

ARTFORUM

Great Migrations: Nick Pinkerton on the 8th Migrating Forms

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MIGRATING FORMS IS NEW YORK'S WEIRD FILM FESTIVAL. I say this with the greatest of affection, for through the years it has, often well ahead of the curve, provided a theatrical showcase to up-and-comers working in all manner of moving-image mediums: Ed Atkins, Ian Cheng, Jacob Ciocci, Laida Lertxundi, James N. Kienitz Wilkins, Zhao Liang, and many more others than I can at this point remember.

Tradition holds that around this point one has to mention that Migrating Forms is the reincarnation of the New York Underground Film Festival, but by the time of its eighth edition it has very much taken on an identity of its own. That identity, however, is one that cannot be clearly defined, and is in constant flux. In its last outing, the fest changed from the previous pick-and-mix format, which meant grab bag thematic shorts blocks, and instead dedicated each program to a single artist. And in recent incarnations, Migrating Forms has distinguished itself as a point of intersection between avant-garde film and digital age new-media art, though this time around works that could be classed with the latter are somewhat thinner on the ground.

An exception is Sondra Perry's *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One*, 2015, a two-channel video which has previously been presented as an installation at venues including MoMA PS1, in which a wandering cursor leads the viewer across two conjoined computer screen desktops and through a personal history that begins with footage of what appears to be a black family's get-together in which all of the participants are wearing neon-green ski masks, then continues to documentary interviews (though other footage reveals that everything we're seeing has been staged for the camera) with a grandmother who later sings The Clash's "Guns of Brixton," a performance that shares space on the soundtrack with Roy Ayers, a club track repeating the refrain "Beautiful gorgeous golden girl," and a YouTube video playing Soundgarden's "Fourth of July" with Spanish subtitles. The setting is Perry's hometown of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, a pretty ordinary looking seaside 'burg, but the footage unfolds on multiple overlaid panels, a proliferation of individual windows skewing at queer angles or drifting against the green backdrop as though floating in space. There's a lot going on amid the overlaid frames, and a lot of ideas to unpack about the construction of African-American identity here, but there's no doubt that Perry, at thirty, has come onto the scene with a sensibility fully formed.

Though previous incarnations of Migrating Forms have never shied away from overtly political content—past editions have included a Glauber Rocha retrospective and *The Irish Tapes*, John Reilly and Stefan Moore's 1974 video documentary of *The Troubles*, for example—this seems the most engaged version of the festival that I've seen. **Amid the new work there are moments of levity, lightness, and play—Cauleen Smith's *Lessons in Semaphore* (2015), a brief urban-bucolic reverie that screens before her straight narrative 1998 feature *dryslongo*, or Wilkins's trailer for the fest, a flickering montage of faces that may seem eerily familiar, because in fact they are the stars of the ubiquitous "If You See Something, Say Something" subway ads—but elsewhere we find work that's wounded, wary, combative. Arthur Jafa's montage film *APEX_scenario* (2014), for instance, is an eight-minute sustained assault through image, with scenes of violence and assertive, theatrical confrontation, including performers from Black Flag to Miles Davis to the Geto Boys, and slam-bang art-historical juxtapositions (John Steuart Curry's 1939 painting *John***

Brown to Caspar David Friedrich's nineteenth-century *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*), amid all of which the most distinct recurring image is that of bared fangs. It is a film that you might love or loathe, but which is impossible to watch with indifference, a thrown gauntlet.

Jafa is a cinematographer whose high-profile credits include ex-wife Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and the second-unit work on *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), and is also a combative essayist who in 1992 wrote in the pages of *Artforum* of the "proposition of an authentic black cinema, a cinema as rich in its power and alienation as black music." If his name is unfamiliar then it's because he has done a fine job in maintaining his truculent outsider status. In the mincing-no-words department, he's given a run for his money by General Idea's *Shut the Fuck Up* (1984), a response to media attempts to create a domestic pet of the "eccentric" bohemian that combines direct-address testimonies and excerpts from mainstreamed works that make the artist into a figure of fun: The razing of Yves Klein in proto-shockumentary *Mondo Cane* (1963), or The Joker's completion of his art-hoax "masterpiece," a blank canvas which he titles *Death of a Mauve Bat*, taken from the Burt Ward and Adam West era of *Batman* (1966-68).

