





# anticipation

Helen Lee in conversation with Midi Onodera

Midi Onodera finished principal photography on her first feature film, *SADNESS OF THE MOON*, in June of 1993.

Shot in three weeks, the film had a cash budget of less than \$200,000, raised from a variety of sources which include;

the Ontario Arts Council, The Canada Council,

Multiculturalism and Citizenship, the UIFT/OFDC Racial

Equity Fund, NFB, and the Gay and Lesbian Community

Appeal, as well as private investment and donations.

Starring Natsuko Ohama as film director Alex Koyama,

the film follows Alex's odyssey as she prepares to shoot a drama about tattooing. Through the film's tattoo "expert" the

intense Chris Black (Keram Malicki Sanchez), Alex discovers

an intertwined culture of pain and pleasure, and becomes

increasingly drawn into a world of body alteration,

transsexuality and personal transformation. The film also

features Melanie Nicholls-King (a co-founder of the Black woman's theatre collective *SUGAR AND SPICE*), and Dana

Brooks (last seen as the gun-wielding Marilyn Monroe dillinger, in *I LOVE A MAN IN UNIFORM*). Primarily

known for the feminist classic *TEN CENTS A DANCE*

(*PARALLAX*) (1986), and *THE DISPLACED VIEW* (1988),

which earned her a special Genie award and a Gemini

nomination, Midi has produced a critically acclaimed body

of about twenty short films. In the past, she

Opposite

Natsuko Ohama and Dana Brooks in  
*SADNESS OF THE MOON*  
by Midi Onodera

has written for CBC's INSIDE STORIES, worked as script reader and story editor, and also completed a two-year stint as a camera assistant in the industry. She serves as an advisor on film and community organizations, and is currently producing Candy Pauker's Super-8 feature GIRLS IN THE BAND.

Toronto-born, Midi made her first film at age fifteen, then studied at the Ontario College of Art before working at The Funnel as production coordinator. There she met other women filmmakers, among them; Anna Gronau, Michelle McLean, Judith Doyle, as well as visiting filmmakers like Leslie Thornton and Scott and Beth B. While the formalist movement of Michael Snow and Stan Brakhage was pre-eminent at the time, Midi remembers being struck most by the works of Kenneth Anger, as well as the New York punk aesthetic, early feminist film and new narrative. From her early works such as HOME WAS NEVER LIKE THIS and VILLE? QUELLE VILLE? up to her current projects, her films display an insistent curiosity about the properties of cinema with more personal themes that recall the iconoclastic work of other formally inventive lesbian filmmakers, Su Friedrich and Chantal Akerman.

### early on, one of my films

was invited to screen at a women's film festival, and I remember talking to Anna and Michelle about it and being really pissed off that this film had been accepted. I thought this is complete ghettoization? I want my work in a festival that's open to men and women, and, this is just bullshit. This was before a concrete feminist cinema was situated. Of course now you have festivals for everything...

HELEN: Do you feel that you still have that ambivalence?

MIDI: My films have been screened at women's film festivals, lesbian and gay film festivals and "people of colour" festivals. They're three different audiences and they all look for very different things. I can never target my work to only one of them because that's not how I see things.

HELEN: How would you align yourself, or do resist that?

MIDI: To a certain extent I do resist it. Just because I think that my sexual orientation is one thing, my gender is another, and my race and culture is another. It's difficult to separate those things and say that I'm only this, when I'm all of those things.

HELEN: Can you describe a relationship between the earlier films that you made and this film? How has that experience fed into what you're doing now?

MIDI: In the early days I was trying to figure out how film worked. A lot of my early films are concentrated in one area; formal elements, like the use of grain and composition. I guess that's how I came to produce TEN CENTS A DANCE, which had a formal, technical backbone augmented by the

theme of the film. That's how I see film working. You find a technical device to enhance the content or the theme.

HELEN: Was that also the case with SADNESS OF THE MOON? What was the technical thing?

