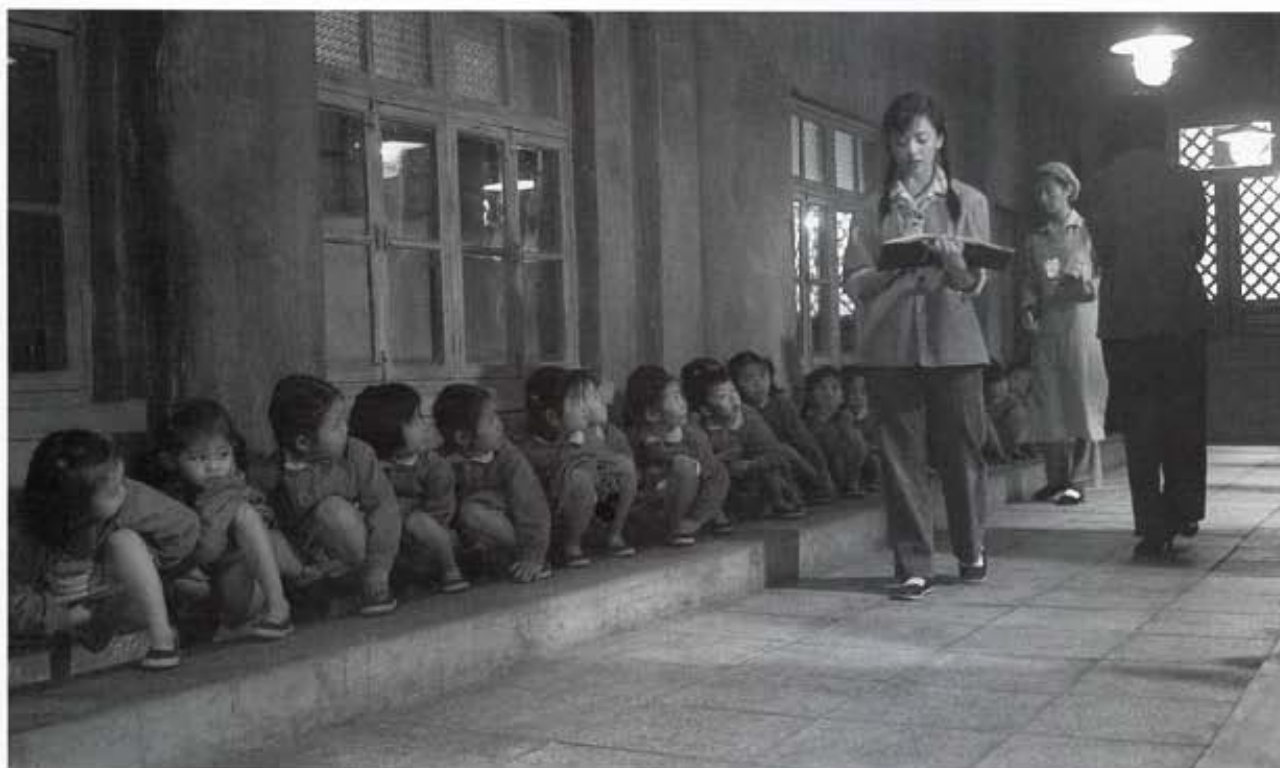
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I Have No Memory Of My Direction by Midi Onodera



Little Red Flowers by Zhang Yuan

THE REEL DEAL

After a decade, Toronto's
Reel Asian Film Fest has come a long way,
but there's still a ways to go

BY GLORIA KIM

At ten years old, the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival is all grown up and with somewhere to go. "We're still fighting the prevailing notion that we are mainly a 'subtitled-movie' festival," says festival director Deanna Wong. "Part of the reason the festival exists is to demonstrate that Asians don't just speak English with accents; that they can fill any role, not just stereotypical delivery boy, Laundromat owner, dragon lady roles. I think the festival has been really successful at growing at a steady, manageable pace while remaining true to its roots. We've always had a strong mandate to support the work of local artists, both emerging and experienced, as well as bringing work by Asian filmmakers all over the world to Toronto audiences. In the first year, we showed only five Canadian films. This year that number has grown to more than 30."

In honour of its ten-year anniversary, the festival has programmed a retrospective of "The Best of Reel Asian" that they have co-presented with the Hamilton Artists Inc. Entitled

"Delicately Devastating: Over a Decade of Independent Asian-Canadian Film and Video", they have included works by artists like Luo Li, Julia Kwan, Ruthann Lee, Ann Marie Fleming, Kanhthuan Tran and Richard Fung.

