

Robert Beavers's Spirit of a Vanished Age

RENAISSANCE MAN

BY J. HOBERMAN

Serenely anachronistic, 52-year-old Robert Beavers is a throwback to the heroic age of the old New American Cinema—if not to the high seriousness of an even earlier epoch. His aesthetic predates the scruffy, confrontational '60s underground, which was at its Warholian peak around the time Beavers dropped out of prep school (the administration censored his film society) and moved to New York City to become an avant-garde filmmaker.

Beavers's mentor was Gregory Markopoulos (1928–92), maker of densely edited, daringly elliptical updates of Greek myths. The teenage Beavers relocated to Europe with Markopoulos in 1967, in part to fulfill Markopoulos's grand ambition to create a theater in central Greece devoted to screening his films. Several years after Markopoulos's death, Beavers returned to the U.S. to selectively show his own (still undistributed) movies. The spirit of a vanished age, he emerged as a filmmaker of tremendous stature—a mini-retro at Toronto, the recipient of a special award from the National Society of Film Critics, and the only filmmaker with a solo program in the current Whitney Biennial (March 10 and April 6).

Running less than an hour, "Robert Beavers: The Architecture of Film" consists of *Work Done* and *The Painting*, two pieces made in the early '70s and re-edited with sound some 25 years later, as well as *The Ground*, a 35mm film shown to universal acclaim at last fall's New York Film Festival. All three works are characterized by highly musical structures in which particular, precisely framed images are repeated in varying combinations. Beavers creates additional internal rhythms within the overall montage by racking focus, masking parts of the image, and stopping down the aperture. (Most distinctive are the abrupt pans, a staccato effect apparently produced by the filmmaker sharply rotating his lens mount.)

Bracing in its simplicity, the 22-minute *Work Done* was shot in Florence and celebrates an archaic Europe. Contemplating a stone vault cooled by blocks of ice or the hand-stitching of a massive tome or the frying of a local delicacy, Beavers considers human activities without dwelling on human protagonists. The activities are archetypal; the connections are made associatively in the editing, as when Beavers cuts from a close-up of the ice to a limpid sylvan stream. That he is also a colorist is clear with the shock appearance of a filtered, greener-than-green meadow. Like many of Beavers's films, *Work Done* is based on a series of textural or transformative equivalences: the workshop and the field, the book and the forest, the mound of cobblestones and a distant mountain. A pig—represented by a folk art butcher sign—is reduced to two pats of lard and a vat of impossibly red blood.

Shorter and more tightly focused, *The Painting* intercuts shots of traffic navigating the old-world remnants of downtown Bern, Switzerland, with details from Dirk Bout's 15th-century altarpiece, *The Martyrdom of St. Hippolytus*. The painting shows the calm, near-naked saint in a peaceful landscape, a frozen moment before four horses tear his body to pieces while an audience of soigné nobles looks on; in the movie's revised ver-



WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

A SENSE OF SYBARITIC, EVEN STONED, WELL-BEING: FROM *THE GROUND*

sion, Beavers gives it a comparably rarefied psychodramatic jolt, juxtaposing shots of Markopoulos, bisected by shafts of light, with a torn photo of himself and the recurring image of a shattered windowpane.

Despite the wealth of allusion, Beavers's

films are not literary. (The Markopoulos opus closest to his disciple's work is the non-narrative study of a soon-to-be-abandoned apartment, *Ming Green*.) Nor is Beavers's vision precious. His fastidious visuals are typically rendered concrete through the use of am-

bi-ent sound—in *The Painting*, it's a combination of traffic noise, door creaks, and the sustained single note of an orchestra tuning. Oscillating between the everyday and the eternal, Beavers dares to harmonize with the spirit of the Renaissance. In some respects, his confident appropriation of the "European" suggests Alexander Sokurov. Beavers is not so much a formalist as a classicist—even *The Painting* is remarkably free of angst. (Stan Brakhage, by comparison, is a wild and crazy expressionist.)

