



Images of Work 2007-2010

by Clinton Rawls



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One of the well worn techniques that writing professors teach is the “peel the onion” approach to revealing the many layers of a character. It is meant to give you the information bit by bit over the course of the script so that by the end of the film, as the character evolves, you come to know what you need to know in order share their struggle.

It works in literature, but in the real world you sometimes run into an onion like Clinton Rawls.

Clinton is an enigma wrapped in conceptual luster and encased in a full metal jacket. The experience was more like disarming a bomb that peeling an onion.

My experience with him as a graduate student, at first, was a constant struggle. Not to get him to learn, but to get him to trust.

Not me, but himself.

His first work *GENERATION*, was the pivotal moment in his film life. Seemingly against his own internal will, he was forced to use methods and strategies that he had never considered as tools to make films.

He was forced to confront an art that he had been able to keep at arm’s length and, almost more importantly, to confront conflict in his own life.

The result was small victory for us both.

Over the next three years, he slowly realized that film can be more than a third person story.

With that, the floodgates opened, and Clinton made more and more work in a number of media deceptively attached to a barbed-wire conceptual spine, but accessible to audiences on any level.

He had mastered the art of subverting the genre.

He had learned that film, and art are not solitary paths.

He had learned to trust his own instincts.

He had learned to trust.

What more could we ask for?

I now look to Clinton as a colleague, an artist and a friend.

I thank him for the privilege, and for what he has taught me as well.

That old “peeling the onion” metaphor only really works with onions.

Andy Anderson, Professor and Writer in Residence

May 12, 2010

As a filmmaker I have explored a wide variety of genres since I started making films in the year 2003. I enjoy working in the narrative format yet I also at times make more personal, non-traditional films. This may seem contradictory to many but I find that working in different disciplines enhances all of my films because the work enhances me. Despite the various genres common themes of isolation and voyeurism appear throughout a great deal of my work.

My interest in film began the moment I saw Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. It was in the film's final minutes, during the famous five minute standoff between the three principle characters that for the first time I became aware of the power of music, visuals and editing in filmmaking. For the first time in my life I was literally on the edge of my seat. The ability that the filmmaker possesses to manipulate the audience's emotions through the juxtaposition of images and sound intrigued me. As I continued to study film the works of Alfred Hitchcock spoke to me above any other. It was Hitchcock's dark sense of humor, mastery of suspense and use of voyeurism as a storytelling element in films such as *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, and *Vertigo* among others which intrigued me. Hitchcock's films were not necessarily realistic, rather they were cinematic and since my first viewing of Leone's film I have loved nothing more than cinema.

Just as I tell stories that deal with isolation and voyeurism for a film to be properly effective it must isolate the viewer and draw them in, make them forget the world around them. For a film to work best there is only one world and the viewer must be engaged to peer into that world intently.

It is because of this belief that I seek to involve the audience through my work by either attempting to make them look at their own lives or telling a story through a particular character's point of view so that the audience sees the world as the main character sees the world, as I want them to see it.

Through filmmaking I am able to make the audience not only a part of my films but can alter an audience's perception and how they view the world. It is this area that I continue to explore because I believe above all that cinema is preferable to reality.

As a filmmaker I have made films since 2003 in a wide variety of styles. My desire is to always challenge myself and never make the same film twice. Despite this I am drawn to certain themes and feelings that I continue to explore. In the bulk of my work common themes of voyeurism and isolation are the most evident.

The first filmmaker I was drawn to was Sergio Leone and his treatment of the isolated loner in such films as *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*. What I found most intriguing about Leone was his ability to manipulate the viewer through the juxtaposition of sound and image. For instance, in the opening scenes of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, three hired killers silently wait for the arrival of a mysterious man. In the film we watch them wait for several minutes, which would normally be very boring, but instead through the use of amplified sound and the actor's expressions it becomes very gripping and fascinating.

As I continued to study film the works of Alfred Hitchcock in particular proved to be the most influential. It was Hitchcock's dark sense of humor, mastery of suspense and use of voyeurism as a storytelling element in films such as *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Notorious* among others that left such a lasting impression. His work was not necessarily realistic but rather it was cinematic and I have often felt that cinema is preferable to reality.

Francois Truffaut summed it up best in this passage from his book, Hitchcock: "In 1962, while in New York to present *Jules and Jim*, I noticed that every journalist asked me the same question: "Why do the critics of Cahiers du Cinéma take Hitchcock so seriously? He's rich and successful, but his movies have no substance." In the course of an interview during which I praised *Rear Window* to the skies, an American critic surprised me by commenting, "You love *Rear Window* because, as a stranger to New York, you know nothing about Greenwich Village." To this absurd statement, I replied, "*Rear Window* is not about Greenwich Village, it is a film about cinema, and I *do* know cinema. (11)"

The idea of isolation helps separate individual audience members from the world around them and allows them to focus on the world of the film. With my work I want involve the audience so much that when the film has ended it stays in their heads and changes them.



