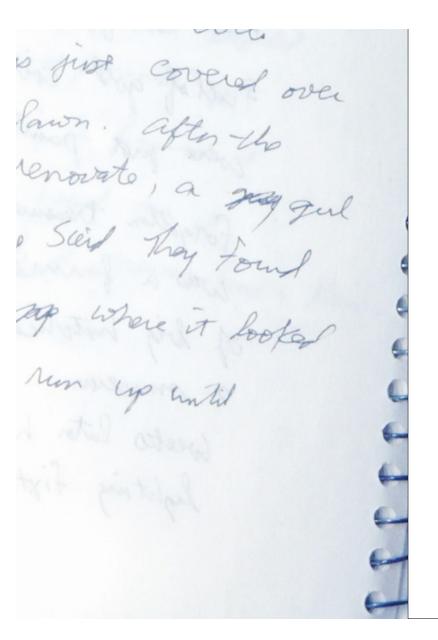
ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE The work of Gerald Saul élan STRANDLINE CURATORIAL COLLECTIVE



ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE: THE WORK OF GERALD SAUL



"...this approach [to art/film making] reflects my assertion that we understand one another through our stories and that each of our stories is important."

- Gerald Saul

1. Regina filmmaker Gerald Saul has been making films for over 30 years, creating more than 300 films and videos since the 1980s. Saul isn't just a prolific filmmaker, however. He's also made important contributions to the Saskatchewan filmmaking community as a board member, teacher, curator, and writer whose column, "The Long and Tall of It," has been a feature of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative's *Splice Magazine* for decades. The focus of *Anecdotal Evidence: The Work of Gerald Saul*, though, is the body of work Saul has created in film, video, and photography over the past three decades. "One cannot discuss Western Canadian experimental film without mentioning Gerald Saul," writes Troy Rhoades, who curated a mid-career retrospective screening of Saul's work in Edmonton in 2003. "His eclectic range of short films," Rhoades continues, "has made Saul one of the most creative filmmakers on the Canadian Prairies." 'I Saul's inclusion by Strandline Curatorial Collective and Christine Ramsay as Station 6 of the Regina-based transnational exhibition series *Meet in the Middle: Stations of Migration and Memory Between Art and Film* ² celebrates this eclectic Saskatchewan talent and profiles him in an international curatorial context.





Images from the archives



 $Most of Saul's \ work, with \ the \ exception \ of \ his \ site-specific \ film \ loops, \ which \ are \ not \ included \ in$ Anecdotal Evidence, was originally intended to be screened in theatres. Negotiating the shift from what Andrew V. Uroskie calls "the kind of distance and mobility promoted by the dematerialised image within the cinematic theatre's black box" to "the proximity and material presence of the material object within the art gallery's brightly lit white cube" ⁶ has been an interesting curatorial and artistic challenge. One response to this challenge would have been to simply transform the white cube of the $gallery\ into\ the\ black\ box\ of\ the\ the atre\ by\ turning\ down\ the\ lights\ and\ projecting\ a\ selection\ of\ Saul's$ films in the gallery space. However, as recent curatorial thinking and practice on expanded cinema and the relationship between art and film suggest, there is a phenomenological difference between watching films in a theatre and seeing them projected in an art gallery. In a theatre, watching a film is a collective experience. We sit in a theatre with other people to watch a film. In a gallery, however, watching a film or video is often closer to an individual experience: sometimes you are the only person in the gallery engaged in watching a film (particularly if you are expected to don headphones to listen to the soundtrack). Watching a film in a theatre is also an experience of linearity: the film begins at its beginning and proceeds until it ends. In a gallery, in contrast, films and videos typically run on a loop, meaning that you might begin watching the film at any point and leave before it





Wheat Soup (film stills), 1987, film, 75 minutes

finishes. So the translation from the atre to gallery is not as straightforward as it might at first appear.

