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Canadian Artist Spotlight: James MacSwain

Friday April 1

9pm

Workman Arts, St. Anne's Parish Hall (651 Dufferin Street at Dundas)

Admission: Pay What You Can



CFMDC
Centre for the Moving Image

insideout



Amherst



Flower

Atlantic native James MacSwain has made more than 20 films over the last 30 years, and it is with pleasure that Images presents a survey screening of his work for the 24th edition of the festival. His voice has become a pervasive and sophisticated contribution to the experimental film community in this country, often literally as his extensive use of voiceover—and his clever scripts—evince a considerable talent as a writer. MacSwain's particular use of 16mm collage and animation appear deceptively simple, but his films have a lingering depth and poignancy that resists easy categorization. Images is excited to celebrate the classic work of a senior Canadian artist, but also to situate MacSwain's practice among the work of so many young filmmakers who operate in a liberated world he helped to create. Images has invited the inimitable Andrew James Paterson to engage MacSwain in a dialogue about the obsessions and trajectories of MacSwain's practice over the last few decades.

Andrew James Paterson: Tell me about your background. You started making films, animations largely, but not exclusively animations. You did puppet theatre.

James MacSwain: That's right. When I was at Mount Allison University in the English Department I did a sort of paper and puppet theatre for one of my classes. By the time I moved to Halifax some friends and I had decided that we would put on a puppet theatre and we called it the Gargoyle Puppet Theatre. This was from 1974 to 1978.

P: When did you move to Halifax?

M: I moved to Halifax in 1973. I graduated from Mount Allison in 1969. But then I went traveling and ended up in Montreal.

P: Traveling? Anywhere specific?

M: I traveled to Europe, of course. That's what we did. We went to England and the friend I was with at the time, Sandy Moore, he and I went to Ireland and lived there for a year.

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Images Talk 4
 James MacSwain and Steve Reinke
 Wednesday April 6, 3 PM
 Gladstone Art Bar, 1214 Queen Street West

Amherst

1983, super8 (on video), 9 min

Flower

1986, 16mm, 8 min

Nova Scotia Tourist Industries

1998, 16mm, 12 min

Alpha Expedition

2000, 16mm, 17 min

Starboy

2006, 16mm, 4 min

Fountain of Youth

2010, 16mm, 10 min

P: Somewhere in there you decided to make a connection between puppet theatre and animation. There is a fairly apparent affiliation between them as a screen or a space onto which a collageist can have a field day.

M: Yeah, we decided that we were getting too old to go on tours, move flats and all the rest of it. We had to find a means of remuneration, so to speak. So I started to work at the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op as a distributor. But at the same time I started making films, and I started to make animations too. Where we worked, the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op and the Centre For Art Tapes, there was an entity down the hall called Doomsday Studios, and they had an animation stand.

P: Tell me more about who was working in proximity to whom during the early to mid 70s.

M: Well, AFCoop had started in 1977. By the time I came to it, which was in '79 or '80, they had quite an extensive body of work—maybe ten to fifteen titles—and they needed help distributing them. In 1983 I put together a cross Canada tour.

P: Did AFCoop have a lot of animation titles?

M: Yeah.

P: What were some of the artists and titles you remember?

M: Lulu Keating made a film, *Jabbenwock 7he*, and Elaine Poin also made animations through Doomsday, and a friend of mine, Rand Gaynor, made work about Halifax's gay history, but as a graphic artist.

Canadian Artist Spotlight: James MacSwain



Fountain of Youth



Nova Scotia Tourist Industries

P: Were you seeing a lot of work outside Halifax that made you go "I can do that," or "I like what they are doing but I can do a different take on it."

M: I think that for animators in Canada it's the National Film Board, particularly the enormous influence of Norman McLaren. When I lived in Montreal I met Ryan Larkin—this was in 1973 before I came to Halifax. He made a film called *Walking*, which was really influential at the time.

P: Well, the open spacing of animation is such an appeal. You have this open space, which in a way is also like a theatrical form of filmmaking. There is a space or stage, and one can move things on or off. What is really unique in your work is this idea of space as an indeterminate zone. Like space junk or floating debris. Am I barking up the wrong tree?

M: It's true. One of the major themes of my work is outer space, the universe.