GENERATION

■

Generation, directed in 2007, was a first for me in the sense that it was my first personal, non-narrative film. Before this I'd made several films and all of them were straight narratives. Many of them carried the same themes I continue to explore but I had become complacent and comfortable with a certain style and it was time to change. The root of the film is that when I was thirteen years old my father died and at some point many years later I realized that I couldn't remember the sound of his voice. In *Generation* I stand in front of the camera and speak directly to the audience by telling them two separate stories: while in post-production on a particular film I worked with an editor who had a very annoying girlfriend. In the film we needed the sound of a woman's laugh and the editor would often suggest that we use his girlfriend. Every time he said this I would often change the subject because I didn't want her to live forever through my work. The second story told was about the loss of memory regarding my father's voice. At the end of the film I lament that I did not make movies when he was alive and so I have no way of preserving him. After filming I realized that this particular sentiment was faulty. There is no way to keep a recording, either visual or aural that will preserve a person as over time the recording will degrade. In *Generation* I have the image start out as full color and degrade to a grainy black and white over time before turning into nothing. Likewise, the sound starts out as clear and over the course of the runtime it degrades to a static ridden mess. By forgetting my own father's voice and by having the image and sound lose generations over time it was decided to call the film *Generation*. One of the most profound reactions to my work I have ever seen took place when I showed the film to an old friend. Immediately after viewing I saw that he was crying. I asked him what was wrong and he replied that the film made him realize he can't remember the sound of his own grandfather's voice.

By speaking directly to the audience and by never mentioning my father or anyone else by name it allows the viewer to fill in the gaps with their own lives.



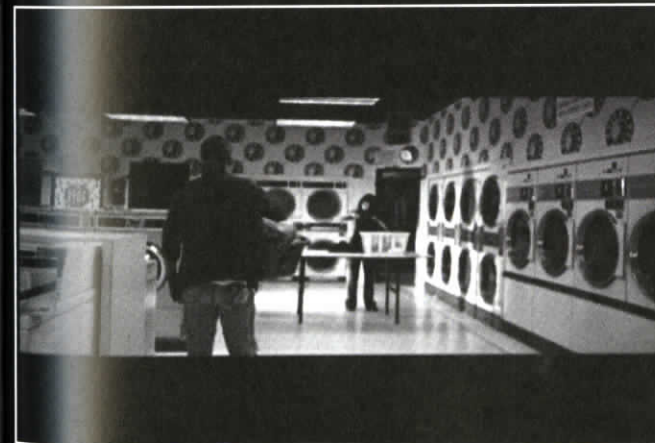


SPIN CYCLE

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Spin Cycle, produced in 2008, tells a story of a man who enters a Laundromat where he and a woman are the only occupants. The man watches the woman yet she never notices his presence. When a buzzer sounds off the man looks at her, hoping she'll look up and see him. She does not and as she walks away she unknowingly knocks over her own detergent box. The man looks at her, and debates silently over whether or not to pick it up. He does, and thinks of speaking to her, but instead turns away and accidentally knocks over the box again and exits the Laundromat as if he was never there. The film comes from a moment in my own life when, at a grocery store I noticed an item on a shelf that was crooked. I corrected it and on the way out I bumped into it and knocked it back where it had previously been. I looked around and realized that it was though I didn't even matter. In developing the film I felt like staying true to life was not the best course of action since I wanted the environment to stand out. In the film's sound design numerous washers and dryers are all running and the sound they create is deafening. The characters themselves and the sounds they make barely register, further adding to the man's invisibility. *Spin Cycle* was filmed as a single long take in which there were no edits. Rather, the camera begins in the Laundromat, follows the man as he enters and when he exits the camera remains inside. By maintaining a shot and following a character for this long it helps the audience identify with that character. When the man looks at the woman, the camera looks at her, when he moves forward the camera moves forward as well. This connects the camera with the character and links the character with the individual audience members. Although it may not be readily apparent, one my influences on this film was the camera work in a Hitchcock film such as *Psycho*. In a Hitchcock film the camera rarely anticipates action but instead the character moves first and then the camera moves. This keeps the audience from being one step ahead of the film.