MIDI: The technical thing was conventional drama. I realized that what I wanted to say within that construction was almost entirely outside of conventional narrative. So by engaging in a form that was already considered mainstream and accepted, I could bring in other elements that were completely foreign to it. I hope that by using that kind of framework I'm being more accessible to an audience that would actually see the film. Hopefully they will get something out of it because of the content.

### new queer cinema

HELEN: What is your take on these different areas, like New Queer Cinema, feminist film, and also what I would call multicultural or films by people of colour, that kind of work? What I sense is that you do have this ambivalent relationship to the terms, but then your work is recruited and used in those contexts.

MIDI: Yeah, but you have no control over who sees your work, who rents it, or even what they say about it.

HELEN: Where do you feel aligned?

MIDI: I wouldn't say... or I'd say I feel aligned in the independent film community.

**New Queer Cinema is about gay men.**

**There are a numk**



Above

Ross McLaren and Wendy Coad in  
TEN CENTS A DANCE (PARALLAX)  
by Midi Onodera 1985

**HELEN:** Do you feel your new film will be taken up in the New Queer Cinema, which has consisted so far of work by gay men primarily?

**MIDI:** I don't know because I think you're right. New Queer Cinema is about gay men. I don't see that there are any women within that definition. I don't see a lot of Queer cinema that I find incredibly interesting.

**HELEN:** Really? POISON, and SWOON? or THE LIVING END?

**MIDI:** It's really good that they're being produced but I still think that the work is by gay men who are working in a conventional way. It's much harder for a woman, just working in film generally. So if anything, my sympathies would go more towards women filmmakers, because it is a lot tougher. There are a number of reasons why it is tougher and I don't think that lesbians are going to make a big dent in Queer cinema.

**HELEN:** It's true that it's unfortunate the way it's been marketed, however canny and sexy it is. But just like Black cinema has become the cinema of young urban Black men, the movement is intended to stand for a whole group when it's actually quite exclusionary and limiting.

## asian american media

**HELEN:** What do you think about three recent and very different Asian-related films like the JOY LUCK CLUB, a women's weepie that is consumed in a classical way but signifies a mainstream emergence of Asian American film. FAREWELL, MY CONCUBINE, from China, which, however you want to describe it, the characters are in drag. Yes, it's the Peking

Opera but it's been imported into a western context, so it doesn't totally maintain its cultural integrity because it's interpreted in a different way here. And then you have Gregg Araki. Even though he identifies himself first as gay, and then Asian. But generally, you're getting a much broader exposure of Asian and Asian American films around identity and sexuality. So do you have any expectations? Does your film fit into that equation, and do you find it encouraging?

**MIDI:** Yeah, I do see it's encouraging. But again, as you say, films like FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE is a foreign film. JOY LUCK CLUB is in a way also a foreign film. It's an American film, but the body of the story takes place outside of North America. Gregg Araki's stuff...I personally didn't like THE LIVING END. I thought it was a bad movie. But I'm encouraged to see Asian Americans making film.

**HELEN:** He's one of those people who is hopefully expanding the definition of what Asian American media is, which is to be celebrated and I really like his work. But with multiculturalism, you've said that if you had made the typical POC work, if you had chosen your

feature to be whatever they/funders, might expect a Japanese Canadian work to be, say more along the lines of THE DISPLACED VIEW as a feature film, funding would have come much more easily. Is that true? To what extent? And what was involved in your choice of pursuing something else?

**MIDI:** Recently, I sat on a panel at Harbourfront (organized during the ASIAN REVISIONS Film Series last year). I was talking about the fact that multicultural films are this new hot thing. And what happens is that a lot of younger filmmakers feel like they have to make certain types of work in order to access that kind of money...But I don't want to get stuck in the position where the only thing that I'm allowed to do is either talk about being a women, talk about being gay, or talk about being Japanese Canadian. I mean what if I wanted to make a slasher horror movie, you know, I think I should be allowed to do that.

**HELEN:** Do you?

**MIDI:** Do I want to make a...no, not at this point.

**HELEN:** Or do you want to make

or of reasons why I don't think lesbians are going to make a big dent,



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work that doesn't concern those issues?

