

THE SASKATCHEWAN FILMPOOL COOPERATIVE PRESENTS

# Fragile Harvest

FILMS FROM PHIL HOFFMAN & HIS FILM FARM

CURATED BY GERALD SAUL



Featuring a selection of short lyrical films created during the legendary Independent Imaging Retreats held by Ontario filmmaker Phil Hoffman over the past twenty years.

This FilmPool screening will include short films by:

Phil Hoffman

Wayne Salazar

Daniel McIntyre

Scott Berry

Penny McCann

James Gillespie

Barbara Sternberg

ONE NIGHT ONLY

8:00 PM FRIDAY NOVEMBER 25, 2011

@ THE FILMPOOL 301-1822 SCARTH STREET

REGINA, SK.

FILMPOOL.CA

Since 1994, Ontario filmmaker Phil Hoffman has been hosting filmmaker retreats at his farm near the town of Mount Forest where each year a dozen or so artists and filmmakers converge to drink in the cool well water, share communal meals, and run a few hundred feet through their cameras. Films created during this week tend towards the highly personal, as these participants throw off their urban armor and run wildly down a gravel road of self discovery. I knew of these films before I knew of the Independent Imaging Retreat itself. In my viewing of hundreds of experimental films during my MFA research, I began to see patterns and themes arise. I was very excited about these fresh personal stories and their hand-made approach, but the source of influence was not yet clear. All I knew was that a new aesthetic was taking shape and having a significant impact on the national avant garde movement.

One may easily suggest that there is something about going to a farm, away from the noise of the city, away from the continuous interaction with computers and phones and schedules, that brings out stories in people. Perhaps the open air is a vacuum, drawing your words and thoughts from us, forcing us to share them with the world. Perhaps this is true, at least for big city dwellers, but from someone who has spent sufficient hours standing amid blowing fields of grain, wandering past decrepit wooden farm structures, and climbing over inconveniently placed barbed wire fences, my intuition makes me doubt this analogy.

I would suggest that it is not solely Phil Hoffman's *farm* which inspires the nature of work created there, but it is Phil himself who is the key. I attended the "imaging retreat" (or "film farm" as we all called it) in 2002. Margaret and William (age 10 months) came with me as my perpetual muses, but home is always left behind when one reaches the Hoffman farm. It is certainly quiet and peaceful, but that can be said for any of a million other hunks of land in this country. More significantly, it is welcoming. This is almost entirely to the credit of Phil and his hand-picked team of

workshop leaders, like life coaches who can load Bolexes. Each participant is treated as an invited guest, never like a paying consumer. In turn, every one of them seems inclined to reciprocate by embracing all of the hosts and attending filmmakers with warmth and respect.

Central to the film farm is the barn which houses darkrooms to develop film, open spaces to hang film to dry, screening areas, and relaxation spots to talk, think, or read. No modern complex could be as versatile or accommodating. The so-called *enemies* of filmmaking; dust, wind, light leaks, and noise, are all acceptable commodities in this environment. To fight the flaws is to fight against nature itself. To accept nature as an external force helps to open the door to express your inner nature (while being a vegan and utilizing meditation crystals remains strictly optional).

After a week of getting your hands dirty, you emerge with the raw materials of a film. This is more than just images on emulsion, it is ideas and inspirations. The direct process of creating, contemplating, exhibiting, and critiquing, is crucial to the film retreat. You find yourself able to respond to comments, rework the project multiple times, and shape it into something you can truly be proud of.

The films created at the film farm deny the necessity of the film industry infrastructure by allowing a single filmmaker to personally control a maximum number of technical processes. Since the early nineties when the retreats began, the 16mm form has been in rapid decline. Laboratories have been reducing the number of services available; optical sound tracks, reversal processing, work printing, negative cutting, and answer printing are all considered too specialized for most labs to even consider offering anymore. Making at least some of these techniques part of the filmmaker's tool belt not only ensures some continuation of the art form, it also empowers those filmmakers, making them more confident to continue working with this, or any other media form. But there remains a precarious balance for pure film artists. As much as

they desire to separate themselves from industry, they remain tethered to it through certain manufactured items. Most notably, Kodak has become the only supplier on this continent for black and white film stock. They continuously change and remove stocks from their inventory as they become less profitable to market. When this supply-line is severed, so too will the ability for filmmakers to practice this art. Furthermore, it has been over five years since the last 16mm projector came off the assembly line, and in the past year, the very last film cameras have been built with none of the key companies intending to return to that market. The art of celluloid filmmaking survives at the whim of tinkerers who may or may not be able to keep the existing equipment functioning.

