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SCENE & HERD

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Crossover Appeal

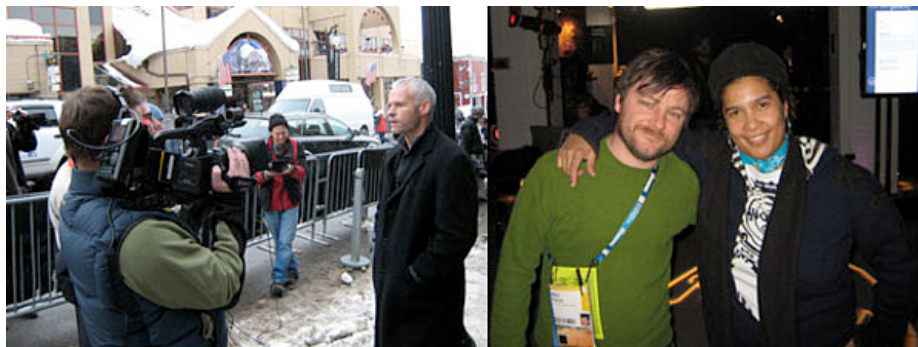
PARK CITY, UT 01.24.08



Left: Tilda Swinton with artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien. (Photo: Jason LaVeris/WireImage) Right: Robert Redford. (Photo: Amy C. Sancetta/AP)

Last Thursday, while I waited for Robert Redford to show up at the Leaf Lounge on Main Street, the temperature outside hovered at eighteen degrees and the street was jammed with temporary migrants here for the Sundance Film Festival. Something like sixty thousand people are expected to attend the twenty-fourth edition of the event, and it seemed as if they were all on Main, cruising for distribution deals or hunting for stars to snap, paparazzi-style, as they rushed from one media fete to the next. At one moment or another, Quentin Tarantino walked by, as did Paris Hilton in pink, Sir Ben Kingsley, and a scruffy Colin Farrell, here as star of opening night's all-too-pat black comedy-cum-morality tale, *In Bruges*. Sundance has swollen so large that Park City can barely handle the crowds, the venues for this year's estimated 125 films and eighty-five shorts, and the A-list party crawl that lasts until the snow-drenched dawn.

Redford, the founder of Sundance, has been widely quoted for his remark at the packed opening press conference that this year's festival is all about change—a theme that immediately rhymed with the slogans of politicians now stumping around the country. But I'm here to talk with Redford about a different species of change. "New Frontier on Main" is an artists' showcase in its second year at Sundance, curated with verve by programmer Shari Frilot and consultant Mike Plante and eccentrically sited in a subterranean purple lounge in a shopping mall. I suggest to him that the true possibility of change that the exhibition incites is toward new kinds of visual thinking. "That's right," he replied, with that quick, appraising Redford smile. "Start with the fact that I began as a painter, studying in Paris and then at Pratt Institute. So I've always wanted to show art. It's taken a long time to get there, but we decided the best way to do it was in combination with new technology, to give filmmakers ideas about the ways artists are using new means to tell stories. If there can be some crossover between new film and new art that's symbiotic, that's going to be an important part of the future for Sundance—and for film."



Left: Director Martin McDonagh interviewed on Main Street. Right: "New Frontier on Main" programmers Mike Plante and Shari Frilot. (Photos: Steven Henry Madoff.)