In some ways, the relative isolation of viewing a film in the context of an art gallery is closer to the experience of watching a DVD or a streaming service at home, except that in your own living room you always have a greater degree of control over the material: you can rewind or fast forward or pause what you are watching at any time. Since the birth of his son William fourteen years ago, most of Saul's film viewing has taken place at home. The pair have been spending their Friday nights working through the classics of international cinema together. No doubt that's how most of us watch films these days. Anecdotal Evidence alludes to this viewing context by placing a couch in front of the screen where Wheat Soup (1987), which Saul co-directed with Regina filmmaker Brian Stockton, is being shown.

The curators of this retrospective, Strandline Curatorial Collective and Christine Ramsay, decided not to simply turn the gallery into a theatre, however. Instead, they studied Saul's approach carefully and conceived of treating the exhibition as "an archive of a creative process that can be read as a gesture in 'cinematic note-taking." 'They worked with Saul and together decided to take the opportunity afforded by this retrospective to perform an archaeological dig of sorts, enabling him to revisit and



One of 5 rotary telephones, with attached MP3 player, used in the *Dread Revisited* installation
 C. *Dread ephemera* Saul connects an MP3 player to a rotary telephone for the *Dread Revisited* installation

reimagine the films he considers to be the most important in the body of work he has created. For example, in preparation for making his 1992 film *Dread*, Saul used an answering machine to record messages in which callers talked about their fears and anxieties. As time went on, Saul discovered that more and more people were calling the "Dread line"; in a pre-web way, the telephone line had gone viral. Some of those messages ended up in the soundtrack of the film; the rest remained on the original cassettes, stored in boxes in Saul's basement and then his campus office. Two years ago, Saul digitized all 30 hours of those tapes. *Dread Revisited* gives visitors to the gallery an opportunity to listen to a selection of that material, using MP3 players connected to old-fashioned rotary telephones (like the ones callers to the "Dread line" would have used 25 years ago).

Other revisitings or reimaginings of past film projects are also part of *Anecdotal Evidence*. For the 1990 film *Angst*, for example, Saul has returned to the locations where the film was shot and created three-dimensional still photographs using a vintage stereoscopic camera—images which must be viewed through a special stereoscopic viewer in order to get the full three-dimensional effect. Saul has also used a microscope to photograph parts of individual frames from his Super 8 cycle *25 Short Films In and About Saskatchewan* (1995–1999). Twenty-five large prints of those images are on display in the gallery. Saul is interested in incongruous relationships of size; it amuses him to make large-scale





Stereoscopic viewer:
 Stereoscopic views (2016) of restaged scenes from Saul's 1990 film Angs



Using a microscope, Saul photographs Super 8 footage from his 1995–1999 film 25 Short Films In and About Saskatchewan

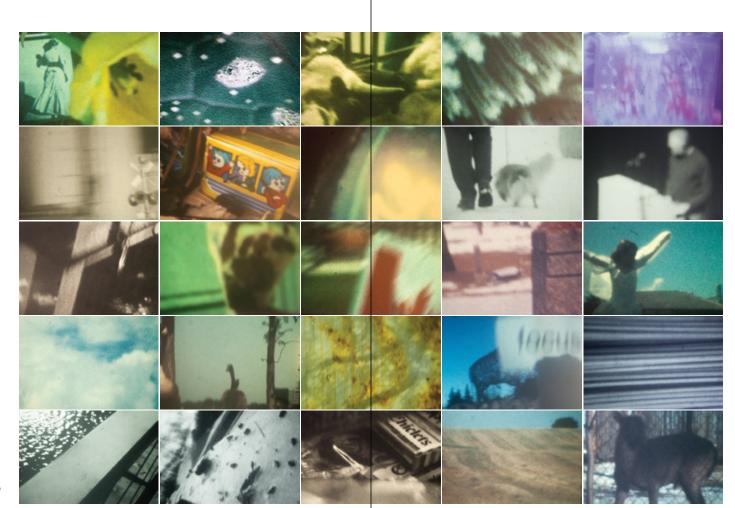
blow-ups from such tiny source material (Super 8 is one of the smallest film gauges ever manufactured). He is also interested in moving-image technologies that predate the cinema; for Anecdotal Evidence, he returned to his feature-length film Life is Like Lint (1999), restaging part of the film before a moving panorama and recording the result with a video camera. None of this rethinking or reimagining would have been possible but for the opportunity this retrospective has provided.

