

Profiling the Prolific

Avant-garde film and computer video artist Shawn Chappelle

Interviewed by Lisa Louise Santonato

11:50 am, Sunday. Shawn Chappelle, experimental video artist and XXX-rated politically charged collagist arrives at my door, motorcycle helmet in hand and another one sitting half atop his wily, silvery black mass of hair. We fly down Main Street to The Whip and the light is gorgeous.

12:20 pm. In the Edit Suite, The Western Front. Treating images with Photoshop, Shawn uses Premiere to edit them together. The images that flow together on the screen before us are pulled from '60s photographic magazines, and create the feeling of a moving Rauschenberg. The move very fluidly, blurring and dissolving together at a peacefully frantic pace. This piece, presently entitled *Implodedrawing*, uses collage sequences similar to *XXXSpacejunk*, yet they are even more beautiful and fluid. A departure from the previous five videos, *Implodedrawing* is solely concerned with beauty and contains no overtly socio-political content.

XXXSpacejunk was created by animating stills from Hustler, Penthouse and still frames from pornographic movies. By looping 3 or 4 layers with static around the edge of frame, and images coming in through the middle, photography, TV, and other media is sarcastically combined with politics, sex and violence.

"Media's fascination is inherently biased towards conflict and aggression, sexual tension. For instance, a happy couple married for twenty years is not good TV. I try to link all these things together. Vortex of media. Manipulated to the point where you can't see it. Constant disaster, sex, nature, violence."

By contrast, *Ozone* has no traces of violence in it. This short piece is an incredibly lush, multi-layered collage of sound art that mixes radio frequencies with beautiful video imagery. Of all of Shawn's work, only three pieces involve sex and violence: *XXXSpacejunk*, *Shooting the Target*, and *Shooting Blanks*. We watch his self-professed opus, *Probe*, and I have to agree. It is an expression of how our scientific world view affects the ways in which we treat our environment. The images are beautiful, as I most of his work.

1:30 pm. We peel back the city in search of an open sushi bar.

1:45 pm. Taste of Japan is open. We park, and run inside almost drooling. When we resume the interview I feign an unnecessary formality and ask Mr. Chappelle the most banal question: When did you first decide to become a filmmaker? I am surprised that he responds, and his self-conviction is clear.

"When I saw Bladerunner. And then when I saw Clockwork Orange I realized I wasn't going to make Bladerunner. I like Stanley Kubrick more than any other filmmaker for his clarity of vision. Every shot has everything to do with the entire point he is making. Very directed. Keeps his eye on the ball the whole time. No superfluous imagery. It's like poetry that way. Cuts out every unnecessary word. Some poets, if they did that, they'd be silent. One of my favourite things to do is to listen in on a conversation and grab the little pieces that I like. Quickly construct a poem out of them on the fly. It lets me leave y own ego in a way. Instead of trying to create something it's like trying to choose something. Most of the reason why I do art is to please myself."

2:00 pm. We've ordered. We're ravenous. We're discussing what he hated about *Reservoir Dogs*.

"That cop was tied up on that chair and then he just doused him, and his head was just bleeding and that other guy was taunting him, and I was going nuts. And then, this other guy comes in and saves the day and then just shoots him like nothing."

What is it about that scene that angers you?

"It's manipulative, to the point where it makes you feel really, really terrible. Whereas I think with Clockwork Orange, there's an intellectually stimulating point to it all, there's a contextualization there. Reservoir Dogs is just entertainment. There's no political theme as far as I can tell. It's a lot subtler, anyways."

2:05 pm. The oysters arrive and we indulge.

"Beauty. I like to make something that is beautiful. That's why I do it. Like being a musician, I guess, it's kind of like jamming music. Yeah, the creation of beauty is a real big one for me."



2:10 pm. I gulp down the freshly poured tea and discover it is scalding hot. My mouth is completely burned and I can no longer taste my sushi, or speak, but Shawn can still make a hot tongue laugh.

"At least you're not quadriplegic. Look at Christopher Reeve. He was a big star, now he's just a head. That's what I call him, Superhead. I made that joke up myself, What's Christopher Reeves' alter ego? Superhead. Can't you just see this head flying through the air with his limp body? I'm getting bad karma from that joke, though. I hope your tongue heals."

3:10 pm. Speeding down to Benny's on Broadway. *"I want a family. I'm getting on thirty and I'm sick of the rat race. I'm also like Florence Nightingale. I like to make people feel good and I'm very passionate about music, experiencing sound. I like music that fills you up with something soothing, fun, sad and interesting. Something that plays with the normal pop structure. I don't listen to mainstream pop at all, I don't like any at all except for really good country."*

Are you happy? *"Yeah, I am now."* What makes you happy?

"Good friends and making other people happy, pleasing other people. A good song. A really wicked song. Songs that give gooseflesh. That's a happy feeling, gooseflesh. Doing something interesting and beautiful, I get a real sense of self-satisfaction, pleasure, seeing something that I really groove on. It's not egotistical. It's ego-centered – like I'm centered in my ego – the anonymity of haiku. I don't know if it's bad to do something that you want to do. A lot of people think what's wrong with the world is individualism. But I don't know. We're already here. You can change certain things but something like that is too profound."

