

WINNING VIDEO

San Francisco

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Eighty separate works by sixty-five individuals and groups were entered in the video section of this year's San Francisco Art Festival. The works range in length from one minute to sixty minutes, and pretty much cover all known genres of videoart, from straight wander-the-streets-with-the-camera-on portapack verite, through community action/public access programming, to the high art of Terry Fox's elegant and shamanistic *Children's Tapes*. The quality of the entries displays a similar spread, touching all the bases between work good enough for anybody's museum, to work I can only charitably describe as video eyewash. There are, of course, the usual dollops of simple and processed feedback, colorized and synthesized abstraction, "intense," "anguished" studies of interpersonal disconnection, records of dancers or dance troupes hamhandedly disarranged via keying, matting and all the other nifty little detours available to those with access to the proper equipment. This year there is even a bonus, of sorts: an unintentionally hilarious, very slickly produced PR documentary about the founder of a bible college in Oakland, whose great dream is to meet David Ben-Gurion and to plant a forest in the Negev Desert.

All this tape was looked at by a jury of three: David Ross, deputy director and video curator of the Long Beach Museum of Art; Suki Wilder, video artist formerly associated with Video Free America, and one of the makers of VFA's monumental *Continuing Saga of Carol and Ferd*; and myself. The jurors had three prizes to award: The California Video Resource Project/San Francisco Public Library Purchase Prize (to simplify — CVRP buys a copy of the winning artist's tape for \$125); the Louise Riskin Prize from the San Francisco Art Commission, \$250 to be awarded in a lump or apportioned any way the jurors saw fit; and \$200 worth of free video editing time or other services donated by General Electronics in Oakland. After twenty-five hours in "video bondage" (the term is a coinage of Bonnie Engle, whose nonprofit corporate front, The Public Eye, was responsible for organizing the video portion of the Art Festival this year, as well as last year) — said bondage interrupted only by a little sleep and a little food — the jury parceled out the loot as follows:

—CVRP/San Francisco Public Library Purchase Prize to Mon Jone Gok and Mike Haller for *Fuzy Wuz He*, a devastating and precisely focused satire on videoart and video artists in general and, in particular, on the smokescreens of technomysterioso jargon far too many video artists spend their time churning out rather than addressing the problem at hand — i.e., making art.

—Video Editing Time/Services from General Electronics to Darryl Saplen for his documentary of his performance piece *Spillman Bisects The Pacific*.

—\$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Joel Hermann and Craig Schiller for their documentary of the San Francisco Museum of Art's Artists' Soapbox Derby — this award was a dead certainty: If every other foot of the tape was unviewable garbage save for the interview with Don Potts, it still would have been well worth the fifty skins.

—\$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Terry Fox for *Children's Tapes* — another dead certainty; I find Terry Fox's video even finer and more powerful than his live performances, and I'm a sucker for his performances.

—\$50 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Joel Glassman for *Dreams*, a brooding, eerie and absolutely masterful thirty minutes worth of video. Glassman has been moving toward *Dreams* for some time now, and having arrived, I hope stays in the neighborhood for many years. *Dreams* is all dark castles and bat lightning, full of flies and ants and bees and decaying sheep, black rooms and seedy laughter giving way to demented weeping, orchestrated into an intense, riveting Black Mass of the soul, the finest example to date of a rapidly emerging style I'm just patsy enough to label "gothic video" (David Ross calls it "German expressionistic video," but to hell with him — this is my article).

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—\$25 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Alan Bloom for *Virginia*, the record of an intense and uneasy-making confrontation between an overbearing, totally insensitive interrogator and a marvelously strong and calm sixty-eight-year-old woman. *Virginia* is absolutely unlike anything of Bloom's I've ever seen before — gone are the artsy in-jokes, the Dada turns, the carefully calculated shock-points. *Virginia* was shot in a studio somewhere, probably at CCAC; the camera focuses only on Virginia herself, and only on her face, which is illuminated with harsh white light. Bloom is up in the control booth asking questions — callous, brutal probings into Virginia's life, a life overflowing with enough personal tragedy and horror to swamp a dozen lives. Virginia responds with grace and strength and an overwhelming, unshakeable humanity. *Virginia* is hard to watch; Bloom's assault is so viciously brass-knuckled you expect Virginia to jump up at any minute and go after him with the nearest blunt object, or at least leave the studio. But she never does; she stays there, answering with a kind and gentle patience, a beautiful and stupendous woman.

—\$25 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Max Almy and Barbara Hammer for *Superdyke Meets Madame X*. Ms. Almy is a video artist and Ms. Hammer is a filmmaker-turning-video artist. They meet because Hammer wants to make a tape but hasn't all the equipment she needs to do it; Almy has. Their confrontation/collaboration turns into a love affair characterized by a great deal of desperation and fear and need, and a painful inability to communicate any of that. Despite the title, *Superdyke Meets Madame X* is not funny — it is a record of Almy and Hammer's relationship as seen by both of them from dead center.

—\$25 from the Louise Riskin Prize to Craig Schiller for *Masks And Other Impressions*, a collection of short, tightly edited pieces such as *Shave And A Haircut*, which records Schiller's evolution (or de-evolution, depending on your cultural politics) from Hairy Hippie to exquisitely-toussured dude straight out of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*; or *Improvisations To Music*, in which actress Andrea Kessler responds off-the-cuff to selections of drippy, Tin Pan Alley music she has never heard before.

In addition to all the above prizes (nine — count 'em), the San Francisco Museum of Art has promised a show to the winners or any selection thereof, the details of which have yet to be worked out.

At this point, it's anybody's guess whether next year's Art Festival will include video or not. The Art Commission seems determined to treat videoart as an orphan form whose presence in the Festival is all right so long as someone else does all the work necessary to put it there. To date, someone else has been Public Eye Engle and such volunteers she has been able to charm, cajole, bribe, seduce, possibly threaten into donating large chunks of time and energy to the cause. And while all those people obviously test out on the nutty side of normal, it's doubtful they're whacked enough to crank themselves through the same tired meatgrinder three years in a row. Actually, the best take on the whole situation comes from The Amazing Rhythm Aces — the Art Commission and video comprise "a third rate romance, low rent rendezvous." Naturally, this constitutes a big fat irony: you could comb through every Art Festival since the first one in 1946 and be hard-put to come up with examples that could stand up as art to Fox's *Children's Tapes*, Glassman's *Dreams*, Hermann's *White I Was Waiting*, Bloom's *Virginia*, etc. and so forth, straight down the line. You'd probably find a few things. Here and there. □