An even blunter series of equivalences, *The Ground* identifies the rocky landscape of a Greek island with that of a man's torso—gray chest hair equated with sea grass and lichens. A stone carver sits beneath a ruined battlement, methodically chiseling a brick in the course of a bucolic afternoon that might have already lasted a thousand years. These shots alternate with close-ups in which a man (the same man? the filmmaker?) rhythmically slaps his chest, creating a fleshy counterpart to the tapping. Beavers complicates this basic structure, which analogizes stone masonry and filmmaking, with screen-filling shots of the sky and the sea, and longer views of the hills. *The Ground* is about shaping something amid the ruins of time. Elegant and elemental, the movie exudes a sense of sybaritic, even stoned, well-being. A stray goat wanders past a cave. The faint sound of cowbells only accentuates the intensity of the noonday stillness.

Andy Warhol once joked about how fabulous it would be to have a movie of a mediocre shoulder. *The Ground* is, in some ways, that movie. More sensuous than austere, it evokes the timeless, sunbaked Mediterranean world of *L'Avventura* or *Contempt*. At the same time, Beavers's film seems far more advanced in its self-contained artistry and eschewal of myth. *The Ground* feels like the expression of another century—but is it the 15th or the 25th? **V**

The Whitney Stirs a Melting Pot

DIGITAL LOVE

Among avant-garde cinephiles, the Whitney Biennial's film and video exhibitions hold an importance roughly analogous to Hollywood's Academy Awards. New faces get career boosts, established names receive belated honors, elder figures show they've still got the knack, and everyone else gripes about the biased selection process. Like the Oscars, too, the Biennial provides a time-capsule sampling of recent cinema, set down in catalog form. Some works prosper, canonized, for years to come, while others remain notable as examples of their era's stereotypical excesses.

An acutely contemporary aspect of 2002's selection is the muddled boundaries between film and video, sound art, performance, Internet, and other arts. For example, videomakers Seth Price and Peggy Ah-Weh create new pieces out of materials culled from the Internet and *Tomb Raider*, respectively, while various Web artists display jittering cartoons on laptops, desktops, and PDAs. Polymath Miranda July presents separate works in the video, sound art, and perfor-

mance categories. In *Trevor*, video art pioneer Steina manipulates footage of a man singing into a virtuoso burst of digital scratching that easily challenges the skills of any trendy turntablist, while Stom Sogo's *Guided by Voices* masterfully remixes video, Super 8, and laptopish music into a post-cinematic K hole. One videomaker loses the image altogether, verging on sound art: Keith Sanborn's *For the Birds* plays nothing but an audio composition of birdsong warbles against an empty black video screen. Aping their more commercial counterparts, these disparate categories of music, film, video, and the Internet feel as if they're melting into a single form called digital media.

Perhaps in reaction to the ingestion of cinema by its own digital offspring, other filmmakers revive the archaic modernist impulse to explore the specific properties of old celluloid, looking backward to craft a new après-garde. Unlike its forebears, this current crop of neo-materialists loses the ideological and cognitive ambitions of the past in favor of optical play and wry historical quotes. A key artist in this mode is Brian Frye (also a curator of the Lower East Side's antique-y Robert Beck Memorial Cinema), who shoots silvery 16mm shorts that play like enigmatic, silent-era scraps rescued from a Hollywood junk shop.

Beyond Frye's films, there's a more baroque variant of Robert Beckism on view. A hallmark of Whitney film curator Chrissie Iles's first Biennial is an ambi-

tious slew of "projector performances," providing a contemporary coda to her much lauded "Into the Light" exhibit of early expanded cinema installations last season. Largely composed of local filmmakers, including Glen Fogel, Zoe Beloff, Bruce McClure, Luis Recader, and projector-manipulation pioneer Ken Jacobs, this group eschews narrative and, often, figurative representation, preferring on-screen collage, glowing abstractions, and rolling color fields. Sometimes adding voice-over, props, and life sound into the show, the performances combine elements of 19th-century sideshows, '60s happenings, and '70s conceptual art, transforming the cinematic apparatus into a motorized means of painting with light.

In true Biennial tradition, 2002 also brings its share of celluloid snoozers and digital duds. Case in point: Tony Cokes's jargon-clogged video *2@*, with its cringingly academic observations on popular music. Far worse is actor Dennis Hopper's miserably tacky narrative short *Homeless*, a wordless DV portrait of an ex-stripper who pushes a shabby shopping cart full of broken dreams through the mean streets of Southern California, but still manages to wear full make-up and show off her pert, tanned breasts. Memo to Mr. Hopper: We love you on the big screen, baby, but please leave the experimental cinema to the professionals. In return, we promise that Ken Jacobs will never best you for an Oscar. — Ed Halter