General Idea was a Canadian artists' collective comprising AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal active from 1969 to 1994, when Partz and Zontal died of AIDS. The two-part General Idea retrospective continues an ongoing partnership between Migrating Forms and video-art archive and nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI)—they also represent Perry—as well as a running tradition of mini-revivals. Also in the retrospective section this go-around is a ramble through four decades of Leslie Thornton's work, including her early films; her tributes to the late actor Ron Vawter, *Strange Space* (1993) and *The Last Time I Saw Ron* (1994), are at once phantasmagoric and terribly physical; and the unveiling of *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding* (2016), Thornton's latest (final?) iteration of her open-ended, ever-evolving signature work, which one can contrast with the 2004 edit *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Beginning Middle End*, also screening. Unfortunately, the archival item that I was most gassed for was unavailable to see before the beginning of the festival, so I will be watching Robert Kramer's four-hours-and-change end-of-the-'80s Maine-to-Florida road-trip epic *Route One/USA* (1989) along with the paying public, and here can record only my anticipation.

While Kramer, no less than Jafa, was an urgently contemporary filmmaker, the work of Tomonari Nishikawa seems almost out of time—you could imagine one of his Super 8 "Sketch Film" series being projected on a sheet at a '60s loft party, though in fact they come from the mid-aughts, around when he would have graduated from SUNY Binghamton, the kingdom of professor emeritus Ken Jacobs, where Nishikawa now teaches. Each of his films is a game with rules of his own devising, usually revolving around finding what can be done with the physical film strip within imposed parameters. They're short—the longest tops out at around ten minutes—in many cases by necessity; the "Sketch" films, for example, are diabolically complex, the first a flickering of single-frame street scenes edited in-camera, a whirl of constant change while carrying on a play of dancing diagonals from one frame to the next, discovering recurring patterns in the urban landscape.

Nishikawa's practice is, in much the same manner, consistently inconsistent, with each film springboarding from the last, introducing a new element: whipping camera movement in *Sketch Film #3* (2006), color in *Sketch Film #4*, a switch to bucolic settings in *Sketch Film #5* (both 2007). After this cycle Nishikawa began to work with larger gauges of film, a development that opened up new possibilities, and for the past several years he has returned repeatedly to making works that divide up the frame, with each sector representing a different temporal and sometimes physical zone. *16-18-4* (2008) was shot, per the artist's website, "through a toy camera with sixteen lenses" at the Tokyo Yushun horserace and cuts the 35-mm frame into quadrants, each showing a slightly temporally staggered scene. The 2010 companion films *Tokyo - Ebisu* and *Shibuya - Tokyo* go still

further, shooting stations on the Yamanote line of the Japan Railway by exposing different sectors of the same film-strip individually to create ghostly effects—a commuter's disembodied legs appear and then disappear as an approaching train evaporates into thin air. A similar effect is at work in *Ten Mornings Ten Evenings* and *One Horizon* (2016), the most recent of Nishikawa's films and perhaps the most lovely, with views of bridges over the Yahagi River, near where the artist grew up in Japan, which are vertically divided into six strips, half exposed at dawn and the other half exposed at dusk, with the overall effect suggesting a folding byōbu screen.

Nishikawa's method inevitably opens the work to discussion in terms of "process," but it's also worth noting that they're films concerned with results—some of them are exhilarating, some implacably sad in a way that's hard to place, and each is an exquisite, precision-crafted object. For the opportunity to see Nishikawa's works altogether, the introduction to Perry's oeuvre, and many other challenges and inducements, mercurial *Migrating Forms* is to be cherished. There isn't a *Death of a Mauve Bat* in the whole bunch.