

Bill fml
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STAR FILE PHOTO

MICHAEL SNOW: Subject of new work by videographer Jim Shedden, premiering tonight at the AGO.

Video probe of Toronto art icon more than just another Snow job

Medium Rare

PETER GODDARD

With last year's entire art season devoted to Michael Snow — and, seemingly, only Michael Snow — one might assume there's not much more to say, or even the will to say it.

But Jim Shedden has found the will and the way — *Michael Snow Up Close*, a 45-minute video premiering tonight at 8 p.m. at the AGO's Jackman Hall. (The piece is also slated to air tonight at 10 p.m. on Metro Toronto community cable stations and repeats May 16 at 10 p.m. on Rogers Community 10. A final showing will happen May 20 at 10 p.m. on the Ontario Community Television Network.)

Like Snow, Shedden knows how to re-use/reinvent from a single image-source. For Snow, early on, it was the Walking Woman image. For Shedden, the AGO's film and video programmer, it's Michael Snow himself.

(Or is that Michael Snow "itself?" Has Snow finally achieved Picasso/Warhol mod-

ern art status, and become his own image? Look for the Michael Snow T-shirt, then you'll know.)

Michael Snow Up Close covers some — not all, just some — of the same turf as Shedden's other Michael Snow project, a collection of essays titled *Presence And Absence: The Films Of Michael Snow 1956-1991, The Michael Snow Project*. In both the video and the essays, we meet Jonas Mekas, R. Bruce Elder, and Steve Reich talking about the artist.

In some ways, one can be grateful for the alternate sources. In the collection, Elder begins his essay with: "Michael Snow acknowledged the existence of limits as an unavoidable condition of art in a conversation with Charlotte Townshend." (This, by the way, follows a quote from Ecclesiastes,

no less.)

In the video, Elder is this great, good-natured guy with a mouthful of polysyllables, but who obviously think Snow is a pretty great guy, too.

In the video, Shedden goes further than in the essay collection, taking a long star-struck trek over the entire high range of Snow's work.

And while you're left rather awe-struck at the range and diversity, when you're finally back down to Earth you're also left with far more questions than answers.

More questions than answers. Artists usually like to hear this. It doesn't sound hostile, and it allows the possibility that they're just too much for the critic. And while that may be true — and Snow is as challenging an artist as this country has seen (or heard) — Shedden's video also leaves you with the impression that no one knows exactly what to make of Snow,

or any — and I mean any — of his work.

The video leaves you more satisfied with Snow's pianism, his movie-making and photography — and in about that order — than with his art pieces. Nor does it help much that he's used as a talking head throughout, graceful always, slightly aloof, distinctly superior, but always friendly. He makes art — well, his art, pick your form — seem ingenious, almost easy.

Snow has a patrician bearing, attitude — and, of course, looks. This is not to be discounted. In fact, this needs to be analyzed (although, please, not in another book/video/show/video — a fax will do. A very short fax.)

Snow's presence, his very bearing, makes his work seem finished when it's quite the opposite: when it has merely wedged open the window to an electric new idea.

That said, *Michael Snow Up Close* is a first-rate primer. But nothing more.

Snow's genius finally accepted

I was delighted to read Susan Walker's Michael Snow article in the March 12 Arts section of The Star. What a long way Canadians and their media have come in the past 18 years in their ability to accept Snow's genius. That's how long it has been since New York's Museum of Modern Art presented a three-part retrospective of his work, including a panel of international experts discussing the impact of Snow's films upon the cinematic world.

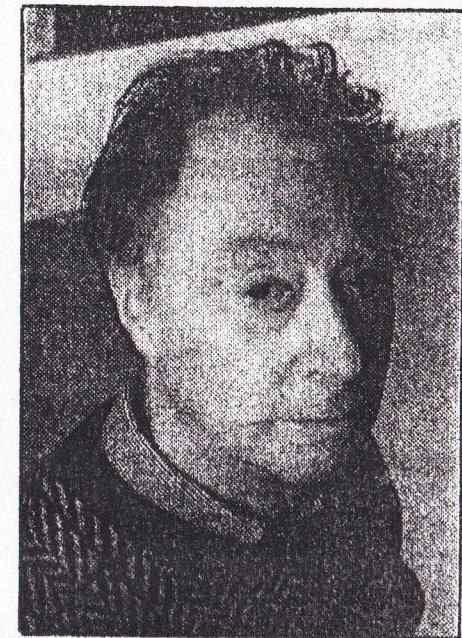
I was contracted to publicize that event in Canada, and the going was tough. CBC's Sol Litman told me that Snow's work was "too esoteric" to interest

Feedback

the Canadian public. The print media, including The Toronto Star, gave me similar turn-downs.

