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LAURIE McDONALD
video artist

BY SAM HO



VIDEO IS AN ECLECTIC MEDIUM," SAYS Houston-based video artist Laurie McDonald. "Working in it, you incorporate aesthetic concerns traditionally relegated to the canvas or the musical score or the theater." It is that ability to blend the essence of many disciplines into one medium that distinguishes McDonald, a videomaker for over 20 years, as an artist.

Born and raised in Fort Worth, she went east to the Rhode Island School of Design to train in film and video. Her work has been shown all over the world, including such prestigious venues as the Smithsonian, the Museum of Modern Art, The Kitchen, the Tokyo Video Festival, and the World-Wide Festival in Amsterdam.

She has a richly varied background in painting, photography, sculpture, music, and dance (at one point she performed professionally with the Rhode Island Ballet). In her art, one can detect frequent references to the visual arts, a fondness for installation pieces, and the importance of sound and movement in both thematic and formal concerns.

In early projects, such as *The Dying Swan* (1975) and *Deux Pieds* (1976), she often applies forms and movements of dance to video, producing something unique to either medium. Throughout her oeuvre she frequently employs the TV screen as a graphic surface, painting images with an electronic "brush." In *Moog Synthesizer Images I* (1973), for example, oscillators are plugged into a television, rendering the vertical and horizontal frequencies of the monitor to create images from sound. In the 1992 installation *Beyond the Shadow*, she simulates the experience of a free fall in space by making use of projection television, poetry, NASA footage, satellite views of the earth, radio transmissions from airports, and the physical attributes of a museum space.

Arriving on the scene during the second wave of video art, McDonald was intrigued by its potential. "There was a sense of freedom with the medium from the very beginning," she says. "A spirit of inquiry and experimentation that pushes science and technology to the limit of what is possible." In her quest to inquire and experiment, she has stead-

fastly refused to establish a signature style, opting instead to let each project dictate its own shape. "Style is a thing that I resist," she declares.

She also resists what she calls "the tyranny of broadcast television." In *Filling the Boxes of Joseph Cornell* (1985), a work that explores the connection between artists and the artistic process, she reveals the trickery used in many commercials, like putting Alka-Seltzer in beer to make it fizzier or applying oil to meat to make it look juicier. In an unforgettable scene, she puts herself in front of the camera, applies green, brown, and yellow paint to her face, turns to stare directly at us, and switches the color off. It's a demonstration of how, in the days of black-and-white television, the "telegenic face" was created.

Commercial television is not the only target of McDonald's biting wit. In *Generic Video Art* (1982), produced in collaboration with Tom Sims,

she pokes fun at video art itself, dividing the piece into segments alluding to common genres of the medium: conceptual, experimental, punk, pet art (in reference to William Wegman's work with his dog Man Ray), and state-of-the-art (suggestive of artists like Jon Sanborn, whose works are based on technologies of the



moment). Combining elements of high art and popular culture, the work parodies the practice of packaging art in definable categories. Rarely have Dante, Abbott and Costello, opera, and coin-op laudromats been used together in such effective and hilarious measure.

The self mockery of *Generic Video Art* and the frontal address in *Joseph Cornell* also represent a desire to establish personal contact with the audience. Although McDonald's work is too complex and analytic to be catalogued as video diaries, she has never shied away from revealing herself. Confessions and personal struggles are

for herself on the East Coast with more than 20 titles under her belt, McDonald was initially apprehensive about the move to Texas. "The decision to remove myself from the nurturing environment of a culturally rich area wasn't easy," she recalls. "I remembered a conversation I overheard in Fort Worth on whether photography is an art form. Wasn't that issue decided a long time ago?"

Her uneasiness was quickly put to rest. "In a true frontier spirit," she observes, "Texas encourages the new, the experimental, the untried." It is that spirit, she says, that allowed her to carve out a delicate balance between working as an artist

and making a living as a videomaker for hire. "I try to be as inventive in commercial projects, and I try to stay away from projects that I oppose politically or those with no redeeming qualities," she says. "I also try to take jobs in the artist community that may not be as lucrative but are more

***In the days of
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was enhanced by ...***

routinely dispensed in narrations, and milestones such as her pregnancy and the growth of her daughter are diligently documented. In such works as *Dreamtime* (1988), a lyrical chronicle of the daughter's dream life, McDonald even shares with her a "With Elaine Ball"

credit. But there's also rougher stuff. In *The Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup* (1980), an almost surreal documentary on the annual West Texas event, she casually relates in voice-over that she was close to being gang-raped while shooting the video.

Roundup was made the year McDonald moved to Houston from Rhode Island to work for Southwest Alternate Media Project, where she stayed until striking out as a freelance producer/writer in 1983. Having established a name



Laurie McDonald's telegenic face, from *Filling the Boxes* of Joseph Cornell.

Courtesy videomaker

interesting."

But it is primarily the way her art is received, she says, that keeps her in the Lone Star State: "Art audiences here are open to unconventional forms of creative expression. Texas can be cutting edge in that regard. Perhaps that's why I have stayed here so long."

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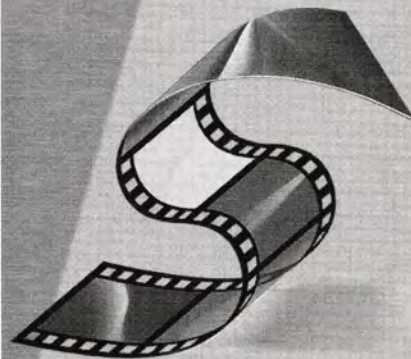
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