P: Yeah, the free fall zone. In your work I sense a lot of ease from which an animator can move their subject or object from here to there, but you are also going across time. You've got these people in an indeterminate zone, and a sort of delirious flossam that is your specialty. You call your film *Star Boy* a space opera and I think that is so appropriate.

M: The other thing about outer space is the, what would you call it? The wonder and awe at the universe, the incredible distances and that it is infinite...

P: So you're dealing with infinite possibilities, and also in some ways you are trapped in this infinity?

M: Yeah.

P: The great thing about this free fall galaxy zone of outer space is that it is not geographically specific, it is not here, it's not grounded, it's not the earth.

M: Although, there are a lot of themes in my in my work that are quite grounded.

P: There's this tension in your work between this free form fantastic and work that is rooted in place and extremely grounded.

M: Yeah, because I have a survival instinct, by which I have to live in this world, this world of flesh and blood. But the thing about

animation is that it has that ability to leave the ground. You are playing as if you are a god, or as if you're moving. You're creating movement out of inanimate objects.

P: At its base, that's what animation is. You are bringing life to the inanimate and it's so far away from the fact that they are still objects, and yet you've got them floating very nicely. There is also an element of the uncanny in your work.

M: I'm very interested in supernatural observations and the whole idea of the phantom and the ghost.

P: You've got lots of ghosts, dear.

M: (Laughter) That's right. I was thinking the other day about the uncanny and I was thinking that it is not horror. The uncanny isn't horror.

P: No.

M: I don't feel like my work is on that level.

P: No. I think you might brush against it and then move away. I don't think you are someone who wants to get stuck there with those particular narratives.

M: Exactly. There is a tension between the idea of the uncanny and the supernatural in trying to ground them in narrative to the extent where they continue to be entertaining in some way.

P: You also have such a sense of place in your work. You know, *Nova Scotia Suicides* is black humour in the extreme. Didn't that film cause a bit of a kerfuffle at the Atlantic Film Festival because it was a bit too close to home?

M: Well, *Flight 111* had just gone down off Peggy's Cove, about two weeks before the film festival. And, well, it's called *Nova Scotia Tourist Industries*, but the description was already in the catalogue. The plot or the outline of the film was that this person was sitting down to write a brochure to entice people to come to Nova Scotia and commit suicide. When I wrote it I thought was very hilarious.

P: Yes, in a rather morbid sense somehow. But it's a very specific place. It's Nova Scotia. And you're from Amherst, which is near the New Brunswick border.

M: Yes.

P: I was on a train travelling through it once and I said "Oh, that's Amherst. Hmm, well, I don't have to get off so I'm not getting off."

M: I know. Small town Nova Scotia...

P: You've done this time travel in your work. You've got incompatible people in the same universe because they make sense to you and you've created this floating jetsam kind of work, in pieces like *Star Boy* or *Mother Marilyn* or even *Flower*.

M: There's even space junk in my most recent one, *The Fountain of Youth*.

P: Oh yeah, there is definitely space junk in that. And on the other hand you have Amherst and that's a different time of time travel. Not only are you visiting it twenty years later, but you yourself are going back twenty years. When you do that, it's pre-Stonewall, pre-Wolfenden Report, even a pre- "the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation" Pierre Trudeau type of zone.

M: Right. In that film I'm talking about the 50s and early 60s, when I was a young lad.

P: When nobody could even spell "liberation."

M: (Laughter) Oh definitely, definitely.

P: With Amherst, the look is documentary, but you're almost teleporting yourself back to do a performance. Your voiceover (in everything) is very performative. It could almost be a live voiceover à la Georges Méliès. It's the polar opposite of the standard documentary voiceover or the NFB voiceover.

M: It's also always a very personal voice over. It's my own voice talking about personal ideas that are very important to me.

P: Standard documentary entertains delusions of being objective when of course it isn't, so why pretend?

M: Exactly. I really adore Amherst. I think it pinpoints that whole pre-Stonewall moment as a gay person growing up in a small town in Nova Scotia, Canada.

P: Yep. It's powerful. There are reasons why it still gets shown. So much of your work is like teleporting yourself. It's a very interesting tension between being grounded in Atlantic Canada, being well-traveled, and then a fascination with the stars, but in a very sort of, dare I say, pagan way: you talk about the gods. But I think we are dealing with more than one god aren't we?

M: Definitely. I'm a pagan through and through.

