

The agoraphobic Robyn (poet Lisa Jarnot, left top and left bottom) makes a rare venture outside her apartment in Jennifer Reeves's 2004 feature-length look at New York City life during the George W. Bush war years, *The Time We Killed*. SF Cinematheque's three-program presentation of Reeves's work to date showcases the stylistic breadth of her movies, which include 2007's affecting memorial piece *He Walked Away* (center).



## Desperately seeking cinema

On the many looking glasses of Jennifer Reeves

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Jennifer Reeves's movies are personal wishing wells, each a repository of dreams and worries. As we see ourselves reflected in the water's surface after tossing in a coin, so too is Reeves's presence apparent in the handmade, fussed-over quality of her moving pictures. I use that broad designation pointedly, as her films are as varied in material and form as they are prosaic in mood and temperament. Over 15 years of independent filmmaking, the New York-based artist has created hand-painted films in the style of her mentor Stan Brakhage, freewheeling shorts, fiction fantasias, 16mm double-projections, feature narratives, and experiments in high definition. San Francisco Cinematheque hosts the formally restless filmmaker for a three-program tour.

Reeves's early shorts channel riot-grrrl spark with scratched-up film stock. *Elations in Negative* (1990) is a good sample of the celluloid-mad sexual politics of these 16mm beaters, though *Taste It Nine Times* (1992), with its vivid pickle-biting innuendos, will be missed from the Cinematheque run. In painted films like *The Girl's Nervy* (1995) and *Fear of Blushing* (2001), Reeves's appropriation of Brakhage's technique conveys playful femininity in color, pattern, and music.

Though Reeves toyed with narrative

early on, most notably in 1996's psychodrama *Chronic*, 2004's *The Time We Killed* represented a kind of breakthrough. An unhurried 94 minutes passes through the dark mirror of an agoraphobic poet keeping to her New York apartment during the buildup to the Iraq War. "Terrorism brought me out of the house, but the war on terror drove me back in," Robyn (Lisa Jarnot) says in her peripatetic voice-over, adding later, "I'm afraid of catching the amnesia of the American people." Reeves's magnetically immersive filmmaking is such that the political situation neatly folds into an extended experiment in subjectivity — besides being an unstinting portrait of madness (it's everywhere in this film: in a record's spin and neighbors' voices echoing through the walls, in dogs' faces, bathwater, and masturbation), *The Time We Killed* also serves as an understated chronicle of the collateral psychic and moral damage of our country's manufactured warmongering.

*The Time We Killed* is heavier than Reeves's other work, though it's not without humor; she finds the ridiculous, unwieldy side of depression in Robyn's litany of death fantasies and a painfully misguided interaction with a curious neighbor. Robyn's locked in, but Reeves is formally unfettered, mixing conventional 16mm footage with lyrical, associative streams of inner life shot in high-contrast black-and-white. The filmmaker raids her home-movie archive for the film, in addition to using her own apart-

ment and acting as Jarnot's body double during the extended shooting. This air of transference makes *The Time We Killed* weirdly transparent, so we feel as intimately connected to Reeves's isolated work in the editing room as we do to Robyn's experience in the apartment.

Since *The Time We Killed*, Reeves has returned to more typically experimental filmmaking. Her 2006-07 *Light Work* variations strike an ideal balance of abstract and representational visions, in the process cataloging the changing textures of cinema. In the affecting *He Walked Away* (2007), Reeves dissects, refracts, and abstracts footage from her older movies to create a tri-tipped memorial piece in which the intrinsically elegiac nature of cinema is connected to the dissolution of film technology, which is then tied to the disappearing loves and friendships that shadow personal lives.

As with Guy Maddin — another filmmaker who favors overheated evocations — one has the sense that Reeves could make a hundred interesting movies from the same scraps of footage. "I want to counter the turncoats who say film's dead," Reeves announces on her excellent new blog. "Try telling a painter that she can only use digital paint on a Mac for the rest of her life. She'd be pissed." But if she were Jennifer Reeves, she certainly wouldn't slow down. **SFBG**

### IMMERSIVE CINEMA: JENNIFER REEVES

Artists' Television Access, Sat/15, 8:30 p.m.  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Sun/16, 7:30 p.m.;  
Tues/18, 7:30 p.m.; \$6-\$8  
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