

GETTING INSIDE THE FRAME (III)
BILL BRAND interviewed
Bill Brand interviewed by Alberte Pagán

THE CARTOONS

The *Cartoons* series is full of “riddles and jokes about structural film concepts”, as you put it. In *Before the Fact* Saul Levine and a woman repeat a recorded phrase spoken by Levine time and time again until its meaning gets lost. Some off screen voices give instructions. Whose are these voices?

Before the Fact was actually a film we made with students as a class exercise. It's my off screen voice giving directions to Saul on screen. One of the students was operating the camera calling out the film footage but I don't remember his name. I was teaching with Saul in Binghamton, New York and the school had an Éclair sound sync camera and a Nagra tape recorder, which was very unusual at the time. They also had a continuous processor so you could develop film and they had a dubber so you could transfer a ¼-inch audio tape to 16mm magnetic film. I thought, “What if we make a film and do everything in one class?” So we loaded the camera and the tape recorder and I came up with this very structural film idea of having Saul and the woman mimic Saul's sentence that we had previously recorded on a cassette tape and which the man sitting next to Saul repeatedly played back [“But it's a lot of stuff, I mean, that film touches on a lot of stuff”]. It was a game that was quite spontaneous.

There was no postproduction? You shot one take and that was the film?

Right.

Kind of Andy Warhol with his Auricon camera, which could record synch sound?

Right, exactly. There was no editing. It was a one-take film. I was not thinking I was making a serious film, I was not thinking I was making even a film. But then I liked it and after I had completed some of the other *Cartoons* I decided that this should be a *Cartoon* too.

Another *Cartoon* is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. That's quite a title!

Ha ha. It's so stupid. Benjamin Franklin... When I was a child I read a series of books about American inventors, like Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. In those books Benjamin Franklin was considered an inventor, and somehow in these books the inventors always made their inventions to save their parents from some calamity. When I moved to New York the first loft where I lived had a wood stove, called a Ben Franklin stove [based on one of his inventions]. It had an air vent that looks like a three blade film shutter. The film is a joke about the stove as film projector with a shutter. I guess the fire is the light bulb.

I'm also puzzled by the title *The Central Finger*, a film with a single image—a spinning mannequin hand.

It is [*he gives the middle finger*]. I had just learned about conventional lighting, you know, the key light, the fill light, the back light. So I lit the hand like a stage, like a Hollywood movie. And then I mounted the hand off center on a record player, a turntable. With my camera mounted on a tripod I panned back and forth to keep the hand in the middle of the frame so you couldn't see that I was panning. It was a game of trying to keep it in the center. And of course this was after I had seen *The Central Region* [1971], by Michael Snow. It's very stupid.

There are many puns in the titles of your films, as in *Still at Work*, where you use a still photograph of your workplace.

Right. One location in *Still at Work* is my studio, which is the still photograph. And the other was Sarah Lawrence College, my new workplace where I was teaching. I filmed the students mounting sections of the still image from my studio on a glass door at the school. You know, I preserved that film recently, and I can't figure out how I made it. I don't remember. I didn't yet have my own optical printer—I think I used the one at Pittsburgh Filmmakers—it must've been an aerial image optical printer where I could keep the film still while advancing the matte. This way the circle mattes change every frame, but the image of the students is step printed with every fourth frame repeated four times emphasizing that the moving image too is a series of stills. It's very funny to be the archivist of my own films.

The avant-garde can be very serious. Do you think there should be more humor in experimental film?

Well, I don't think it's so serious.

Some of it.

Some of it, yes. Mine aren't that funny, anyway. But with the *Cartoons* I was trying to find my way to the next set of ideas and was trying to be playful. I got the idea of the cartoon because when I had visited London for a film festival I went to a museum where I learned that a cartoon is a drawing used to sketch out a painting. So I thought, I'll call these "cartoons" because they are like sketches out of which I can generate ideas for future films. They are more playful than they are funny, I think.

Even your narratives, like *Split Decision*, can be very funny. Did you write the script for that?

Yes. I wrote the script with Bruce Hanford. And we had a big fight and that was the end of that.

Was there no room for improvisation? Did everybody know their dialogues?