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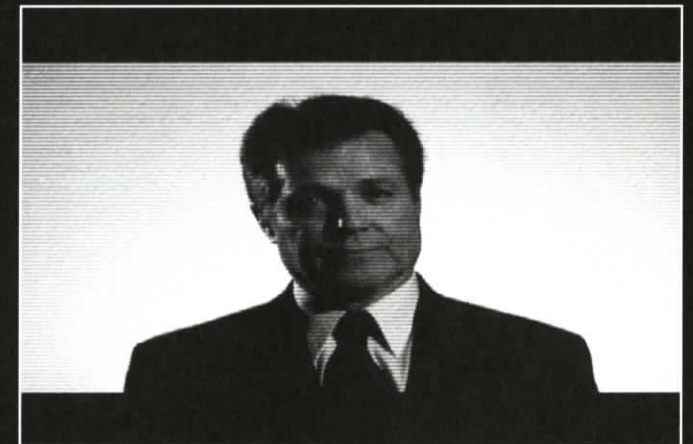
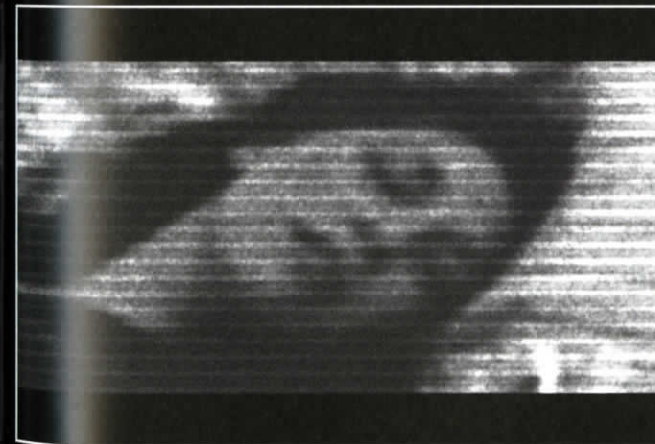
TECHNOPHILIAC

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Technophilic, produced in 2008 and completed in 2009, was a film I had both co-written and produced. While I did not direct the film I was involved in its development through all stages and it features themes found in my other work. In the film, a woman, Ivy, works as a “watcher” for a company that installs surveillance cameras in people’s homes as a safety measure. If you are having a heart attack and you’re able to afford the emergency services, then the watcher will contact authorities for you. Despite this, there are people who abuse the service such as one character who will leave his infant daughter in a playpen in front of the camera while he leaves. All of the “customers” of the service are only seen when they are home in front of the camera. This is done not only because Ivy is the main character but also to make the audience connect with her the most. If she can only watch people through cameras then we can only watch people through cameras so that we are in her shoes. In the story, Ivy monotonously watches several people to the point of sheer boredom and she drinks a steady flow of coffee to stay awake. When one of the people under her watch, Brooke, begins to convulse Ivy cannot contact emergency services since Brooke has not paid for that option. Ivy instead calls the ambulance herself and is reprimanded for it. When Brooke returns the next evening she looks into the camera and Ivy, feeling a connection, calls her directly. The two hit it off and Ivy feels better about herself however the next night Brooke is not home. Ivy, frustrated, calls her but receives no answer.

When Brooke returns with a man, Ivy calls once again and Brooke brushes her off. In the end the dejected Ivy returns to her droning job. In *Technophilic* the lead character is a lonely person whose only connection to people is through watching them behind a camera. Despite eventually taking a more active role in the plot by the end she is returned to the role of the lone voyeur. The movie was filmed in both 16mm film for all of Ivy’s scenes and High Definition digital video for any scene involving Ivy’s clients. By having separate formats it

allows the viewer to recognize which world is which and by filming the digital video scenes so dimly it adds to the cold and distant relationship Ivy has with that world. By making that world visually unappealing, Ivy is the more appealing alternative, further allowing the viewer to identify with her.







LOADED IMAGES

■

During the Summer of 2008 and through the Fall of 2009 I began to work in still photography. I felt that if I could tell a story or illicit a feeling in only one frame then it would make my skills a filmmaker all the better. While researching an idea for what would become the basis of one of my later films, I accompanied a friend to an indoor gun range. I had often heard about the power a gun can give you and while it was an interesting experience I didn't feel any different. However, when I stepped outside the sun blared in my eyes and when I removed the ear protection my ears popped and the sounds of surrounding traffic had a strangely distant and hollow feel.

What I noticed most was that everything and everyone around me looked like a target with a circular shape and a certain point in the middle that I was fixated on.

From this I made the photographic series *Loaded Images*. What I set out to do was photograph all types of people (young, old, children, adults, men, women, etc.) with a crosshair on them, creating the illusion that they are seen through a rifle scope. As Luc Sante states in his afterward to the art compilation book *Voyeur*:

"The purest works of voyeuristic photography were made by private detectives assigned to divorce cases, sweating for hours on end in hotel armories, losing feeling in their extremities, armed with Minoxes loaded with infrared film."

