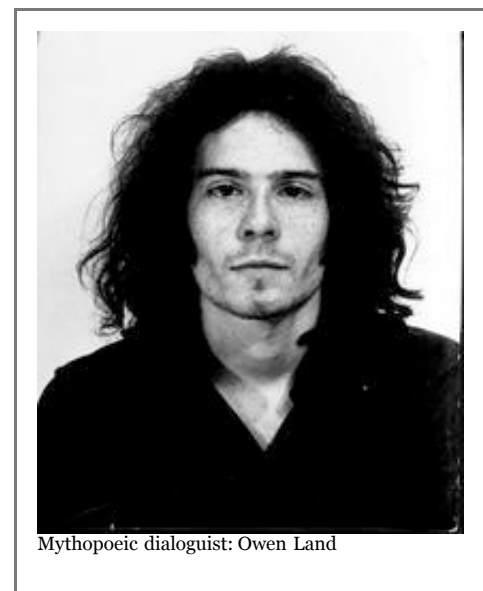


Avant-gardist Owen Land Comes Out of the Shadows

Filmmaker will screen new work and appear at L.A. Filmforum

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Mythopoeic dialoguist: Owen Land

"There are two things you should know about me," says Owen Land. "One is that I'm a follower of Christ, and the other is that I'm a follower on the path of tantra."

(Click to enlarge)

Mythopoeic dialoguist: Owen Land

At least, that's how this interview was supposed to begin, in the version that Land wrote himself, before we had even met. Land had also, he informed me in an e-mail, conceived of a layout and a headline — "It's Mythopoeic!" — for the article. "Yes, I'm a control freak," he added. But then Land's computer mysteriously erased the document, meaning we would have to start from scratch. "It's too bad," Land says, when we finally meet face to face, at his sparsely furnished apartment in Hollywood. "I was feeling really inspired when I wrote it."

This is par for the course with Land, the artist formerly known as George Landow, whose densely constructed, impishly funny short films made in the 1960s and '70s established him as a major figure of the then-burgeoning American avant-garde cinema. The former assistant to Gregory Markopoulos, mentored by Stan Brakhage and hailed by the venerable film historian P. Adams Sitney (whom Land is fond of quoting) as having created some of "the most radical, super-real and haunting images the cinema has ever given us," Land first attracted attention with several early efforts (including the aptly titled *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.*), which exposed the chemical and physical properties of celluloid in much the way that abstract-expressionist painters used paint and canvas.

But Land's most *sui generis* work was a later series of films, with titles like *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (1970), and *Wide Angle Saxon* (1975), which wedded their maker's highly developed visual agility to a sophisticated grasp of language (with an affection for puns and double entendres) and a proudly irreverent attitude toward orthodoxies — religious, cinematic and otherwise. In Land's *No Sir, Orison!* (1975), a grocery shopper sings an impassioned hymn to the pleasures of supermarkets, then drops to his knees in prayer in the middle of the canned-goods aisle. In *Wide Angle Saxon*, a man's spiritual conversion while watching an ersatz experimental film is juxtaposed against excerpts from the film in question, a TV news reporter repeatedly flubbing his lines on camera, and a Christian evangelist lecturing on the subject of Christ's crucifixion.

When I first encountered Land's films, during a retrospective at the 2005 Rotterdam Film Festival, the question was obvious: Whatever happened to this guy? Excepting two rarely screened video-shot projects made in the mid-1980s, Land seemed to have disappeared following his 1979 masterpiece *On the Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious or Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?* — in which two panda-suited actors in a checkerboard and polka-dot room make a film about the marketing strategies for a Japanese brand of salted plums. Then, a couple of years ago, word reached me via a local film programmer that Land was alive if not entirely well, residing in L.A. and, most notably, shooting again. Now, he's set to screen new work — his first in more than two decades — during a weekend appearance at Los Angeles Filmforum.

One of those films, *Why Do We Disrespect Our Genitals?*, is actually an excerpt from a feature-length project, *Dialogues*, comprising 50 individual episodes that can be shown together or as separate shorts. "I think people who see avant-garde films are more accustomed to seeing short films, whereas people who only go to conventional features have to have the whole plot structure in order to understand what's going on," says Land, who shot the material for *Dialogues* last year (entirely in L.A., though there are scenes set as far afield as Toronto and Okinawa) and is now in the final stages of editing. "This film can be shown either way. So, when all of the 50 more or less episodes are put together in the correct order — I say 'correct,' but there's really no correct order. There'll probably be variations. Each copy might be different."

There is, Land allows, something of a plot, about a filmmaker named Owen Land, a film called *Dialogues*, and the filmmaker's relationships with several women; one, named Iphigenia, hails from ancient Greece and, in a tip of the hat to Euripides and Goethe, shows up driving a Ford Taurus. Alas, neither Land nor Iphigenia appears in *Genitals*, in which a Nazareth, Pennsylvania, bible-college student with a scrapheap bicycle prays for divine intervention as he challenges his Harley-riding girlfriend to a drag race. ("The Lord says, 'Thou shall have no other hogs before me,'" he reminds her before they begin.) Although shot on video and lacking some of Land's earlier technical polish, the film is nonetheless instantly recognizable as the product of its creator's singular sensibility.

Also slated for the Filmforum show is *Undesirables (Condensed Version)*, an assemblage of scenes from another feature film Land began shooting in the 1990s but didn't finish. Its subject is the New York avant-garde film scene of yesteryear, where Land made his own debut. "I'm going to try, before the Filmforum show, to put it all together," he says. "All of the excerpts, plus the confusion ... I mean the conclusion. A Freudian slip."

On the subject of his own years in the wilderness, Land is less forthcoming, though he notes that his decision to quit teaching left him without the university resources (free equipment, actors, etc.) that had facilitated his prolific filmmaking output, and so he found himself drifting away from movies and back to painting, even earning a belated master's degree from the New York Academy of Art. Somewhere in there, he changed his name, though he denies this was done because of "a mysterious territorial dispute," as was reported in the program notes for the Rotterdam retrospective. (Though there is, on one of the otherwise bare walls of his apartment, a handwritten chart titled "Homes I Bought.") Then, in 2001, Land suffered a debilitating stroke, which left him partially paralyzed and unable to do much of anything but write. So, he jotted down five feature-length screenplays that can only be produced with the backing of a major studio. "I think they're more conventional," Land says of his projects. "Well, for me, they seem more conventional, but I think from the point of view of a

studio, they'll seem like really far-out art films, not like anything they've ever done."

In the meantime, as Land readies *Dialogues* for its world premiere at Switzerland's Kunsthalle Bern museum in April next year, he continues to push the boundaries of the moving image. "I think the motion-picture form as it is usually practiced in Hollywood and Europe — the narrative film — has become so overly conventionalized that it's really destroyed itself," he says. "There are so many possibilities that have never been explored. My role model in all this is James Joyce — the way he looked at the novel and tried to come up with a new form of telling a story in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. I think *Ulysses* has a lot of correspondences to *Dialogues*: You have a story that is told in many fragmented episodes; they skip around in time and place; it's hard to get oriented. Reading a novel, everything is a continuity, but reading *Ulysses*, there's no continuity. How does that last chapter relate to what I'm reading now? And who is the crab? There was no crab before, and now you've got a talking crab!"

Owen Land will screen new work and appear at Los Angeles Filmforum at the Egyptian Theatre on Sunday, June 29 at 7 p.m. For more information, go to www.lafilmforum.wordpress.com.