Cleveland finally shooting toward success

BY JOHN PETKOVIC
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

Shoot first, ask questions later.

For a decade, Robert Banks has embodied the strategy. The Cleveland indie filmmaker has relentlessly pursued a life-long dream: To make experimental movies full time, all the time.

To finance his flicks, the self-taught Banks has gone deep in debt to his mom, Visa card and insurance policy. To make them, he has done everything from using expired, discounted film to shooting and editing his films in the dimly lit basement of the Cleveland home he shares with his mother.

The hard work is starting to pay off.

In the last year, Banks, 34, has had his movies shown in some of the most prestigious film festivals — Sundance, Rotterdam and South by Southwest. The BBC British Short Film Festival in London, meanwhile, accorded him a career-long retrospective — a show that hits the Cleveland Cinematheque this weekend.

Now that the dream seems closer than ever to being realized, Banks is starting to ask questions.

“When I went to London, I realized that in Europe they really care about films, especially the experimental stuff I do,” says Banks. “It isn’t just a bunch of people who think it’s cool to be an ‘indie’ filmmaker.

“And so I started wondering what am I doing here in the indie scene — I don’t want to be cool, I want to create art,” he says.

It’s a dilemma Banks will continue to struggle with, but one that sets him apart, says Cleveland Cinematheque Director John Ewing.

“Nowadays, everyone wants to be an ‘indie’ filmmaker. Robert is an anomaly in his work ethic and the kind of films he makes,” says Ewing, who has been following Banks’ career since November 1990 when the theater screened his short “Froggy Central.”

Clevelander Robert Banks, holding an Eclair 16 mm camera, is the epitome of an indie filmmaker.

PREVIEW

Robert Banks: Rage Against the Dying of the Light

What: A 75-minute film that features 11 shorts by Cleveland filmmaker Robert Banks.

When: It screens at 10:05 p.m. tonight and 8:45 p.m. tomorrow.

Where: The Cinematheque in the Cleveland Institute of Art, 11141 East Blvd.


“He makes nonnarrative-films. He doesn’t shoot on video or 16 mm, but on 35 mm, which costs a lot more money,” says Ewing. “And he isn’t making features. He makes experimental shorts.”

Banks uses another name to describe his impressionistic films — “puzzles.” And while they are often puzzling, they are also poetic.

“Outlet,” shot on 35 mm (a high-end format rarely used in the indie world), is a sensual, visually striking collage of women posing with Flexiglas while crushing eggs and squeezing tubes of multi-colored toothpaste.

“X — The Baby Cinema” is a three-minute assault of graphic images (photos and drawings that were manipulated on a copy machine) and scratch-and-color-on-film techniques that tell the life story of Malcolm X in dizzying, rapid-fire fashion.

The films represent extremes in Banks’ work. But both are independent in the truest sense of the word. They don’t fit into either the glitz of Hollywood or the sloth of indiedom.

Instead, they’re singular expressions inspired by the first, most basic element of film: moving pictures.

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