The presence of these reimaginings in this retrospective doesn't mean that the films themselves have been excluded from the gallery. Visitors to Anecdotal Evidence have the opportunity to compare a sample of Saul's films against the way he's rethought them for the exhibition: Angst, Dread, Doubt (1997) and the Toxic cycle (2002–2004) are being projected on plexiglass screens hanging in the gallery. Angst is an unusual love story about a relationship between a vampire and a student filmmaker; itis, as Saul says near the beginning of the film, a meditation on pain, loneliness, and love. Dread is an exploration of fear; it is prefaced by its own short subject, a rotoscoped study of a dancer made by Saul's life partner and collaborator, Margaret Bessai. Saul's thesis film at York University in Toronto, Doubt, begins as an abstract narrative about a young man (wearing a lab coat) in a forest; partway through, however, the film shifts to an explanation (in a fictional telephone conversation between

Saul and an unknown interlocutor) of what we've just seen. As well as being an example of a selfinterpreting film, *Doubt* is also one of Saul's first experiments in hand-processing motion-picture film. Finally, the *Toxic* cycle is a kind of hand-processed autobiography. Other short films are being screened on monitors elsewhere in the gallery. The autobiographical nature of much of Saul's work is a paradox; while he's more interested in telling other people's stories, he often returns to telling his own, typically in a displaced form.

Anecdotal Evidence uses many examples of obsolete technologies. Some of these are the predigital technology of Saul's childhood (rotary telephones, an antique television); others are survivals from an earlier era (stereoscopic viewers, a video remake of Life is Like Lint using a panorama as a background). This obsolescence is important and meaningful. Much of Saul's film work has been created on moving-image technologies that were manufactured before the advent of digital technology, particularly 16mm and Super 8 film. In other words, much of Saul's work, to some degree, meditates on the ruins of the cinema. It is based in a medium, analogue film—defined as strips of celluloid covered in emulsion with sprocket holes on the side—that is now essentially obsolete. According to American experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton, "no activity can become an art until its proper





25 Short Films In and About Saskatchewan (film stills), 1995–1999, Super 8, 80 minutes





The many facets of Canister the Robot, 2009–2016

epoch has ended and it has dwindled, as an aid to gut survival, into total obsolescence." ⁸ Analogue filmmaking may have reached that point in its evolution. Erika Balsom claims that the presence of film—particularly 16mm film installations—within art galleries "may be seen as an attempt for film to take shelter in the privileged and relatively autonomous zone of art, staking out the region as a new site of cinema after the end of its dominance as a form of mass culture." ⁸ As Frampton's comment suggests, however, film is not the only medium that has found new life inside art galleries. George Baker writes, "The obsolescent, the 'outmoded,' the nonsynchronous, discarded forms, marginal mediums: all of these seem to be resources of special interest to many of the most interesting artistic projects today." ⁹ Film is one of those media, but it is certainly not the only one.

None of this is intended to suggest that Saul is some kind of Luddite; after all, much of the work presented as part of *Anecdotal Evidence* has been made or prepared for exhibition using digital technologies: a high-end, 4K RED video camera; digital cameras; MP3 players; digital editing software; and laser printers. But, still, the ruins of cinema as a medium are nonetheless on display here (and, by extension, the ruins of other predigital technologies). Not coincidentally, these predigital technologies are also relics from the world of Saul's childhood and early adulthood. They are memories made tangible.

5.