I think it was mostly written out. It's a terrible script. It has all the earmarks of a young artist. It has too many ideas. But I was trying to break out of what I thought was expected of me. I wanted to do things that made me uncomfortable so I tried to tell a story, write a script, direct actors, have a crew. These are things I had never done before. I felt like I had to do all of this to be a real filmmaker even if I did it in my own peculiar way, taking apart narrative and conventional story telling tropes. Carolee

Schneemann plays the part of Tracy, the skeptic. She says it's the only film she ever enjoyed acting in. So at least she had fun!

SUITE, SUSIE'S GHOST AND PERSONAL FILM

You have made structural films, narrative films, social and political films, and more recently in *Suite* you get more personal and free, even filming your own body.

My work in the seventies was mainly abstract. It became associated with structural film, where we were investigating the physical material of the medium and the perceptual and mechanical attributes of the system of the medium. This was sort of the end of high modernism. For *Angular Momentum* I physically scraped the emulsion off black leader and then in an optical printer, with color filters, I made continuously changing colors. With *Moment* I was exploring systematic arrangements of the frames in time. With *Zip-Tone-Cat-Tune* I began thinking about the grain as possibly not just a unit of the image, what we now call pixel, but as possibly a frame, so it can be both a unit of the image and a frame for the image. And I created elaborate scores for some of these films.

After I made *Works in the Field* and *Split Decision* I found that the Cartesian grid was an overdetermining image and was too limited expressively. So even by the end of the 70s I was interested in finding a way to continue that line of work but where the expressive gesture of the camera was an important element. On the side I was always shooting sketches, making much more lyrical and poetic kinds of images. I was very impressed with [Stan] Brakhage, you know, the way he could use just an 8mm camera and make these pictures that were so powerful. And I wanted to have that but I didn't really subscribe to his... [long pause, looking for the right word]

Romanticism?

Yes. So I was thinking, "Is there a way I could include emotions and gesture and poetic lyricism in the analytical ideas of structural film?" That's where all this crazy stuff that I did came from. *Coalfields* was kind of a culmination of this way of thinking, because it is very emotional and lyrical, but it's also political, and the politics is both in the form and in the subject matter. And from there, you know, I made the homeless documentary [*Home Less Home*]. And there the challenge was, "What if I just start with the subject and trust that I'll invent a form that is appropriate to the subject?" I just can't drop all the ideas that are in me. In some ways it came out much more conventional than I had anticipated. *Home Less Home* was very engaging to make but it was also very expensive and time consuming. I didn't know that I could make another film that way, so I returned to a more personal and smaller scale kind of filmmaking.

Suite is a series of five videos where I use my own body as a way to address personal and family history and a genetic disease [Polycystic Kidney Disease] that all my siblings have inherited but not me. My wife Katy Martin sometimes filmed me under my direction. After completing *Suite* Katy and I deliberately collaborated as co-directors in *Swan's Island* and *Skinside Out*, which grew out of Katy's mixed media and performance work where she literally becomes both canvas and painter. In *Skinside Out* images filmed in the studio are juxtaposed with footage of a construction barge along the Hudson. The film looks for what lies within, beyond the surface.

Who is Susie in *Susie's Ghost*? Is the film a documentation of your neighborhood?

Susie in the title refers to my older sister Susan who had recently passed. But the film is about other losses as well. I shot the film in TriBeCa, the Manhattan neighborhood where I'd lived since the 1970's. I'd seen the neighborhood transform from an abandoned manufacturing district to an enclave of struggling artists to a fully gentrified neighborhood for the ultra wealthy. I made the film in collaboration with former student Ruthie Marantz who had grown up in this neighborhood. Her mother was my daughter's elementary school principal during the same period I was Ruthie's college professor. So we shared a connection to the place although from the perspective of two different generations. Ruthie and I each, for our own reasons, were experiencing feelings of loss in relation to the place. Without even talking about it, this became evident in improvisational video sketches we made. Eventually I asked her to improvise performances in the neighborhood landscape while I shot out-of-date 16mm film I had accumulated in my refrigerator. So in shooting up my remaining film-stock I was paying a tribute to a passing medium in the passing landscape during a time of other personal loss including the passing of my sister. Ruthie was dealing with her own passages and these entered the film through the shifting characters she created for the camera.