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Themes revolve around generational change, idiosyncratic mythologies, intimacy, sexuality and notions of home and family. Juxtaposing that, the closing night program BitterSweet Roots is the best of emerging shorts from

Asian-Canadian indie filmmakers. "It's interesting for me as a programmer and artist to see the change in the work from the retrospective program and the work that's being created today," says programmer Heather Keung. "The films in the retrospective told stories of racism and going home and had a more traditional approach to identity politics, more heartbreaking, like Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*, a self-exploratory documentary that has sparked almost a genre of filmmaking in and of itself. By contrast the Bittersweet Roots program is almost more cheeky and optimistic. It still deals with identity politics, and it couldn't have been made without the films that came before, but they're freer to play with tone and storytelling."

Some of the most interesting offerings in the Bittersweet Roots program are award-winning filmmaker Samuel Kihoon Lee's *5 x 9c: The Wake*, a blackly humorous look at what the filmmaker has imagined to be his own death. Set as a tableau, the scene is replayed multiple times as each of the



Dan Carter by Alison S. M. Kobayashi

characters in Lee's imagined life has their own conversation about Lee, each revealing multiple shades to his personality from endearing to devious. At once ironic and slyly witty, each scenario ends exactly the same way, with pseudo-uplifting music and a pseudo-poetic shot of a red balloon floating up into the blue sky. Lee's piece pokes fun at himself as well as notions of death and life. Meanwhile, Alison S. M. Kobayashi, a third-year University of Toronto student, has taken her obsession with people's identity memorabilia and made daring use of a found answering machine tape, in her piece **Dan Carter**. As the tape plays, Kobayashi acts out each person's message. Dan himself appears, along with officials, church counselors, his son, his ex-wife and his new fiancée. The effect is often hilarious, tragic and slightly creepy.

Another place we see how far the festival has evolved is in the Canadian Artist Feature. A showcase and talk

with artist Ho Tam around his first feature **Books of James**, a portrait of Tam's friend James Wentzy, an artist and AIDS activist in New York City, the

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festival programmers struggled with this decision initially. "We had to discuss where we were going as a festival," says Keung. "Ho Tam has done a lot of pieces centred around queer

Asian males and in this, James is a white activist, and initially Tam was confused why we'd be interested. But as a festival we support Asian filmmakers, whether the subject matter is Asian. Asian artists are making art in different fields and in different ways and it's not so clear-cut anymore. It's broadening and re-defining what people think of Asian-Canadian art and practice."

Made over a period of eight years, the piece is narrated by Wentzy through his diaries and chronicles his 30 year struggle with AIDS and documents his activism through ACT UP protests in the 1990s and his 160 segments produced for AIDS Community Television. Tam himself does not appear in this work, but it is personally significant in that Tam lost a partner to AIDS more than 11 years ago.

Also new to the festival is its industry series, which they hope to make permanent. With such industry heavy hitters as Hussain Amarshi, president



Banana Bruises by Joyce Wong

and founder of Mongrel Media, Carrie Paupst Shaughnessy, creative feature film analyst for Telefilm Canada and Robin Smith, vice president at Capri Releasing, the series offers filmmakers the chance to meet executives from all aspects of the film industry, from distributors to broadcasters to funding agencies. They have also launched a website called RAfilms.ca where Asian-Canadian filmmakers can showcase a short clip from their films, along with info about distribution, award wins and more. "I'm really excited about this because it means that even if a film doesn't get picked up for distribution, it will live on in the internet, where anyone can get a taste of what their work is like," says Wong. "It's still pretty small, only 43 works, but our long-term hopes are for it to be a place where educators, distributors, programmers and whoever will know to turn to if they're looking for a certain type of film for whatever their purpose is."

Reel Asian has come a long way in the last ten years, but it still has a long way to go yet. "If you're talking about North American Asian cinema, some

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people have found their voice and have moved beyond identity politics as the basis for their films," says Wong. "A us film we showed back in 1998, **Yellow**, told the story of a Korean-American protagonist whose family store is robbed, potentially jeopardizing his

dreams of going away to college. What made this film so appealing to me back then was that this film showed a group of friends onscreen who looked like me and who happened to be Asian – they weren't Asian for a reason. We still need many, many more films like this."