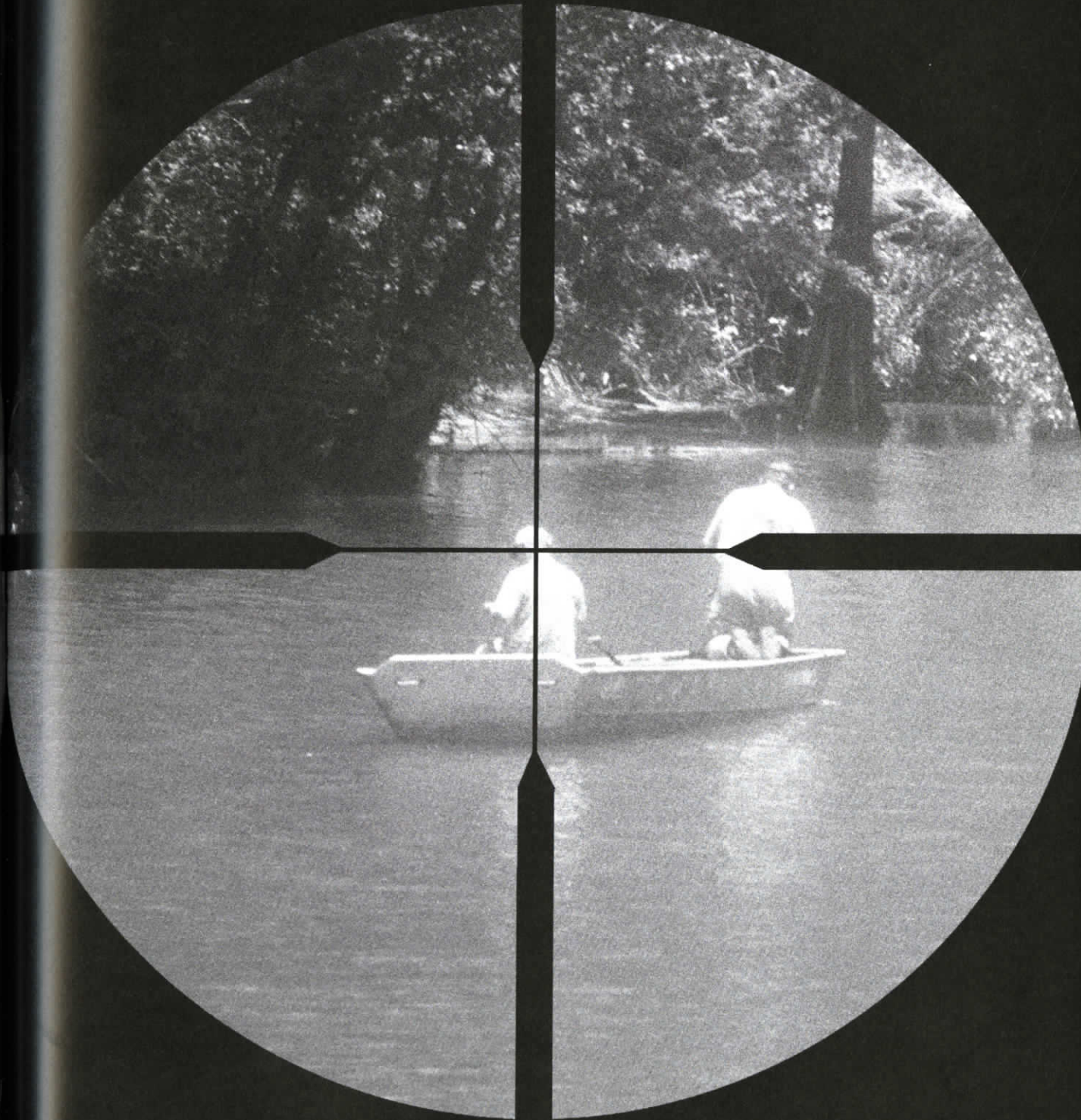
This is in a way what I set out to do. I would drive around and if I saw someone interesting looking I would drive and follow them around to continue snapping photos of them. Sometimes I would camp out at a grocery store or any other mundane location and wait for someone who interested me. Other times I would see a subject and before I could snap a photo they were gone. As Sante continued, "The model may or may not be aware of being photographed, but isn't our very speculation on the matter itself an additional

voyeuristic seasoning?" By shooting so many different types of people the viewer is able to relate to the subjects.

I combined many of the photos into a large collage giving it a grid-like look. One of the more interesting reactions I found was that people who viewed the work often try to associate a motive behind killing the individual persons. At the same time some viewers, as stated above, will see people who may remind them of themselves or performing mundane, relatable tasks that make the viewer think about who is watching them.