MIDI: Sure. If someone came to me and said I've got this really good project and I read the script and I liked it, I would do it.

female to male

HELEN: What kind of changes has your film undergone during the four years in the making? Was that time of waiting and frustration during the fundraising fruitful in any way?

MIDI: Yeah, I did start thinking about the idea right after *THE DISPLACED VIEW*. That was in '88. I did a lot of reading, just because I didn't know a lot about transsexuality, and felt that I really had to do thorough research. Early on I found out that female to male, and male to female - philosophies, history and context were completely different from each other. So when you talk about transsexuality, you have to ask, well, what to what gender? There has been quite a bit done on male to female, as one would expect in this culture. There is of course an absence of the visa versa. So I spent a lot of time writing and re-writing, trying to figure out what the story was, who the characters were,

and I worked on other projects in between.

HELEN: So the core or originating idea of the film was around transsexuality?

MIDI: Yeah, the ideas and the issues in the film have not changed since that time. If anything, I think they've grown and become more ingrained in the characters rather than a theoretical essay applied to something. So it becomes more of a character insight than a "this is my theory and I want to prove it."

HELEN: What exactly changed in the script?

MIDI: In the very beginning, I had a lot more characters. I had less of a story line, less of a narrative structure. I had drafts where the character was a man. I kept flipping genders back and forth, I had to figure out what gender meant in terms of how a character would play that role. I think I was a bit insane.

process in progress

MIDI: I realized at one point, the film was about \$750,000 and it was because of economic reasons that I had to cut back and change a lot of things. But I think it was a good process to go

through because I think it's much tighter.

HELEN: What exactly did you want to do with a higher budget that you couldn't achieve with this budget.

MIDI: I think I had more locations. I, of course, had bigger salaries for people. HELEN: Different people? Different actors?

MIDI: I went to the Canadian Film Centre last year, for the Fall Lab, and it was useful because I had a chance to bring in actors. We had a full read-through of the script and I got a stronger handle on the characters. Then we shot a scene. I brought up one of my actors from LA, who I also used in the film, and I had Brooke Johnson as Chris. I wanted Shirley Douglas for the role of Penny. So I thought that I pretty much had my cast in place. But when we came to shooting it, things changed.

HELEN: So it was this period between the Fall Lab and when you shot it, which period?

MIDI: When did I make the big decision? I guess it was in March '93. I had already received money from the arts councils and money from various other sources, and was having a really hard time getting a Canadian distributor to access any more money from OFDC and Telefilm. That's the catch-22. You need a Canadian distributor to get into their whole system. Not in development, but in production. And I didn't have that. It was really, really discouraging. I'd find myself at these meetings saying, well, it's sort of like *BASIC INSTINCT*, and cringing... I mean, it was unbelievable, I couldn't handle that kind of stuff. I also had another producer at that point, Moira Holmes, and Alex Raffé was my executive producer. I thought it was a good package, but it just didn't get going. I was getting more frustrated. I went away on holidays and I came back and said, yes, I'm going to do it. Within the next few weeks, it just fell into place...

HELEN: You just cut off that avenue and...

MIDI: I decided, yeah, I'm going to make this. I have to make this now.



gay, or being Japanese Canadian. What if I wanted to make a

slasher horror movie?

**HELEN:** Yes, a lot of women filmmakers who are poised to make their first features, a whole raft of them, there is this glass ceiling...

**MIDI:** It's thick glass. Every woman faces this. When I decided to go ahead, I talked to Brenda Longfellow, who had just finished her film GERDA. It was great because we could share information about budgets and deferrals and all this kind of stuff. Just to have that communication with someone else was so beneficial. I have good producers that are completely behind the film, as well.

**HELEN:** How did you recruit those people, and what did they do once they stepped in and the project was already so developed?

