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SCREENING ROOM

In decay, an eerie beauty

Bill Morrison's artful shorts are the focus of two L.A. programs.

March 01, 2007 | Robert Abele | Special to The Times

WHERE preservationists might shriek, Bill Morrison sees a strangely rapturous alternative cinema narrative. Degenerating archival film has long been a source of temporally bewitching beauty for the Chicago-born filmmaker -- perhaps best known among the art-house set for his 2002 feature-length study "Decasia" -- and Los Angeles is fortunate to have a pair of programs of his short work in local venues over the next two weeks, with Morrison present at both.

On Monday, REDCAT's "Bill Morrison's Theater of Decaying Memories" has an enchantingly carny-esque ring to it. It includes his frenetic ascent-of-man/birth-of-cinema 1992 treasure "Footprints," and the sepia bath reveries "The Mesmerist" and "Light Is Calling," where the organically globular distortions seem to add fascinating moral shadings to a 1926 Lionel Barrymore-Boris Karloff silent about murder and conscience called "The Bells." Receiving its L.A. premiere that night is his entrancing 2006 work "The Highwater Trilogy," which uses reedited newsreel footage of punishing storms, towering icebergs and flood damage -- coupled with the lapping soundscape of frequent music collaborator Michael Gordon -- to suggest nothing less than an aquatic battlefield that humans can do little about.

On March 11, Los Angeles Filmforum is presenting the other Morrison program at the Egyptian, and that includes his latest found-footage work, "Who by Water," a fascinating array of steamer passengers looking directly into the camera, who start to represent something inexorable and poignant as the images begin to splotch and deteriorate.

Incidentally, there's no overlap of films, so Morrison completists might want to mark both events on their calendar.

Feminist voices

REDCAT has also scheduled four days of films directed by women for next weekend, to coincide with the Museum of Contemporary Art's show "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution." Called "Where Did Our Love Go?" and posed as a gauge of where the '70s and '80s have led in terms of independent feminist film voices, the series features new work by experimental lionesses Chantal Akerman and Nina Menkes, a revival showing of the late Barbara Loden's 1970 verite masterpiece "Wanda," a remarkable feature debut by L.A. filmmaker Anna Biller, Emily Tang's post-Tiananmen Square tale "Conjugation" about the limits of ambition for Chinese youth, and Zeinabu irene Davis' documentary on a black female trumpeter, "Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant."

It's hard not to notice a theme of solitude and self-discovery among the films. Although the journeys are varied in tone and character, there's also a sense of almost subconscious connections between the films. A powerful long shot such as the one of Loden's soul-deadened housewife in "Wanda" traversing a grim coalfield has a decades-later corollary in Menkes' dreamlike "Phantom Love," in which her lonely and bitter protagonist, a casino worker in L.A.'s Koreatown, occasionally is shown crossing a bridge in India crowded with natives.

"La-bas (Down There)" is the most austere of this reflective bunch, a claustrophobic documentary in which Akerman points her camera out the window of a Tel Aviv apartment toward her neighbors and occasionally comments, with gravelly breathlessness, on Jewishness, Israel and her conflicted feelings about how to engage with the world. A candid work framed by a hesitant voyeurism -- there's usually a screen between the camera and the nearby buildings -- it won't win new converts to the prolific feminist icon, but it dovetails well with Akerman's recent geographically minded forays.

The liveliest female-centric adventure, however, is Biller's "Viva," a meticulously designed re-imagining of "classy"-minded '70s-era soft porn -- boy meets girl, but more important, girl meets free love -- that pays as much attention to the realities of the sexual revolution for women as it does the get-it-on aura of wet-bar aesthetics, polyester, peekaboo nudity and color-saturated interior decor. It converts an earlier male generation's notion of swinger gratification into the pitfalls for females of the unfulfilled tease.

Biller stars (and strips) as a neglected Los Angeles housewife named Barbi who experiments with looser sexuality by becoming a call girl, only to find that her fantasies and those of the men she encounters hardly mesh.

Simply put, the movie pops with parodic joy -- in the hoary double-entendres and presentational acting styles -- and hotly lighted 35-millimeter cinematography that evokes lounge music album covers and Playboy ads.

Short shorts

The Very Short Movies Festival, happening next weekend at the Egyptian, will present new works, recent films that have won awards and shorts by now-established studio filmmakers.

Among the new offerings is a delightful gender-switch comedy called "The Happiest Day of His Life" from Ursula Burton that is a long joke -- reversing wedding sex-role traditions of bride and groom from proposal (she kneels) to planning (dad organizes, mom rolls her eyes) to

rice toss -- but a well-played and thorough one at that. A favorite: the crudely teasing she-doesn't-deserve-him toast made by one of the "brideswomen."

As far as films that were previously honored, this year's Oscar winner for animated short, "The Danish Poet," is a must. And in the program "From Short List to A List," there is the novelty of seeing early USC student work from Robert Zemeckis ("A Field of Honor"), James Foley ("November") and George Lucas, whose penchant for roaring machines that go fast has its roots in his hypnotic racing doc "1:42.08 to Qualify."

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Screenings

REDCAT

* "Bill Morrison's Theater of Decaying Memories": 8 p.m. Monday

Where: Disney Hall, 2nd and Hope streets, downtown L.A.

Info: (213) 237-2800, www.redcat.org

Los Angeles Filmforum

* Bill Morrison program: 7 p.m. March 11

Where: Spielberg Theatre at the Egyptian, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood

Info: www.lafilmforum.org

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'Where Did Our Love Go?'

* "La-bas (Down There)": 8 p.m. next Thursday

* "Wanda": 8 p.m. March 9

* "Viva": 6:30 p.m. March 10

* "Phantom Love": 9:30 p.m. March 10

* "Conjugation": 5 p.m. March 11

* "Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant": 7:30 p.m. March 11

Where: Disney Hall, 2nd and Hope streets, downtown L.A.

Info: (213) 237-2800, www.redcat.org

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Very Short Movies Festival

When: next Thursday to March 11

Where: Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood

Info: (866) 376-9047, www.veryshortmovies.com