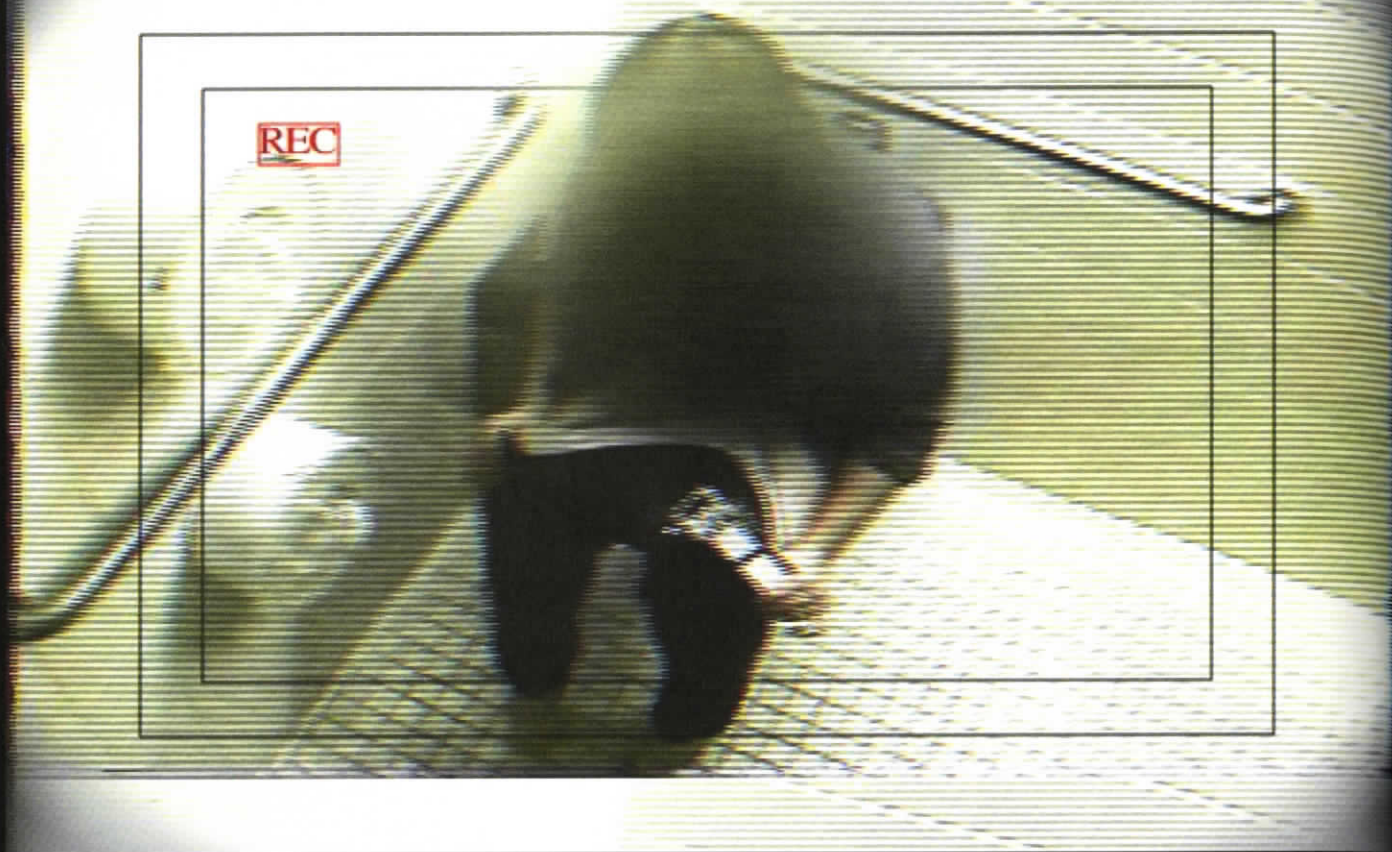




LOADED QUESTION

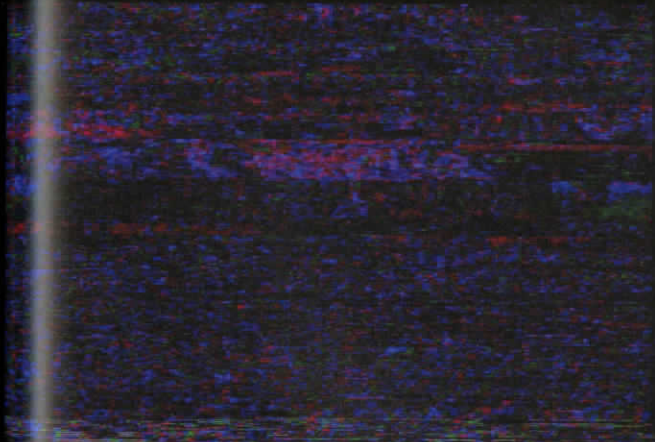
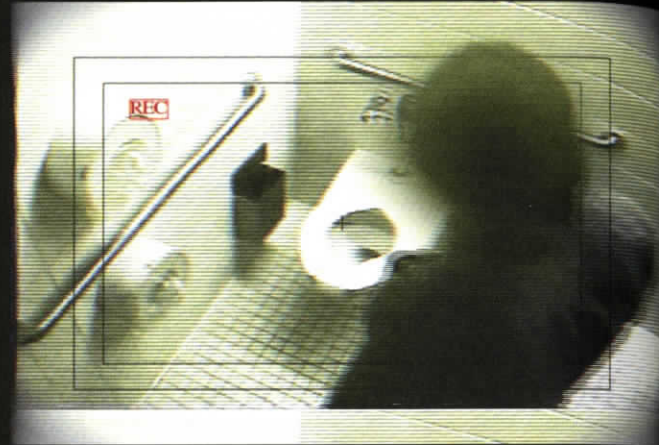
While continuing my research for a later film I remembered an encounter I'd had with my father, which served as the genesis for another non-traditional film, *Loaded Question*, completed in 2009. My father liked to be alone and would often go hunting as a means to leave the home. Once, my mother begged him to take me along. I was only around ten years old at the time and my father reluctantly agreed. Once out there he gave me a gun, which I held by the barrel, resting the stock on the ground. He very coldly and harshly asked, "Do you wanna blow my head off?" I looked at him, unsure how to respond. He pointed at the gun, silently telling me I was holding it wrong. After a moment he asked me, very calmly, "Do you want me to die?" I answered, "No," but all he could do was pack everything up and take me home. For a long time I've wondered what the meaning of that conversation was and all I could come up with was that it was his own way of asking whether or not I love him although I'm still uncertain. I filmed the movie as a static shot with an extreme wide-angle lens at his final resting place of sorts, the hunting land in which we scattered his ashes. In my narration I speak to the viewer very quietly, as though they're right in front of me. This adds to the intimate relationship between storyteller and listener, further creating the idea that when you watch the movie, even with a crowd of people, I am speaking directly to you.





what the hell...

The most recent non-traditional film I've created is titled *what the hell...*, produced in 2009. On the one hand, visually in the film we see a woman entering a public restroom and urinating as filmed through a surveillance camera. Although we can hear some sounds from the woman, the narrator tells a story of being in his apartment one evening and hearing his neighbor having sex. As the story continues the narrator relates the details of what he heard. The room became hot and the narrator started to sweat. As the air conditioner kicked on with its loud, muffled blowing, he could no longer hear the neighbor and so he bolted across the room and shut the air conditioner off. The film ends with the narrator stating, "That's when I finally realized what I was doing. I thought about it for a moment but I figured what the hell, I like to listen." With this piece, like *Loaded Images*, I want the viewer to not only be engaged in the subject but also at the same time wonder who is watching and/or listening to them.





LOADED