3:20 pm. Coffee, chocolate and cigarettes at Benny's. What makes you nervous? What gets under your skin?

"People who are saying things without meaning them. Lying, in a way, I guess. I also have a low patience for slow alliteration. I have a habit that has me piss off people sometimes cause I interrupt them. I can't wait for them. I finish people's sentences. Some people don't mind that and that's good – those people I can live with, hang out with – or the type that talk really fast and I don't even have to think about finishing their sentences cause they're already on to the next one."

Why politics? *"I'm a communist I guess, I think subsistence is the way to go. This growth market economy is killing the planet and if we think we can fix it by having the same attitude, we're wrong and it's not gonna get fixed until we're changed. We're putting Band-Aids on a cancer."*

So what would you think you could ultimately do, to be as effective as you could be with your work? What would you need?

"Actually, inside that question, it's not what I can do with my work it's that I consider everything that I pass through my hands. What I do is a consideration. If everybody on the planet did that, this world would change. I'm not going to take this coffee out, I'm going to sit down in here and drink it with this cup. My most guilty thing that I have is this damn motorcycle, I know it pollutes. I don't just read ideas and then regurgitate them, I kinda start to live them if I really feel them and I don't think there's enough of that in this world. People think that I'm so prolific and I don't even think that I'm that prolific. I just think that I make decisions and that I stick to them and I go on. I don't go back and fix things forever. I do a bit, but this is the worst enemy for most people, their lack of the ability to just decide it and do it and move on."

Self-doubt. *"Yeah, I guess that's its biggest root. Self-doubt versus self-confidence and most people in this society are very filled with self-doubt. I think it's a very individualistic society but at the same time it encourages humbleness and lack of taking credit for anything, you know like the more you pass off credit the more people admire you for your... you know, like what the fuck? It's a double standard that makes you crazy."*

So what's the hardest thing for you to overcome with your work?

"Getting the sounds together with visuals, and figuring out how its gonna end. It just sort of unfolds, which is kind of how my work comes about anyway, so I guess I have an organic approach to how I work. It's different every time and the more you look at it the more different it becomes. I knew what I wanted to do in the long run and I guess I'm doing it. I thought I was gonna make Kubrick-like movies, you know, a feature film director – which isn't out of the cards yet."

You're on the brink... *"I don't look at it as any different kind of accomplishment than what I'm doing now. There's this sort of notion that that is film and that these are cute little short things, you know. When actually doing one of those is just as much work as making a feature film. Just a different kind of work. Completely different process involved. I'm in control of absolutely everything. But because I have no characters, no dialogue, no body for anyone to overtly narratively identify with anything, it doesn't have a wide audience. It's too challenging. That's where Kubrick is really fantastic. He appeals to the intellectual and at the same time to Joe or Jane Doe, you know? Cause he bridges that gap."*

5:00 pm. We continue to sit out on the patio, talking. I've been treated to a beautiful visual collage seen from the back of a Suzuki together with honest, delightful conversation. Bright sunshine, warm breeze and little fluffy clouds join and separate across the sky. I think of *Matter Passing*. A beautiful mesmerizing film using imagery in place of verbal language, this piece is almost entirely composed of visions of clouds moving over time and space.

"Matter Passing is about physics, the dance of life. This table is not solid, everything is in motion, everything has different frequencies of vibration. That distance in-between atoms makes up so much more of a percentage of the space in which an atom takes up than the actual physical thing that we can perceive is there, so this solid table is mostly nothing. There's more space than solid. That's what blows my mind, like, what the fuck is holding everything together? So that's what this film is about, anyway. Matter passing."

If Shawn Chappelle were to someday produce a conventionally narrative film, it would probably be a strikingly *silent* film about interpersonal relationships.

"Individual psychological growing affectations, that kind of thing. Things that deal with how you deal with yourself and somebody else and the world in which we find ourselves, the beauty of the world, of other people, of other cultures. I think there would be a lot of silences just cause I'm so fucking talkative. I think I'm compensating for my personality in my work by never saying anything. Ha! I never thought of it that way! That's it. No voice over in my work. (mimics) 'The ozone is 40 km thick.' 'Oh, is that all you've got to say for yourself?' Yep."

Film/Videography:

XXXSpacejunk (1996). 3/4" video, 9 mins.
Shooting Blanks (1996). Co-director: Mike Hoolboom. 16 mm, 8 mins.
Trans (1995). 3/4" video, 5 mins.
Ozone remix (1994). 3/4" video, 14 mins.
Ozone (1994). 3/4" video, 27 mins.
Probe (1994). 3/4" video, 7 mins.
Matter Passing (1994). Super 8, 10 mins.
Victoria (1993). Super 8, 3 mins.
Filmovie Cream (1993). 16 mm, 4 mins.
Illuminares 92 (1993). Super 8, 3 mins.
Film 1965/91 (1991). 16 mm, 3 mins.
Servicing the Target (1991). 3/4" video, 10 mins.
Red, Blue... (1990). 3/4" video, 5 mins.

To see some of Shawn Chappelle's work, check out *Collide... An Audio Visual Time Tale* at the Video In Studios, May 17th. A live and interactive performance event, *Collide...* is part of the Electronic Arts Festival, "Body Electric" May 14-18, 1997.

Check out samples of Shawn's work on our website: www.taxionline.com.