**MIDI:** Phillip Ing was on the project for quite a bit longer than Mehernaz Lentin...He was around with Moira. They were co-producers. Phillip was also working at the Film Board. Basically, he was very supportive, it was like having someone in your court. Once things actually got rolling, Mehernaz came on board, in the early days of pre-production... They pretty well took over everything, getting the crew together, keeping money on track, our cash flow, everything. All those kinds of things, there's no way that I could have done it myself. They were just great and of course they still are. And it allowed me the time and the freedom just to concentrate on directing, which I really needed because we were shooting for three weeks, and that was it, and that meant that I would have to cover at least six pages a day which was enormous. For a feature, you work two and a half pages a day, kind of thing. I definitely needed their support, and they gave it to me.

**HELEN:** And then, Deepa (Mehta, Director of SAM AND ME and the upcoming CAMILLA)?

**MIDI:** Deepa was the executive producer, she is more of a consultant figure. We go to her with our problems and we figure out strategies and gives us feed back.

**HELEN:** Other executive producers help fundraise...

**MIDI:** Phillip and Meheranz are the

producers. But we're all in this together trying to get money.

## REF apprenticeship training

**HELEN:** I was also interested in your apprenticeship training initiative that was funded through REF (LIFT Racial Equity Fund).

**MIDI:** We had a lot of people who were on the apprenticeship program, and that worked out really well. At the very beginning it was kind of discouraging because I put out these ads through the "people of colour" network, and we got, ten responses. It was so disappointing. If I saw an ad like that I would have killed for a position like that. I mean, that's what I did in the industry for two years. And people just didn't seem to be eager and I was just so shocked. It wasn't until we put an ad in NOW that we got well over 200 applications. So I'm still trying to figure that out. Was it considered invalid because it only went through the networks, BFVN, Full Screen and other community-based groups. Then when it was in NOW did it suddenly become valid? I still haven't figured it out.

**HELEN:** May be they didn't know how to assess the project, because different people tap into those lists, actively recruiting POCs, and you just want to get away from that dynamic if it is a white-driven project.

**MIDI:** I also wasn't interested in just the same people getting those opportunities.

## character

**HELEN:** Going on to the substance of the film, can you talk about Alex and that portrayal, what you wanted to accomplish with that character?

**MIDI:** When I've been interviewed by the mainstream press, they want to know right away, or they assume right away that Alex is, and the film is, an autobiographical story. And my response is, well, do you consider every film by a white male heterosexual to be

opposite

Suno Yamazaki, Tomoko Makabe & Mido Onodera in

The Displaced View  
Mido Onodera 1988

autobiographical if you're dealing with white men in the film? I mean, I don't see it that way, so Alex is not autobiographical. I think she's very strong, and determined. She breaks out of Asian stereotypes. She's not seductive in that sort of 'exotic' way, she's an individual.

**HELEN:** You mentioned stereotypes. Were you intrigued by any characters who might be similar to your character?

**MIDI:** The character who was in... what's the character's name? Angelica Huston, in *THE GRIFTERS*, I really liked her character. I thought she was a real cold bitch but there was some other layer to her, some other level to her, I think that's what characters should be, multi-dimensional and not fixed.

**HELEN:** Because it's truly a character you've never seen before, I think, on screen.

**MIDI:** Is it because she's Asian?

**HELEN:** When you mention Anjelica Huston, you've seen shades of this character before, but I think because she is Asian, you can't deny that aspect. Whatever you want to call it, it's overdetermined, you need to work with the assumptions that are there when you have an Asian face on screen.

**MIDI:** The character is a product of North America, and yet has to hold on to all of this Asian baggage. I would talk to Natsuko about the character. Since Natsuko is also third-generation Japanese Canadian, we can relate on that level. We have those generational things that hang over us. With Miyashita, the tattoo master, she appropriates this Asian culture for her own film, and yet when you really get down to it, she doesn't know a damn thing about it. I think that's a truism.

**HELEN:** Tell me about the Chris Black character, who I think is really complex. When you talk about the origins of the script, and your ideas around transsexuality, did you want to explore that female to male aspect, although this character is pre-transsexual.