Like many artists, Saul is a collector: among other things, he makes and collects artists' trading cards. For *Anecdotal Evidence*, he has made a collection of imaginary objects from the past that feature his robot character, Canister: games, a colouring book, trading cards, an LP record, a paperback book. Had Canister existed as a pop culture figure in the 1960s and 1970s, this material is precisely the kind of thing that would have been produced for kids enthralled by their mechanical hero.

Of course, Canister didn't really exist. He is a character Saul created some years ago for a course he was teaching at the University of Regina. Canister's costume is simple: black trousers, a black turtleneck, an ice-cream pail with a viewing slit (covered with coloured acetate). Anyone can therefore perform the role; the only significant differences between the various embodiments of Canister are their varying heights.

Saul has constructed a dense network of narratives around the figure of Canister. These narratives arguably are a way of reanimating Saul's own childhood experiences, with his son William as both creative partner and inspiration. I see a distinction between the multiple layers of Saul's earlier work and the more straightforward Canister stories, which inevitably involve Canister battling one of his arch enemies—often Professor Delusia, a mad scientist character (another of Saul's avatars) who may









Angst (film stills), 1990, film, 30 minutes
 Dread (film stills), 1992, film, 25 minutes
 Doubt (film stills), 1997, film, 18 minutes
 Toxic (film stills), 2002-2004, 6 film cycle, 16mm, 30 minutes



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(or may not) be connected to Saul's interest in hand-processed film. But at the same time Canister is at the centre of a rich imaginative world. Canister is an alien, an invader from another planet. He exists in different times; he has an identity crisis; he becomes a god after a black hole explodes inside his head. Saul is enthusiastic about making films that feature Canister; the character has taken a central role in his creative imagination.

Videos featuring Canister are screened on an antique television in the gallery; the age of the television is an allusion to Saul's childhood memories and the kinds of stories children watched on television in the 1960s and 1970s.

 $Another\ echo\ of\ childhood\ memories\ in\ Saul's\ work\ is\ his\ interest\ in\ puppets.\ I\ always\ associate$ puppets with childhood, perhaps because of the television shows featuring puppets that I watched when I was a child, or because I remember spending rainy afternoons making puppets out of socks and buttons. The puppets that Saul and Bessai have created are many steps above what I used to come up with on those long-ago afternoons. These artful and comic puppets are an important part of Saul's work, including the short video The Golem of Socks (1995), Life is Like Lint, and the yet-unfinished

Sockvile, which had its genesis as a project involving Saul's film students. Some of the puppets from The Golem of Socks reappear in Sockvile. For Saul, puppets create aesthetic distance; they enable him to tell stories that are more excessive, more absurd, than he would be able to tell with human actors, and puppetry is something he is increasingly interested in exploring.

The ice-cream pail that constitutes Canister's head alludes to another aspect of Saul's filmmaking: handprocessing—that is, developing motion-picture film in a darkroom, in a series of plastic buckets. Saul has been researching hand-processing for more than 20 years. Through hand-processing, filmmakers can develop film in different ways. They can create a negative or positive print. They can solarize the film, exposing it to light in the developers or that the image becomes both positive and negative. They can use coffee instead of traditional developing chemistry, or use chemistry intended for other film stocks. They can develop film at different temperatures and use more or less agitation, creating different image textures. They can tint and tone the film using dyes. Saul even hand-processes colour film—a much more complex process than black-and-white developing. This interest in hand-processing is part of Saul's interest in what filmmaker Helen Hill calls "handcrafted" filmmaking. 11





Hand-processing, as filmmaker Chris Gehman argues, is "an artisanal mode of filmmaking—one in which the artist works directly on every stage of a film, from shooting and editing to the processing and printing of the film stock itself." ¹² Gehman points out that hand-processing gives filmmakers direct control of their materials, motivated by a combination of necessity and curiosity. ¹³ and that is true—although hand-processing is also a situation where happy accidents can occur. There is, after all, no way to plan what part of a 100-foot roll of film will be solarized, or whether the film will be developed consistently throughout its length, or where the emulsion might be damaged or scratched from being agitated by hand in the bucket of developer. That lack of control, the sense that you don't know exactly how the film will turn out, is one of the attractions of hand-processing.

