

Documentaries season

Cutie and the Boxer

“I was immediately engrossed in their colorful world, where the lines between art and life were completely blurred.”

Notes compiled by Georgina Coburn

Zachary Heinzerling

A statement from the director



This film started about five years ago, when I first met Ushio and Noriko Shinohara. My friend and producer Patrick Burns invited me to their loft in Brooklyn and I brought along my video camera. Patrick had shown me a few portraits he took of the striking couple and from those photos alone I knew something special was there; something that became clear immediately upon meeting them in person. Ushio is 80 years old, but has the energy and hunger for life of someone a tenth his age. Noriko exudes a calming grace and sly wit, perfectly complimenting Ushio's raucous nature. They live in a space that acts as a shrine to their storied existence: floors coated with years of old paint, drawings stacked on top of paintings on top of books, photos tacked to the walls hinting at past fame. I was immediately engrossed in their colorful world, where the lines between art and life were completely blurred.



Ushio was very forthcoming about his story. He spoke about his early years as a rebellious, Mohawk-sporting artist, tearing up the post-war Tokyo creative scene with his action painting and street performances. He told me about his move to New York, where he was a star of the Japanese expat artist community in Soho, gallivanting with the likes of Warhol and Rauschenberg and living the quintessential underground artist's life. He was understandably less eager to talk about the years following his initial fame, or his struggle to gain any sort of commercial success and, more importantly, to be noticed in the competitive New York art world. He has turned this struggle into fodder for his work. The spirit of this youthful troublemaker remains undimmed, as he constantly creates new work for his public and himself, always fighting to stay relevant. He is among the last of a dying breed of the 1960s and '70s artists that many artists of my generation seek to emulate: this pure, romantic ideal of the "struggling artist" catnapping on the streets of downtown New York, brush and canvas in hand, living for their work. With every breath he insists on his relevance, at once defiant and yet devastatingly aware of his scant legacy.

Noriko's story is a bit more complicated and took longer to develop. She was reluctant at first to dive back into her past with Ushio in a serious way, choosing instead to joke what a terrible husband Ushio was and is, most of the time in front of Ushio. At first she was timid and unsure of me and my team's intentions. But as time progressed, and we became more comfortable with one another, the layers of her complex story began to unfold before the camera. I soon began to sense that Noriko's story would drive the narrative arc of the film. She only recently had established her own studio space away from Ushio and begun to deal with their turbulent past through a series of drawings and paintings. And only more recently had she become comfortable enough with her own art to present it to the public. I began filming during a period of re-birth for Noriko. After years of playing back seat

Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday 15 April 2014 at 7.15pm

2013, USA, Colour

Running time: 82 mins.

Genre: Documentary/biography

Language: English / Japanese

Cast: Noriko Shinohara, Ushio Shinohara,
Alex Shinohara, Ethan Cohen

Director: Zachary Heinzerling

Writer: Zachary Heinzerling



to her attention-grabbing husband, she desperately wanted someone to tell her side of the story.

The struggles that Ushio and Noriko have gone through, though intensely personal, are universal. I saw their story as one that would not only appeal to art-lovers, but also wider audiences who could relate to Ushio and Noriko's lives. Career disappointments, gender roles, marriage, aging—are all issues we encounter in adulthood. The focus of the film was never their art specifically, but rather their relationship and the bond that has kept them together through their own individual highs and lows for the last forty years.

I set out to make a film that was unlike any of the artist documentaries I had seen before. I did not want this to be a biography of the artists' lives and work, but rather a story that unfolds in a dramatic way—more akin to a narrative film. I wanted it to look and sound like a narrative film as well; to fully immerse the audience in the Shinoharas' odd world. The textured cinematography and sound design are meant to embody the purposeful way in which they live, and brings the dynamism of their work and lives to the screen. The music, composed by the prolific saxophonist Yasuaki Shimizu, plays off of the more imaginative and whimsical side of the Shinoharas' life and art, but also hints at the pain and sadness that lies beneath their playful nature. I took an observational approach, inviting the audience to watch the Shinohara's everyday lives.

I've always loved Japanese Neo-realist cinema—Ozu's family portraits like *Tokyo Story*, and more recently the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda, specifically *Still Walking*. They are films of such intense inner turmoil and drama, but presented in a very honest and unsentimental manner. The tension exists beneath the surface, and arises in moments that are more powerful because of the quiet anticipation that precedes them. Ushio and Noriko hold a lot of their pain within. They joke about their past marital problems, Noriko's suffering, or their son's troubled upbringing—but there is a lot of seriousness behind those jokes. In making the film I was trying to find the best way to explore that pain in a way that was honest and not exploitative.

One way this pain is explored in the film is through the animation of Noriko's artwork. When I first saw her "Cutie" series, consisting of comic style paintings and drawings depicting her difficult past with her husband, my first reaction was to laugh. They are exaggerated to the point of comedy, yet the truths they reveal are deeply sad. Noriko has created an alter-ego in Cutie, who suffers at the fate of her insensitive, husband Bullie. ("Bullie" plays on "bull" or ushi in Japanese, referring to Ushio.) She constructs a world where she can both explore her pain and fight back against its source. I felt the best way to represent Noriko's "Cutie" story, and heighten this mix of reality and fantasy, was through animation. As the stories from her art play out in dream-like sequences, the audience is transported into Noriko's mind. Viewers simultaneously gain a deeper understanding of both Noriko's past, and the method she uses to cope with it.

The experience of making this film was life-altering. I spent countless nights, at times living at the Shinoharas' loft for days, listening to their stories and recording their lives. With other projects going on along the way, I continued this film based on my vast fascination with and affection for the Shinoharas, and the belief that this story would touch others. I enjoyed the most formative period in my short filmmaking career learning through the example Ushio and Noriko set—unbridled passion and energy towards their work, and a risk-at-all-cost mentality.

Noriko and Ushio's lives are defined by intense highs and lows, and their miseries are often shared more readily than their joys. Their relationship is extremely complicated. They describe it as a mutual dependence, void of any romance—purely a creative partnership. One of the biggest challenges in this film was to shed light on the love they undoubtedly have for one another, even if they rarely express it directly. I hope that audiences will recognize themselves in Ushio and Noriko's story, and consider their own relationships after watching. Ultimately, my goal is to absorb the audience in the raw spirit and beauty that emanates from my subjects, to open a door onto the creative and very private world where the rhythms of the Shinoharas' lives play out.

Our next screening...



¡Vivan las Antipodas!

The last in our season of

Documentaries

on Tuesday 29 April 2014 at 7.15pm

What would be the shortest route between Entre Rios in Argentina and the Chinese metropolis Shanghai? ... a straight line through the center of the earth - the two places are antipodes: they are located diametrically opposite to each other on the earth's surface. Award-winning documentary filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky has captured images that turn our view of the world upside down.

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