However, thank heaven for The Star's wonderful institution, the ombudsman. I took Michael's representative, Av Isaacs, to see The Star's ombudsman, Borden Spears. After their meeting, mention was eventually made of the colossal international honors bestowed on this Canadian renaissance man of art, so long before we saw fit to honor our own.

Vivienne Muhling
Toronto



MICHAEL SNOW

COLUMN

one

DO YOU know of an unsung patron of the arts who might accept some recognition?

The Montblanc de la Culture Foundation is asking the public for input on its nomination process for an international award for outstanding partons of the arts.

Last year's winner was **Susan Sontag**, for her work bringing "cultural relief" to the people of Sarajevo. A previous Canadian winner was philanthropist **Walter Carsen**, who is credited with saving the National Ballet of Canada.

Winners are chosen for their role in aiding the arts and culture, whether through gifts of time, talent, energy or money. The ability to motivate others is an important criterion in judging.

Among those judging on the 1995 panel are director **Norman Jewison**, artist **Michael Snow**, actors **Diana Rigg** and **Catherine Deneuve**, theatre designer **Robert Wilson** and writers **John Guare** and **Tom Stoppard**.

The prize is a rare, limited edition of a Montblanc fountain pen and a gift of \$25,000 US to the arts organization of the winner's choice.

Montblanc's Canadian publicist, **Lina Ko**, says Canadians "are usually more low-profile" about their efforts for the arts, and that's why the group is putting out a call for input from the public. Three nominees from Canada will be submitted to the international panel.

The deadline is Nov. 30. Letters of nomination should be sent to: The Montblanc de la Culture Foundation, c/o National Public Relations, 310 Front St. W., 6th floor, Toronto, Ont. M5V 3B5.



SNOW

By ROBIN LAURENCE

If the phrase "Renaissance man" had any critical cachet these days, Michael Snow would probably be considered such a being — not that I'm condoning the idea.

A cutting-edge musician, filmmaker and visual artist, Snow has worked in an astounding number of media, from painting, drawing, sculpture, collage and printmaking to photo-based works, video installations, performance, sound recording, bookworks and holography.

Since his early days as a jazz pianist and abstract painter in Toronto in the '50s, through his decade in New York in the '60s working with conceptual and photo-based art and film, and his return to Toronto in the '70s to investigate ever wider rings of music, art and technology, his range has been prodigious.

That prodigiousness was shown earlier this year in a multi-part retrospective at Toronto's Power Plant and the Art Gallery of Ontario — the largest one-person show ever mounted for any Canadian artist, living or dead. So how, if you're the director of a small North Vancouver gallery, would you begin to address that immense and diverse body of work? Well, you wouldn't. You'd concentrate instead on a few photo-based pieces, a sculpture, and a music



VENETIAN BLIND: each photo a self-portrait of the artist

Venetian Blind a real eye-opener

Venetian Blind, made at the time Snow was representing Canada at the Venice Biennale, consists of 24 framed and fading Ektacolor prints mounted in a grid formation. (The grid is a recurring formal and conceptual device throughout Snow's oeuvre.) Each photo is a self-portrait, taken while Snow was riding around Venice in a gondola.

tains drawn across bright windows in *Speed of Light*, and in the ghostly silhouettes of insects, suspended against the unseen window pane.

Here, Snow poses some rather simple oppositions: material versus process; image versus content; natural but represented light in the color transparency versus artificial but actual light leaking from fluores-

VISUAL ARTS

holding the camera at arm's length in front of him, his eyes squeezed shut, Snow has made here-and-now snapshots of himself against a postcard past of piazzas, bridges, cathedrals, palaces and canals.

These sites form the in-focus background and Snow's face, the over-exposed and out-of-focus foreground of each shot. Puns aside, *Venetian Blind* attempts to insert the artist's singular and ephemeral self into durational time, serialized photography and the solid edifice of history.