P: Are you a Warhol Pagan? You know, everyone's gonna be god for fifteen minutes, then gravity's gonna bring them down to earth and they are just another stupid human.

M: Warhol Pagan! I love it. The whole pagan thing is that it understands homosexuality as it was understood in Greek and Roman times, when it was part of the culture. It wasn't something that was siphoned off.

P: Yes, the Greeks and Romans were notorious. Homosexuality wasn't considered to be criminal or a mental illness.

M: It was on a continuum of sexual possibilities.

P: It was a free-floating zone that many played with.

M: Yep. It's very important to me. I really like reading and thinking about it. There's a lot of history.

P: You also love astronomy. I watch *Mother Marilyn* and *Star Boy* and I see those kinds of backgrounds. I see them in some other artist works too, like Michael Balsler who was obsessed with astronomy in a very queer way.

M: He was influential to me, definitely.

P: Space itself is a very queer place that is not the earth, but at the same time is not escapist. Your work isn't at all escapist. It's fantastic, which is not escapist.

M: There is a lot of camp and humour in it too. Obviously my style is a collage style. I always like to talk about the Dadaists and the Surrealists, who I've learned a great deal from.

P: One of the paradoxes of collage, of course, and also montage, is that those methods were originally an avant-garde discontinuity, but they also became the vocabulary of advertising and music videos. Obviously, collage is *modus operandi* for you in almost everything unless you choose not to use it, like in *Amherst*.

M: I still feel that collage can be very subversive. If it is used well, it can undermine social constructions of gender and politics.

P: Like assumed linearity. What do you mean that's not supposed to be next to that? It works formally so who the hell are you to tell me that's not supposed to be there?!

M: Exactly.

P: Do you have things to say about specific titles? *Flower*, which is from 1984, is one on my favourites.

M: It's taking all the ideas and constructions around the image of the flower and using them as an environmental probe into the idea of war, fashion, stardom and all different kinds of illusions that are socially perpetuated.

P: There is this great quote at the beginning of it in your voiceover. What is it?

M: "When I gathered flowers, I knew it was myself plucking my own flowering." A lot of those quotes I used came from the poetry I was reading at the time.

P: Who were some of the poets you were reading at the time?

M: I was reading all the 19th and 20th century poetry that I love, especially Yeats.

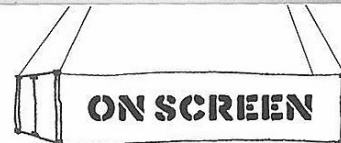
P: Names, names, names.

M: Well, Yeats and T. S. Eliot of course. And Oscar Wilde has definitely been an influence. He has a lot of flower imagery.



Starboy

Canadian Artist Spotlight: James MacSwain



P: He always had one in his lapel.

M: Yeah, the green carnation.

P: The delirium I see in your works, like *Flower* or *Nova Scotia Tourist Industry*, it's a Celtic delirium.

M: That's an interesting observation.

P: Well, you've got the Tartans in there, and the fiddlers in too, who, no doubt, you have downloaded or put in from some record collection. They are exhilarating! In their own Celtic way, they are having a rave.

M: They are! Living in Nova Scotia, you can't get away from the influence of the Scottish and the Irish. I think that's where my supernatural, ghost-thing comes from. Everybody, anybody, has read the ghost stories from here.

P: I wouldn't mind talking a little bit about the people you have collaborated with over the years, and also peoples' work you feel your work is on a continuum with.

M: I collaborated with a group called Popular Projects that were from NSCAD. We did a series of videos through the Centre for Art Tapes at around the time Brian Mulroney was the Prime Minister. We made videos against censorship, against cuts to the arts, et cetera. I also did a group collaboration called New Tools for Imaging.

P: You worked with people like Doug Porter and Amy Lockhart. You worked with the Helens too, right?