Saul, who has attended filmmaker Phil Hoffman's Independent Imaging Retreat near Mount Forest, Ontario, a week-long hand-processing workshop, is fascinated by hand-processing, as the *Toxic* cycle, *Modern* (2013), and the *Grain* cycle (2009-2014) indicate. Hand-processing is an ongoing series of experiments, a process of trial and error, and Saul carefully keeps notes about what he did (the temperature of the chemistry, the length of time the film was in the developer) and what the results were. The notebooks on display as part of *Anecdotal Evidence* are therefore not just sources of plans and ideas for film projects; they also constitute a record of what happened in the darkroom. In his

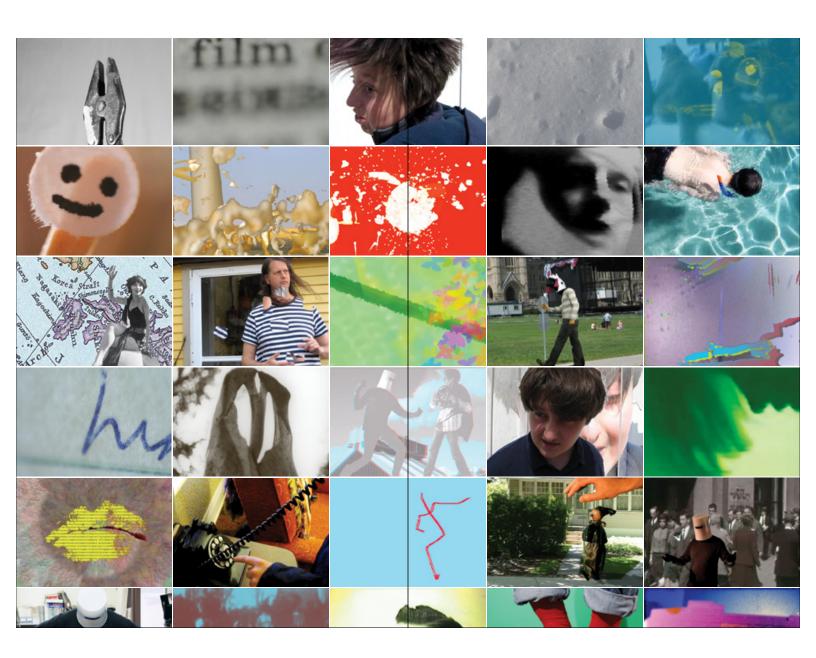
white lab coat (stained by years of exposure to developer and photographic bleach), Saul becomes a kind of artistic mad scientist, not unlike his alter ego Professor Delusia, plotting new ways of creating moving images.

8.

Anecdotal Evidence shows a filmmaker at the height of his powers, experimenting with a variety of media, exploring a range of aesthetic and material possibilities. And it is only able to do that because it brings Saul's work into a new kind of presentation space: the art gallery.