**MIDI:** Pre-operative. Pre-transsexual, I don't know. Transsexuality is more about what's in your mind than, as they say, what's in-between your legs.

**HELEN:** To me, the character was complex because the film is about tattooing and Alex is really interested in this first-hand experience of tattooing and lifts Chris's experience and tries to transpose that to her own film. So the Chris character is tattooed

and therefore "experienced," or worldly, but then is really naive and confused, actually disturbed and living with trauma. Can you talk about building those emotional layers?

**MIDI:** Like I said, in the writing process I went back and forth trying to figure out what gender is all about. Then I had to do a casting call. I looked at men and women. That was quite an experience because I had to leave myself open enough to be flexible. We narrowed it down to three people and I had them read against Natsuko because that chemistry between the two is so important and, really, Keram was the only one to play that role in the end.

## love

**HELEN:** Was Montana always a Black character? What did you want to achieve with that Black/Asian pairing?

**MIDI:** Again, on the screen, in either gay films or lesbian films, I don't think there's been any representation of a mixed race



couple. It's almost always white people coupling.

**HELEN:** They're rare to begin with, not rare...

**MIDI:** Rare even in the heterosexual world...

**HELEN:** Rare when it's not a white/other pairing. It's very hard to find. I wanted to know how you dealt with the overdetermination of something like that, to have the Black/Asian pairing.

**MIDI:** We discussed it from the characters' point of view, more that what it means in a larger racial and political context. Certainly I had a handle on what I was doing but it wasn't necessary for me to engage the actors in that kind of discussion.

**HELEN:** Do you want to talk about the love triangle aspect, with Alex, Chris and Montana?

**MIDI:** It's there on a certain level but the obsession is the main focus of the Alex/Chris relationship. Montana is another person that Alex has used. If anything, Montana is one of the more positive

**Transsexuality is more about what's in your**



characters in the film. She's very sure of herself, she knows exactly who she is and what she wants. She is just very straight all the way through.

**HELEN:** What was your interest in tattooing? It has a metaphorical purpose. I thought it was interesting how the tattooing imagery, which you have mediated by reshooting off a television, breaks away from the narrative realist structure of the drama. You have those grainy close-ups. It almost functions as a pornographic or spectacular image; it reveals a source of pleasure and desire.

### body alterations

**MIDI:** Initially, my interest in tattooing came about because I realized that it was a form of body alteration, just as piercing or scarification is. It seemed to me the perfect visual metaphor for a sort of transsexuality that isn't visible. A sex change operation and tattooing, there's pain in both of them. It's permanent, it's completely fixed and it's up to you to

decide if you want to get it. I mean, no one forces a sex change operation on you, no one forces you to get a tattoo, unless we're talking about a larger context.

**HELEN:** When you're dealing with these ideas and issues around transsexuality and tattooing, they are to different degrees, taboo subjects, and they also have as I'm sure you've found, very developed communities. Can you tell me a bit about, representing this "subcultural" form or world, and recruiting that into your film and presenting it as a feature, in an undeniably more mainstream context? Especially since in these four or five intervening years, drag queens have become pop culture icons.

**MIDI:** I think it's great that drag queens are getting recognition or publicity in the mainstream. Again, I think we must return to character. Penny is a very caring individual and she's a drag queen. She's out there, she deals with all this wild stuff or what the mainstream would

consider wild, but it's her home, and this is where she's most comfortable. So I think that each of the characters have a strong base in that way...At one point, I remember I was talking to some transsexuals who are involved in the performing arts and one of them said to me, "you know, you have a huge responsibility because you have the power to make a film and I don't, and therefore you have to represent me in this way." And I said, "I understand that, but I can't. All I can do is say that I understand your position and I hope to achieve something greater than positive imagery reinforcement. Because I don't like to do that in my films, I don't like to give people pat little answers and say, "okay, this person might have 'major problems', but aren't they just a 'normal' and wonderful person underneath it all." I don't think that really exists, characters are more complex than that."

mind than, as they say, what's in-between your legs.