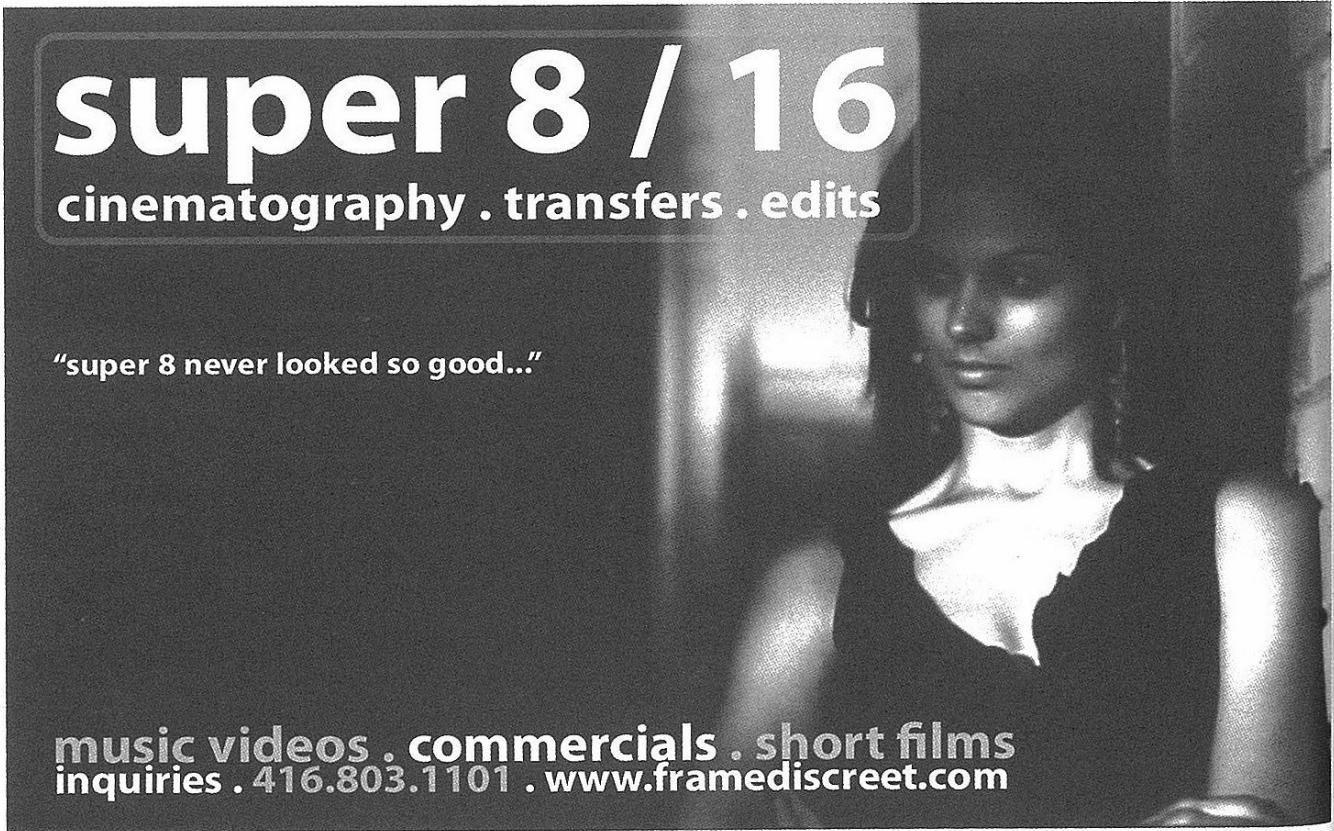
M: Yeah, Helen Hill and Helen Bredin: the two Helens. And Lisa Morse, who showed her animation *Pustulations* at Images in 2004 and it won the NFB award. Right now I have an assistant, Dorota Forfa, who worked with me on *Fountain of Youth*. I always find working with assistants really important; two heads are better than one.

P: It's the nature of the practice.

M: The reason why I'm interested in animation is that, although you can have assistants, it is a solitary genre. It's just you and the machines and your ideas and your imagination and your creativity and all the rest of it. And you don't have to worry about people on set.

James MacSwain was born in Amherst, Nova Scotia. He received a B.A. in English from Mount Allison University and studied theatrical arts at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Since 1980 he has been working in film and video, receiving numerous grants as a media artist. As a visual artist he works in photo-and collage-based images and has exhibited nationally. Presently he sits on the Exhibitions Committee of Visual Arts Nova Scotia and has just retired from his employment as the Director of Programming for the Centre For Art Tapes.

Andrew James Paterson is a media-artist, critical and fiction writer, performer and composer based in Toronto. He is particularly known for his cameraless videos and for his writings on state-funded culture. He has also functioned as a coordinator for Toronto's annual 8 Fest, dedicated to small-gauge films.



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