As my thesis film I have returned after some time back to narrative storytelling. Research for the film began around the time I went to the gun range, which served as the inspiration for *Loaded Images*. I had been intrigued for some time over what it means to hold a gun and take a person's life. As George Blakely stated in his curatorial statement for the art exhibit, "BANG! THE GUN AS IMAGE:"

"Handguns are specifically designed to kill people. This does not necessarily mean that guns *have* to be used for this purpose, or that when they are it is wrong or bad (for instance in self-defense or as a tool to provide food for the family table, but there is a responsibility attached to ownership of a gun that far exceeds the responsibility for the ownership of a stereo set, or a weed-eater (5)."

I'd read about Charles Whitman and many other war veterans but nothing really stood out. It was then that I'd read about Bernard Goetz, dubbed New York's "Subway Gunman." I found his story interesting: as a timid person he'd been mugged in New York a number of times to the point that he couldn't take it any longer. He began to carry a firearm for protection. One day on the subway he was minding his own business when four men sat beside him, two on his right and two on his left. Reportedly they only asked him if he had any money to spare but Goetz, feeling threatened, very calmly stood up and fired all five shots from his gun wounding three of them and paralyzing the fourth. He then fled the scene and eventually days later turned himself into authorities. While on trial one of the prosecution's major points was that the four men had not directly threatened Goetz however at the time the crime rate in New York was so high that people looked at Goetz as though he was a hero. Eventually Goetz was found innocent of the crime because of public opinion and the extensive records of the four men and he only served a few months for illegal firearms possession.

I was intrigued by the story and I began to learn more about Goetz. He

struck me as someone who really enjoyed what happened on that subway. In a televised interview Goetz was asked if he believed in gun control and he jokingly replied, "I believe in a steady aim." In my research I found that he maintained a website with his contact information. I wrote to him:

"Mr. Goetz,

I am an independent filmmaker currently based in the Dallas, TX area. I am currently working on a film dealing with the subject of guns, specifically people's right to carry a gun. As a believer in the Second Amendment I would be honored if you would grant me some time from your busy schedule for an interview. I would be more than happy to come to you and do whatever I can to make it as convenient and comfortable as possible. If you would like any references or have any questions please feel free to contact me. If you are interested then we could set a date and take it from there. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Clinton Rawls"