Down in the purple cave, there were eighteen works on view, many of them familiar to the art world but

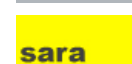
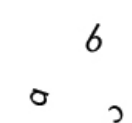
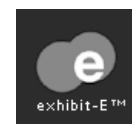


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surely new to the film crowds that packed in, curious and evidently entertained. Doug Aitken was represented by a single-channel version of *Sleepwalkers*, and Robert Boyd screened *Xanadu*, his deliriously dystopian assembly of video clips about man's unslaked thirst for mayhem and apocalypse, set to a disco beat. Hasan Elahi's video starred the artist in a roomful of simulated monitors, surveilling himself every minute of the day to abet (and, in fact, deluge) the government's own surveillance operation, which had mistaken him for a terrorist. In a side gallery, Eddo Stern stumped amateur gamers with his perverse two-person shooter *Darkgame*, while out in the main space, Jennifer Steinkamp exhibited her well-known animations of a quartet of trees metamorphosing through the seasons like a sylvan dream of Ovid. Marina Zurkow, inspired by Asian scroll painting, presented three elegantly simple and unsettling panels of animation, depicting a polar bear and several characters firing off guns in the globally warmed Arctic north. Other works left less of an impression and made me wish for a little more thematic coherence, but Brent Green's Whitmanesque, hallucinatory performance with the band Califone rocked my spirit in front of his funky film animations, and Stephanie Rothenberg and Jeff Crouse's *Invisible Threads: A Virtual Sweatshop in Second Life*, in which workers who are members of the online community get paid ninety cents an hour to design facsimile blue jeans that are then printed and assembled on the spot at "New Frontier on Main" for waiting viewers, really is a new kind of interactive storytelling with obvious social and political heft.

The artists floated in and out of the show over the four days I was there and could be glimpsed here and there at the endless parties, like the one John Johnson (the founder of Eyebeam) threw for his new, eco-minded Harmony Project, where Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, chatted with Danny Glover and Oliver Stone, or U2's bash at the Riverhouse on Main after they premiered *U2 3D*, their high-tech concert spectacle codirected by Irish artist Catherine Owens, who said that "artists have been exploring 3-D forever, from Vermeer to Hockney. 3-D is like installation art—I could actually integrate art pieces into the set that felt physically present in 3-D—and film offers a larger conversation than the narrow focus of the art world, though technology is beginning to change that."



Left: Artists Paul D. Miller and Hasan Elahi. (Photo: Steven Henry Madoff) Right: Artist Brent Green performs with Califone. (Photo: Matthew Simmons/WireImage)

At one point, Miller and Elahi entered into a deep dissection of the moment that "New Frontier on Main" confronts, in keeping with Frlot's remark "Cinema is in our pockets now, in our malls, in our cabs. That's the technology. It's moment-to-moment all around us. I call it physical cinema." Riffing, Elahi said, "Actually, I think the physicality is deteriorating. YouTube changed everything." Miller: "It's like Deleuze's idea of deterritorialization. The cell phone, the iPod, the Web—the whole idea of a centralized screen, of the totalitarian imagination for centralized distribution, is changing. You see what you want where you want."

I wanted to see some old-school cinema, too, though. Among the films were *The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins*, Pietra Brettkelly's fascinating blow-by-blow documentary about Vanessa Beecroft's slightly mad, questionably intentioned obsession to adopt two motherless children amid the bare-bones poverty of Sudan; and *Derek*, Isaac Julien's heartbreaking and giddily alive biopic about filmmaker, painter, and general renegade Derek Jarman. Tilda Swinton's gorgeous presence, ripe with immensely articulate and sometimes mournful reminiscences, walks through the film like a grave revenant. I caught up with Julien the night before I left. He said, "I'm curating a show of Derek's paintings at the Serpentine Gallery in February, so there's a nice crossover between the art world and cinema with this project. And, you know, I think there are still so many misunderstandings between the art and film worlds because of the different languages they use. But with the rise of digital everything, they're becoming more closely linked because they're both being invaded by new economies. 'New Frontier on Main' gets at that, though I think it has a ways to go. It has to grow. It has to take itself more seriously. But then, don't we all?"

— Steven Henry Madoff

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Left: Artist and filmmaker Catherine Owens. (Photo: George Pimentel/WireImage) Right: Performance view of *Invisible Threads: A Virtual Sweatshop in Second Life*. (Photo: Rebecca Sapp/WireImage)

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