Creating under this shadow, it is no wonder that the filmmakers become philosophical and introspective when using it. With every roll shot, one finds him or herself asking "is this the last time I do this?". The comparison between "film-farm" filmmakers and "farm-farm" farmers begs to be made. Not only is sustainability an issue, but the process also has parallels. Images need to be carefully cultivated, gathered, processed, and delivered to the hungry consumer. The final product never reflects how much personal investment was put into it; the time and sweat and pain. Farmers and filmmakers, each working in their fields, isolated, driven by single-minded passion certainly must live in hope that what they are doing is good and necessary and that recognition will eventually come. The belief that the outcome has value must outweigh the futility that comes with being aware of the inevitable demise of this way of working.

The films I selected for this screening are some of the more recent works to emerge from the farm, most of which are by filmmakers I was previously unfamiliar. They each feel like they are walking a delicate line, the elements and the content both fragile, as the filmmaker struggles with mortality on some level. The cycle of the seasons is always apparent, illuminating both the nature of film as art as well as life itself. Within each, either spoke or unspoken, you can sense the Hoffman's

subtle hand urging the filmmaker to be brave, to reach deep within themselves, to work beyond the pain and harvest moments of truth.

**Goodbye - 3.5 min., by Daniel McIntyre (2011)**

McIntyre has created a montage of images, some positive and others negative, which waft over us like the a perfume, surrounding you without touching you. The blending between positive and negative, from people to animals, from water to air, all act to evoke a semi-waking, dreamlike state; the pleasure of the inexplicable. The title seems to suggest an ending or departure as perhaps the viewer is led into a dream from which there is no waking.

**Lot 22, Concession 5 – 4 min., by Penny McCann (2009)**

As we listen to an old man's voice talking about growing up on a farm, we see a crack in time and watch the story like an echo, never quite as distinct as we'd hoped. The farm and the tales are both fragmented, crackling in and out of view, incomplete. Imagination fills in details but in the end we realize that each of us has experienced a different story, as fleeting as the wind.

**Towards Everyday Lightning – silent, 9 min., by James Gillespie (2003)**

The world within this film is like lightning, beautiful but fleeting, existing for longer in your eye and your mind than it does in reality. Gillespie uses extensive solarization (shifts from positive to negative, randomly created through light being introduced in the middle of film development) to suggest a life as a series of memories ravaged by a storm. In silence, the storm creates a tumultuous atmosphere in ironic contrast to the lethargic faceless farm labourer featured on screen.

**Anamnesis – 3 min., by Scott Miller Berry (2009)**

The camera seem agitated as it struggles to discover meaning below the layers of paper, some being wasp nests, others being photographs collaged onto a human face. Colour and moments of clarity don't satisfy

us as the images, and the history held within them, seems too shrouded in secrecy to ever decode. Amid all the images, the man is blinded by history and paralyzed into inaction.

**Once – 5 min., by Barbara Sternberg (2007)**

"Once" conjures up a sensation of seeing the world for the first time, awakening in a forest and knowing only the flashes of light, trees like a veil against the sky. Sternberg posits that life is brief but important, that every moment of it is of value if we believe it to be. She begs us to open our eyes and to really see.

**Destroying Angel - 32 min., by Phil Hoffman and Wayne Salazar (1998)**

"Destroying Angle" is a collaboration between Hoffman and Salazar and is not, strictly speaking, made at the film farm. It represents the methods and approaches that Hoffman takes in creating a film and the legacy he has established. The structure is loose, moving fluidly between black and white and colour, sync sound and voice over, abstract and representation, metaphor and informational and most importantly between the filmmaker as maker and as subject. It is a film about dualities. There are two primary stories, that of Salazar's struggles with AIDS and his coming to terms with his father, and the story of Hoffman's wife Marion McMahon and her tragic death from cancer in 1996. The film was shot over an extended period of time, partially at the farm, partially off of it. It is about memory, how photographic images evoke feelings but often tell a different story. When Salazar's photos of his father and his dog contradict his memory of them, we realize that we cannot trust the plastic arts, that all of what we are watching is subjective. For every right there is a wrong, for every failure there is a success and this is not represented in either memory nor in photography.

This film is the metaphoric harvesting of Phil Hoffman, turning inspiration into seeds, growing them into courage for the filmmakers he touches. The film poses many questions about the nature of memory. Should we share our stories, releasing them into the world, or hold them close to our hearts? What will do more good, what will do more harm? In a world overshadowed by memory, how can we let go?

Gerald Saul is a Regina based filmmaker, a long time member of the Saskatchewan Filmpool, and a professor of film and video production in the Department of Media Production and Studies at the University of Regina. ([www.GeraldSaul.com](http://www.GeraldSaul.com))

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