Following pages: recent video sketches

Developing and processing notes and records Film test strips



ENDNOTES

- Troy Rhoades, "An Economy of Scale: The Films of Gerald Saul," screening notes, Metro Cinema, Edmonton, 24 July 2003, p. 6, "Gerald Saul: Solo Shows," Gerald Saul, 21 April 2016 http://www.nmsl.uregina.ca/saul/Troy%20Rhoades%20on%20Gerald's%20booklet.pdf
- 2 Meet in the Middle Stations of Migration and Memory Between Act and Film is a Quartitional series of exhibitions and events taking place in Regina between 2014 and 2017 on the theme of migration, memory, and trauma. It creates a special relationship between artists and curators from Saskatchewan and Armenia—both relatively isolated geographical areas with histories of migration, memory, and trauma—and features the lens-based installations of renowned Canadian-Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan. www.mitmproject.info.
- Gerald Saul, "Gerald Saul, Artist Statement," Gerald Saul, 2010, 21 April 2016. www.nmsl.uregina.ca/ saul/2010artiststatement.htm.
- Gerald Saul, "Gerald Saul, Artist Statement."
- Gerald Saul, "Gerald Saul, Artist Statement."
- Andrew V. Uroskie, "Windows in the White Cube," Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art, ed. Tamara Todd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2011), pp. 145-46.
- Text panel, Anecdotal Evidence, 2016.
- Hollis Frampton, Circles of Confusion: Film/Photography/Video Texts 1968-1980 (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), p. 112.
- 9. Erika Balsom, "A Cinema in the Gallery, a Cinema in Ruins," Screen 50:4 (Winter 2009), p. 414
- George Baker, ed., "Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses," October 100 (Spring 2002): p. 6.
- Helen Hill, Recipes For Disaster: A Handcrafted Film Recipebooklet, 2004, 5 May 2016. www.filmlabs.org/docs/recipes_for_disaster_hill.pdf.
- Chris Gehman, "The Independent Imaging Retreat," 20 September 2003, "Film Farm Publications," Phil Hoffman, 22 April 2016. www.philiphoffman.ca/the-independent-imaging-retreat/.
- 13. Chris Gehman, "The Independent Imaging Retreat."

BIOGRAPHIES

GERALD SAUL is a Regina-based filmmaker, educator, curator and writer who holds an MFA in film production from York University (Toronto). His first forays into film making involved shooting 8mm with his childhood friends. Over his career he has worked across forms, from 16mm feature drama to animation and ultra low budget processes. He continues to experiment, using old and new media, often with his son. Key works include Wheat Soup (1987), Lilie & Like Lim (1999), 25 Short Films in and About Saskatchevan (1999) and the Toxic cycle (2003).

www.geraldsaul.com

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Select Filmography:

Canister the Robot, 2009–2016, multi-film, multi-media

Modem, 2013, film, 40 minutes

Sockvile, 2010–2016, digital, 60 minutes

Mr. Saul's Digital Utopia, 2010–2015, 28 digital cycle, 54 minutes

Grain, 2009–2014, 5 film cycle, 45 minutes

Mr. Saul's Utopia, 2005–2009, 5 Super 8 film cycle, 32 minutes

Toxic, 2002–2004, 16mm, 6 film cycle, 30 minutes

Lilie is Like Lint, 1999, film, 80 minutes

Doubt, 1997, film, 18 minutes

25 Short Films in and About Saskatchewan, 1995–1999, Super 8, 80 minutes

Dread, 1992, film, 25 minutes

Angat, 1990, film, 30 minutes

Wheat Soup, 1987, film, 75 minutes, co-director with Brian Stockton

The Mundane Acts, 1986–2004, 6 video sketches, 28 minutes

KEN WIL SON lectures in English and Film Studies at the University of Regina and is currently an MFA student in the Department of Theatre. His first play, The Interview, won the 2010 Dorothy White Prize and was produced at the Ottawa Fringe Festival, and his 2012 site-specific audio collage, Cyclone Podwalk, was presented as part of Curtain Razors' Sprialling Forces event in Regina. In May 2016 his new play, What We Carry Inside, received a staged reading at

the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's Spring Festival of New Plays. A past president of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative, he has served as editor of the Filmpool's *Splice Magazine* and has contributed site-specific film and performance text to several Saskatchewan-based arts events, including *Crossfiring/Mama Wetotan* and, most recently, *Windblown/Rafales*.

ELIZABETH MATHESON is a curator, lecturer, and writer in the field of contemporary at and movoig imagery. She has worked with artist-run centres, galleries, universities, government agencies and cultural organizations and organized conferences in a number of institutions. Matheson has developed pioneering approaches to collaborative and cross-disciplinary work, including the co-founding of Strandline Curatorial Collective. She serves as an advisor to Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art (Toronto), the Prince Claus Fund (Amsterdam), Victor Pinchuk Foundation (Ultraine) and is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT). She has published internationally in countries such as the United States, Brazil, India, and her works have been translated into several languages. Matheson has been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and is a recipient of the Management of the Arts Certificate from The Banff Centre.

