



# FLASHLIGHT MAGIC

KERRY LAITALA interviewed by Ileana Pietrobruno

**"Laitala hand builds her films, manipulating the surface of the celluloid and exposing each frame individually to create works that stand at the edge of both film and art". This mysterious, experimental filmmaker from San Francisco recently hosted a Cineworks Cinematic Salon before moving into the optical printer room to spend long hours working on her latest film, *The Muse of Cinema*. When I met-up with Kerry Laitala, tears were running down her face. The optical printer can do that to you.**

**Kerry Laitala:** I have such an investment in what I do that when things don't work out I feel totally lost, as if everything is going to fall apart. I think I place more emotional investment in my work than I do in relationships.

**Ileana Pietrobruno:** It's been said that men express their sensuality through technology. Have you ever thought of that as a female artist working with technology?

**Kerry Laitala:** I definitely have a connection to certain kinds of machines and the optical printer has been a very enticing machine for me. I've had a lot of fun with it. As you labour, you become more and more absorbed with each frame of film until you get kind of sucked-in and the film starts to manipulate you.

**IP: It's quite addictive.**

**KL:** Absolutely! I don't have any other addictions.

**IP: What are you trying to accomplish with the optical printer?**

**KL:** I want to create an intervention on the original material. I'll place a mask that I've made, or a filter, or a piece of fabric in front of the lens. This either illuminates part of the image or hides it in shadow. I do this in order to create, not just a formal intervention, but also because I want to transform the idea of what the image can mean.

**IP: You often shoot images using a camera, but how do you create images without a camera?**

**KL:** One technique involves placing things on top of the unexposed film stock as a kind of mask. I found a broken windshield on the side of the road. Anything you find is possible material depending on whether it has an interesting kind of texture. Then I expose the film by hand with a flashlight or sometimes I use a photographic flash or a table lamp. When I'm exposing film I find that 'the gesture' is so resonant because you're basically using the gesture of your body to leave a trace that then becomes transformed and brought out. I mean it's pretty far out when you think about it - what I'm doing here and now will eventually be moving through space and all of the little particles of the image are going to reform onto the surface of a wall and a whole room of people will watch that gesture. There's something

so empowering about that and there's something so... I don't know... you're making some kind of strange magic happen. It sounds so simple to say that but I do feel like a magus.

**IP: Seriously. Magic?**

**KL:** Using light to coax an image out onto the surface of the film is like using magic. It's alchemy because you are activating those silver halides and sensitizing them. For me, film is connected with the 17<sup>th</sup> century when alchemists were working with all kinds of natural elements. They had a very different connection to their cosmological universe and were more connected than us to the natural processes. Film is kind of analogous to that.

**IP: What do you call this type of filmmaking?**

**KL:** It's called 'direct cinema' or 'direct film technique'. We also call it DIY (Do It Yourself) which is a punk rock term. DIY is about making everything happen yourself instead of relying on a lab or on equipment. You don't need a camera. What you need is a flashlight, some film stock, chemicals, a tank, and some rewinds.

**IP: That's fantastic. We tend to get so caught-up in buying all the latest expensive gizmos.**

**KL:** The tools aren't necessarily going to make what you're doing interesting at all. Making art has to do with what you put into it - what kind of vision you have, the connection you have to the materials, and how you create a personal expression.

**IP: I love how your cat sits on the table right next to your negative film as you expose it.**

**KL:** She likes to get right in the middle of everything. Yeah, she's a trip. I find it funny that video has a filter for fake dust and scratches and all I have to do is drop my film on the floor. People in video are always trying to imitate the look of film. It's pretty phony baloney because video is its own form but people want to use it to imitate film. It's so strange how often people come up to me and say, "Why don't you just do your films on a computer?" And I'm like, "Well, it's like telling a painter or a sculptor that they should just do their art on a computer! Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?" But of course it doesn't sound ridiculous to most people because they don't understand the difference between film and video. And there's a lot of differ-

ence. Video and film are apples and oranges. One is not better or worse than the other. They simply have their own properties and I'm interested in bringing-out the essential properties of film.

**IP: Since your films are not structured narratively, how do you structure your films?**

**KL:** I don't have a beginning and an end. The film grows in a really organic way. Sometimes I'll have one image in mind and then I find different ways I want to work with that image. Soon, other images come into my sphere in a sometimes random, sometimes elliptical way. I like this because it allows me to discover what the film is about along the way. I don't work with a map or a formula. This allows me and the viewer to discover things. The film comes to life on its own and creates its own compass for us to follow.

**IP: Your films carry a visual explosion of meanings - symbolic, surreal, and mythic.**

**KL:** I think of images as 'thought pictures' that can create repercussions and different associations. I'm interested in working with metaphor and creating different possibilities. There isn't necessarily one overarching theme in my films. I'm not interested in creating work that's dictatorial, that's going to say, "Okay, this film is only about this and if you don't get it then you're not going to get anything out of it." I'm interested in making films that are open-ended and expansive, where you can derive multiple meanings. When a viewer tells me something about my film that I consider a little bit 'off', I'm often like "Wow, that's a really interesting reading. I like that." You don't have to understand everything in my films in order to get something out of them; I'm hoping that you can just be open to experiencing them. But some people get very angry or insulting and say, "Maybe someday you'll learn how to tell the story".

**IP: It's so true that you don't have to understand everything about your films in order to enjoy them. Why do your films often end with an image of a heart or a caduceus?**

**KL:** The caduceus is the symbol for Asclepius, the god of health. I think of film as a panacea because it can help you to reconnect with your soul. I know it sounds very out there, but art does allow you to have a deeper connection with your own self. I mean, I get very depressed when I'm not producing my art. It takes so many steps to do just a minute of film and yet the process is so rewarding. I find the actual labour meditative; there's a communion between the work and my body. Some of my films are very cathartic for me. Some of my films are really dark and sad. People are often like, "Wow, your films are so different from you". And I'm like, "Well, in my day to day life, I don't show every part of myself". It's interesting that with film I can bring certain things out of myself. I allow the film to embody my feelings in a way that is much more genuine and honest. I do put my heart into my films. ■

*Ileana Pietrobruno has made two features — the darkly surreal *Cat Swallows Parakeet and Speaks!* and the raucous gender-bending *Girl King*. She is currently in development for the feature film, *Nana*.*

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