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## Film

## Real Life on the Streets

### The Maryland Documentary Symposium Puts the Clichés Aside and Shows Baltimore Life at Street Level

BY ERIC ALLEN HATCH

**"If someone asks you where you're from,** and you say Baltimore, it's very interesting to hear what they say right away," says self-described "working-class, dependent filmmaker" Richard Chisolm. "Usually something about John Waters or about crack dealers and crime. *Homicide* and *Pink Flamingos*. Those are the exotic aspects of this city, but I can show people other neighborhoods and other aspects of Maryland life that the mainstream media hasn't done to death."

Three short documentaries shot by Chisolm are part of the Maryland Documentary Symposium, a five-day program of film screenings and panel discussions at the Creative Alliance in Highlandtown that promises to uncover less celebrated but equally vital aspects of the state's cultural life. The program certainly features subjects that have popped up in Waters movies--Formstone, the Block, and Edith Massey, say--but it places these topics within a broad, warm view of Maryland history that encompasses more than just its camp value.

One program at the symposium, for instance, focuses on the history of Baltimore's arabbbers, produce vendors who still hawk their wares from pony-drawn wagons. It will feature two films: 1977's *Arabbin' with the Hucksters and Vendors of Baltimore* and 2002's *We Are Arabbers*. Another program discusses the history of African-Americans in Maryland's justice system, juxtaposing 2001's *Color at the Bar* with newsreel footage from the 1950s. Meanwhile, a more pastoral program, "Small Economies in the Land of Pleasant Living," features films that document the close-knit waterman community of Smith Island and the tobacco growers of Calvert County.

In presenting films that range from archival footage of the Great Fire of 1904 to digital video from this year, the Maryland Documentary Symposium operates on a meta-level; spanning nearly a century of the state's filmed history, it allows us to reflect not only on our history, but upon the history of our history. The symposium even points toward a potential future of Maryland historical recording with its program "A Young Lens: Docs by Teens and Children."

1988's *The Screen Painters*, the earliest of Chisolm's films to be shown, does a neat job of capturing rich, quirky Baltimore flavor without adopting a condescending attitude. The film, for which he was both director of photography and co-producer, details a local tradition, nearly a century strong, of painting vivid scenes--often peaceful and bucolic, but sometimes more fantastical--on the screen doors and windows screens of rowhouses. Through Chisolm's lens, these painters (including former *Freaks* star and circus performer Johnny Eck) come across as accomplished and talented folk artists, even as they sometimes betray their foibles.

Still, Chisolm recalls the firm dedication of *Screen Painters* director Elaine Eff in preserving the "rich, pure

cultural identity of these people," nixing footage when she thought it might lead to a cynical view. Indeed, *The Screen Painters* likely has the distinction of being the only film in the symposium (if not in cinematic history) in which footage of John Waters ended up on the cutting-room floor. Chisolm recalls Waters making comments that contributed a "good perspective--kinda silly, kinda fun"--but Eff ultimately crafted a film that relies mainly on the artists' own words to tell their story.

"Some of these films walk a very fine line," muses Chisolm. "How do you make a film about something that someone in another state is going to laugh at, is going to think is really peculiar, is maybe tacky, crazy, pathological even? How do you make a film about that topic if you really care about that topic?"

Another film Chisolm shot featured in the symposium, 1996's *Land, Water, People, and Time: Smith Island*, also directed by Eff, took by necessity a different approach to that same problem. Commissioned by a historical society on the insular Eastern Shore island for its new museum, the film saw its final cut determined by the community members themselves.

"Other journalists, including some national press, had gone to Smith Island decades previously and done very exposé kind of things, [portraying the islanders as having] a deranged and backwards heritage," Chisolm remembers. "And the people of Smith Island felt incredibly ripped off and exploited by that. Therefore, aspects of Smith Island culture having to do with crime, having to do with incest, or poverty, or obesity, were not to be in this movie." But if the film does depict a sanitized vision of the community, it certainly opens a window on another form of historical record: records of a people not only as they are, but also as they would like to be seen.

Most of the films in the symposium, however, were not funded by their subjects but through "a very limited amount of private funders, and a very tiny amount of public funders"--sources, Chisolm feels, that became much scarcer after the slashing of public arts funding that gained momentum during the Reagan years.

"Pure documentary, which this symposium pretty much envelopes . . . [is] not films by Exxon about the environment, but films that have some degree of creative autonomy," he says. "Philosophically, I've always had the desire to work on projects that the public has a use for, that benefit the people watching the movies. And believe it or not, that is not a common thing among film craftspeople."

Chisolm has worked on documentaries all over the world, but he always feels a special affinity for hometown projects. These have included ABC's prime-time series *Hopkins 24/7*, seen by more than 6 million viewers, and *Anatomy of a "Homicide,"* a behind-the-scenes look at the NBC drama for which he also worked on second-camera units. Much of his work also involves shooting Baltimore segments for national or international documentaries. While this work offers its own challenges and rewards, Chisolm says, producing a five-minute component of an hourlong program doesn't offer the same satisfactions as a local project he might co-produce, co-direct, or shoot in its entirety--such as his current project, *The Building of a Sanctuary*, the third Chisolm work to be featured in the symposium, which focuses on Sheppard Pratt Hospital in Towson.

As he prizes his opportunities to work locally, Chisolm also looks forward to the occasion to see and discuss his and others' work with a local audience. Indeed, as few of these documentaries have seen theatrical release and have only rare or oddly timed TV showings, the chance to see them with any audience is rare. Chisolm hopes these screenings, and their related panel discussions, will draw crowds more diverse than those at other film events.

"When you go to [most Baltimore film screenings] you see all the usual suspects: film students, film professors, filmmakers," he says. "It's all kind of an incestuous scene, a little club. Because this venue is in working-class East Baltimore, I think it has the potential to be more than that."

Kristen Anchor, coordinator for Creative Alliance MovieMakers, which is organizing the symposium, also hopes that the program will draw not just cineastes but a wide range of Baltimoreans eager to learn about and

discuss local culture. "I think after screening all these films and videos, I gained a greater sense of my own identity as a Baltimorean: this sort of rugged yet wacky yet tenacious doggedness that is a part of this city and state, and the people who make it," says Anchor. "I find the work to be very inspiring: this sense of unapologetic survival, with a little irony. The programs here are a good reminder that history is a set of individuals' stories, and not one big narrative."

The Maryland Documentary Symposium takes place Nov. 13-17 at the Creative Alliance (413 S. Conkling St.). More information at [www.creativealliance.org](http://www.creativealliance.org) or (410) 276-1651.

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