Many of my films are landscapes where the gesture of hand and eye through the camera carry an ephemeral emotion. With *Susie's Ghost* I tried to include a figure in the picture where my framing of the landscape foregrounds as the primary carrier of emotion instead of receding as background for the figurative character. By foregrounding the graphic qualities of the landscape with my gestural framing of the camera, the figure slips into an unstable netherworld and becomes ghost-like, neither here nor gone.

Is this Susie the same sister you portray in *Double Nephrectomy*?

No. In *Double Nephrectomy* is my other sister Kathy.

In this film you project your sister's scars onto your own body, as if you tried to identify with her or become her. What were your feelings at the time about your sister's surgery? Sorrow, pain, guilt for being free of the disease she suffered from?

Your reading of the film is good. I was thinking about and feeling all the ways you mention. *Double Nephrectomy* is a double portrait made a couple of weeks after my sister received a living donor kidney from a friend. It's a way of sharing the scars.

Do you keep many home movies at home?

Yes, I guess so. I never throw that stuff away, so I have all these 8mm films. But the real home movies are mostly video, and they are real home movies, you know, endless pictures of my children.

HUEVOS A LA MEXICANA

Your latest film, *Huevos a la mexicana*, was premiered at the (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico. It is a kind of home movie too.

It is a home movie made at the end of the analog film encounter “Hazlo tú mismo” in September 2018 in Mexico City, organized by Laboratorio Experimental de Cine (LEC) that had a year-long residency at Estudios cinematográficos Churubusco. On the last day of the encounter we all went to organizer Tzutzú Matzín’s hometown, Xochimilco, which is part of Mexico City but is a traditional indigenous village, and they have these canals like Venice. It’s a local tourist site. People come there to ride in these boats and they have parties and there’s food. What the organizers of the encounter did was that they gave people film and said, “Bring your cameras and we’ll have a treasure hunt”. The instructions for the treasure hunt were completely crazy. I didn’t bring my Bolex because it was too heavy. So I joined the group activity with my digital point and shoot camera. And the first thing to do when you go on a treasure hunt with your camera is you have to eat, right? And the official food for treasure hunting with a camera is “huevos a la mexicana”. We all ordered this. That’s why I named this piece like that. It really is a home movie!

But in *Huevos a la mexicana* you return to the techniques of *Split Decision* and *Coalfields*.

The technique comes from *Coalfields*. I finished *Coalfields* in 1984, and I thought I had finished with that technique. It took me maybe 10 years to develop these ideas and I wanted to move on. I made a feature documentary [*Home Less Home*], and I made a series of digital works about the body and family history [*Suite*]. But I found myself returning to these old ideas when digital video became higher quality and computers, some 6 or 8 years ago, became faster. I had always been interested in video, but the early video didn’t satisfy me. I needed something that was more detailed for the things I wanted to do, the way I was seeing the world.

So I guess I’m still interested in the way that I can complicate the visual field, and have the surface, the material, the image and the audience all moving in a very dynamic way. There is no single purpose, intention or meaning to the technique. I just follow a playful urge with the tools at hand. In *Huevos a la mexicana* I apply these old techniques in ways that are less conscious and more congenial, casual and playfully exploratory, trying to keep the spirit of the encounter. Since I have been recently trying to preserve *Coalfields*, I used this film as a case study in the (S8) Master Class for how to do preservation.

The abstract shapes in the grid in *Huevos a la mexicana* were first drawn on paper. Drawing has also been part of your artistic practice.

Yes, drawing has always been part of my practice and recently a more sustained activity. Some of the shapes in *Huevos a la mexicana* are drawn with ink on paper, some are animated objects, some are drawn with the mouse in the computer. What does abstraction mean? Because drawing is itself abstract, a two dimensional linear representation of some kind. And I realized that photography works because it’s an abstraction from drawing, it imitates the way drawing works. I am very interested in this relationship between photography, the lens and the marks on paper with pencil and ink. I was thinking back to the work I had made in the 1980s with films like *Coalfields*, and

I thought, “What if I make abstract shapes with the ink on the *xuan* paper?” I started doing that, and I drew abstract shapes and animated them and composited it into the video, literally bringing the drawing back into the video with the hope that it would bring into the work some of its physical dimension.