Power Plant curator Louise Dompiere has written that *Venetian Blind* expresses a state of "euphoria." Snow himself has remarked that the images are "deathly" and, indeed, there's a death-mask quality to Snow's closed eyes and slack mouth that is paradoxical to the lively success he was enjoying at the time. There's something a little deathly, too, about the beige cur-

cent tubes behind it.

Other simple oppositions are posed by *Conception of Light*, in which two enormously enlarged human irises — one pinkish-blue, the other amber-orange — confront each other across the space of the gallery. This is not, however, an entirely successful installation. The space between the images is too wide for them to engage each other fully, and the



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huge colored photos, mounted on plastic with conspicuous seams, are warping.

Snow's work deals obsessively with the nature of representation and the perceptual assumptions we make when we abstract three dimensions down to two, then read those two as three again. An aspect of this phenomenon, and a conditioning metaphor for Snow, is the picture frame.

Framing devices occur in many of the works here, but are most obvious and self-referential in *8 X 10, 1969* and *Recombinant, 1992*.

Most famously, Snow raises issues of framing and representation in his *Walking Woman*, an image he employed repeatedly between 1961 to 1967 and with which he has become forever identified. Aspects of the *Walking Woman* are visible here in *Morningside Heights, 1965*.

The original five-foot tall cutout — abstracted from its context as a cartoon-like painting of a young woman, in profile, in mid-stride and in a tight dress — underwent hundreds of incarnations, including sculptures in wood, metal and cloth, paintings on canvas, plywood and lucite, rubber stamps on paper and mixed media assemblage.

It was exhibited conventionally in art galleries and world fairs and deployed unconventionally as two-dimensional interventions in the three-dimensional urban

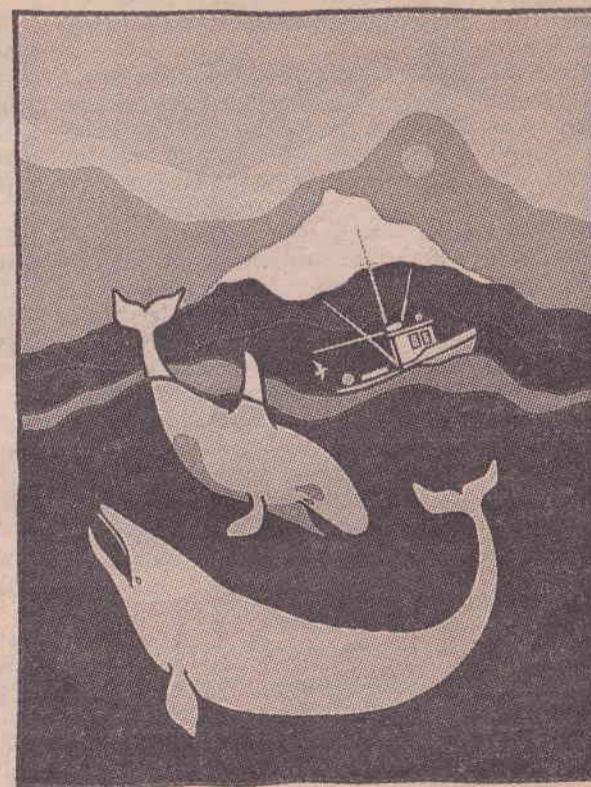
environment. Some of the conditions of representation that Snow addressed with *Walking Woman* were the viewer's relationship to the art object, the object's ability to alter the perceptions of the viewer, and the tension between two-dimensional art and three-dimensional "reality".

What Snow seems not to have addressed was the objectification of women in art. His *Walking Woman*, with her blank face, pert breasts and big bottom, has had her hands, feet and the top of her head lopped off. Ostensibly, this is to position her within a frame, to identify her origins as two-dimensional.

But doesn't Snow's strategy work symbolically, to deprive this figure of agency? Doesn't it make her a maimed and sexualized non-being who, though "walking," isn't really going anywhere?

Of course, you could argue that the *Walking Woman* Works were a product of their pre-feminist time. Thirty-three years ago, who was talking about voyeurism, "scopophilia" and the objectification of women? Still, you have only to look at Snow's recent sculpture project for Toronto's SkyDome to understand how little his attitudes have changed. The women in that retro-gargoyle hideosity are notable for their big boobs and scanty, clinging clothing. They're not going anywhere, either.♦

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