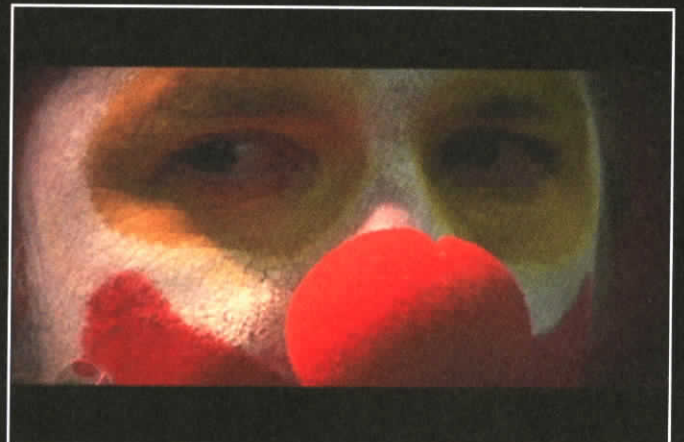
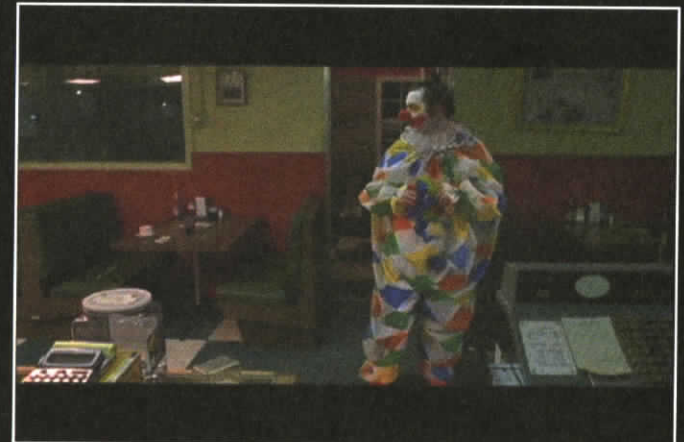
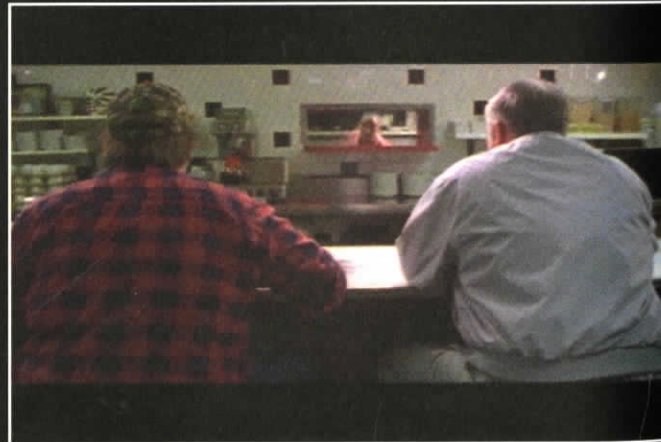
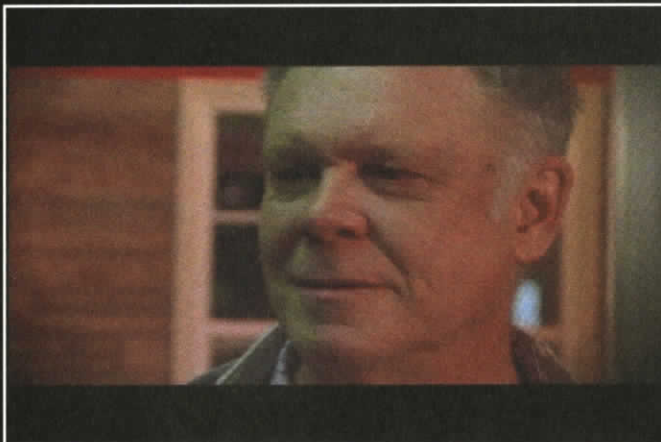
He replied:

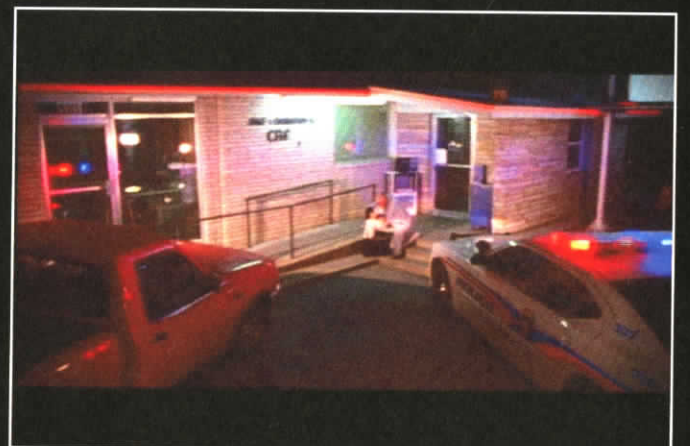
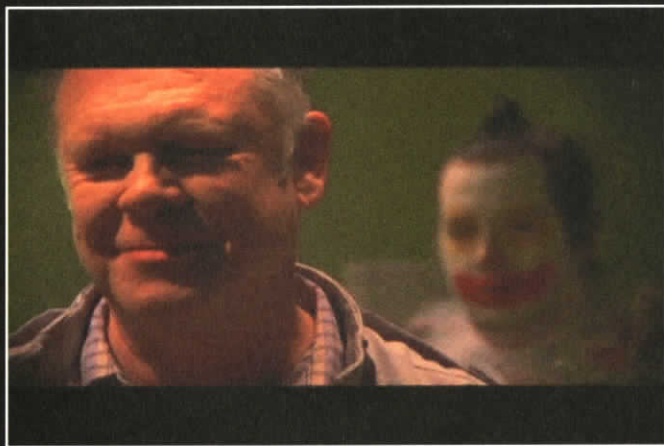
"No thanks. Other than vegetarianism or rebuilding the WTC [World Trade Center] site, I prefer to keep a low profile.

Anyway, nothing else works other than a gun when confronted by a group."

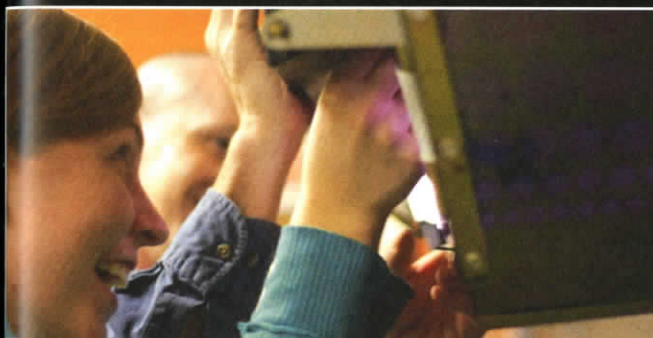
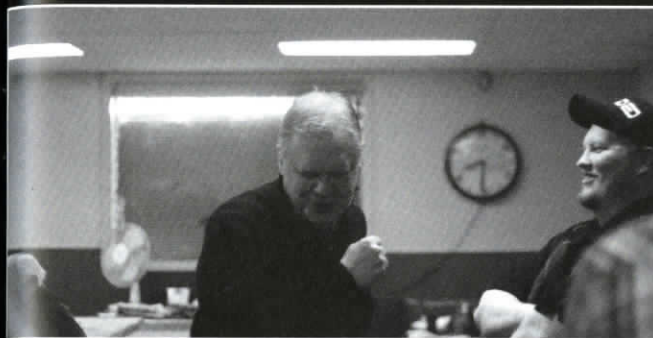
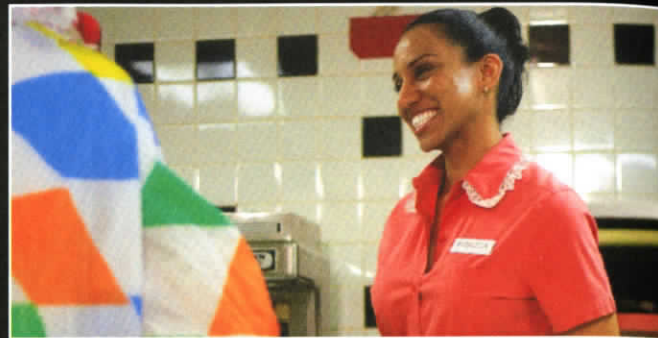
Although he refused to meet me in person, corresponding with Goetz was a very influential experience. I began crafting a script about a man who would lure people into a trap and once they attack him then he would strike back, legally being able to commit murder and fully enjoying the experience. Because I felt it was connected the film *Loaded Question* and the photo series *Loaded Images* I called the film *Loaded*. The film takes place in a sparse, seedy diner in which a patron enters and flashes a great deal of money around.

Meanwhile, a down on his luck party clown watches the man from a booth and contemplates making a grab for the money. The clown follows the man into the bathroom and attacks him but is stunned when the man pulls out a gun and shoots him. The man kills the clown and at the end of the film we see him enter another diner and begin to repeat his previous actions. Through this film I want people to think about what is going on beneath the surface of a person. Why do people do the things they do? What is their motive? I want people to always be aware that just as much as they may be watching a person that person may be watching them and who knows what they want from you.









In the last three years that I've been a student of the University of Texas at Arlington I have learned a great deal and have encountered a number of other influential artists and works of art such as paintings, installations, photographs and films. Although I still maintain many of my old influences I have grown beyond that to appreciate a great deal more that is out there and being said. The experience and knowledge I have gained as a graduate student has had a significant impact on my life and my work and I look forward to what direction my work will take next.

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