CHRISTINE RAMSAY is Associate Professor in Film, Media Studies and Creative Technologies at the University of Regina. Her research, teaching and service are in the areas of Canadian and Saskatchewan cinemas, masculinities in contemporary cinemas, curatorial studies in expanded cinema. the culture of small cities, and politosophies of identity.

MITM: STATION 6 Anecdatal Evidence: The Work of Gerald Saul, July 7-August 27, 2016 Anecdatal Evidence: The Work of Gerald Saul represents Station 6 of the larger durational exhibition Meet in the Middle: Stations of Migration and Memory Between Art and Flim, taking place from 2014 to 2017 in Regina, Saskatchewan. Meet in the Middle is conceived as a series of way stations connected by common concerns underlying the historical and contemporary dynamics of global migration, memory and trauma that enable artists and audiences to encounter, intersect, reflect, locate and relocate themselves relative to these experiences at the intersection of art and film. The project includes a special focus on creating a dialogue between Saskatchewan and Armenia, two equally isolated geographical areas with shared traumatic histories. In the broader context of Meet in the Middle, Regiona becomes a cross-cultural meeting ground for the examination of these themes in both their political and personal manifestations, creating a collaborative hub for shared creative futures. Featured artists include Atom Egoyan (Canada), Berny Hi (Canada), Shrirn Neshat (USA), Kathryn Ricketts (Canada), Gerald Saul (Canada) and Mitritch Tonoyan (Armenia).

Anecdotal Evidence is also significant as it marks a career retrospective. Saul has been an important avant-garde filmmaker on the Regina arts and culture scene with a prolific output. His 300 short films and videos produced over the past three decades offer an eclectic contribution to lens-based storytelling in Canada, existing between dramatic, experimental and animated forms, and in recent years incorporating inter-media, puppetry and performance. The exhibition is designed to contextualize Saul's decidedly personal, autobiographical meditations on self anxiety, memory, trauma and the meaning of place and belonging in the Saskatchewan prairies, within and against Meet in the Middle's larger global contexts, movements, and themes, and to showcase the work of an inimitable Saskatchewan artist at the height of his creative powers.

www.mitmproject.info

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ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE: THE WORK OF GERALD SAUL July 7 – August 27, 2016 Art Gallery of Regina Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre 2420 Elphinstone Street Regina, Saskatchewan Canada www.artgalleryofregina.ca

Published by: Strandline Curatorial Collective © 2016 All rights reserved ISBN 978-0-9952226-1-8

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Design: Epic Art + Design
Photography: Trevor Hopkin, Gerald Saul, Margaret Bessai, Erik Sirke, Geremy Lague, Kallie Garcia, other [courtesy of the artist, source unknown]
Cover photographs: Gerald Saul

Acknowledgements

Strandline Curatorial Collective and Christine Ramsay are thankful to our Meet in the Middle partners—from Regina to Toronto here in Canada, and from Coventry, UK to Yerevan and Gyumri, Armenia—who have been with us on this five-year collaborative research project. We are extremely proud of Meet in the Middle and the important bridges it has built between people and places. It has been our privilege to be part of this series of events and exhibitions which have afforded us an opportunity to work with a team of exceptional national and international collaborators—including Ego Film Arts, Artangel, Black Dog Publishing, Independent Curators International, Arts, Artangel, Black Dog Publishing, Independent Curators International, Armenian Center of Art and Social Studies (Akos), Armenian Center of Contemporary Experimental Art (ACEEA), Coventry University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada—along with our Saskatchewan partners the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Dunlop Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Regina, Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative, Neutral Ground Contemporary Art Forum, 5th Parallel Gallery, Campion College, and the Humanities Research Institute, Faculty of Media-Art-Performance and Department of Film (University of Regina).

The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of:

















































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