

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: Style Weekly's "Hidden Richmond" opens May 5 at Rentz Gallery. Read >

ARTS & CULTURE

March 22, 2006

Things That Go Bump on the Screen

Experimental animator Martha Colburn comes to town with her film fetishes.

by Brandon Reynolds

Though James Parrish of the Richmond Moving Image Co-Op insists there is no theme, the connective tissue joining the meat and bones of the James River Film Festival would seem to be the stuff that dreams are made of. Bad ones, anyway. Two big draws are Ray Harryhausen and Martha Colburn, animators who have plumbed the depths and come back with nightmares fit for the screen. Harryhausen is the mind behind the irate skeletons in "Jason and the Argonauts" (1963) and the huge and ultimately flash-frozen Kraken in "Clash of the Titans" (1981). Colburn's work is less well-known, perhaps, but no less unsettling. In her short film, "There's a Pervert in Our Pool," images of Bill Clinton, Woody Allen and large-breasted penguins frolic in a body of water while Baltimore poet Fred Collins rants on the soundtrack. It's not going to sell the popcorn, maybe, but when taken together with her other work, you get a good look across the horizon of a person's mind, even if her pool runneth over with perverts. Colburn is known in the weird art scenes of places like Amsterdam, Baltimore and New York for her films — Frankensteinian things put together on Super 8 from found film and collaged images strapped together and forced to play out her strange little dramas. One of the better and more disturbing films (the one people tend to talk about when discussing her work or to write about in articles, so here we go) is "Skelahellavision" (2001), a composite of porn films, lava, dancing girls and snakes. Colburn etched skeletons onto the film over the porn bits, so the whole film seems to be coming apart as it goes along. For her part, Colburn is simply picking up what comes across her path and playing with it, an organic shifting-in-theme, as she calls it. "At the time, I was living with someone with this huge pornographic collection, so of course I was gonna use it," she says. "It's fun to play with." So jerky skeletons wield swords in Harryhausen's vision; in Colburn's, they are screwed in slow motion. There's a strange violence to a lot of her work that, she says for lack of a better idea, stems from growing up on a farm in Pennsylvania. "I saw lots of sex and death growing up, with the turkeys and the chickens." Whatever the cause, she returns again and again to sexual themes, hammering away at different aspects of the subject with the obsessive regularity

of a headboard banging against a wall in a cheap hotel. And she's discovered a strange phenomenon in her found film foraging: Basic images are perverted very easily. Silver Age rocket ships fly around naked women with the intentions of a rapist, footage of people eating greasy food is reversed so that the gaping mouths disgorge an intact hamburger or assemble a pizza in the palm of the hand. After a while of this, it seems easier to go that way than the other, and hard to go back. "I combine very beautiful things with very horrific things," she says. "Because of collage, I am drawing from the real world, but putting it into my nightmarish vision of things. ...And I think that's kind of the power of collage." Colburn got started in Baltimore, scavenging old films from a city surplus in 1994. She brought her personal touches into the animation of the titles, evolving a style of illustration that's made its way into murals and installations in galleries here and abroad. An art residency took her over to Amsterdam for five years, but since June of last year, she's been living in New York. "I know as an artist you eventually have to move to New York," she says, but she is still constantly frustrated by the fact that the city is one continuous monetary transaction, which means she has to do a lot of commercial work to find time to do her art. Or wait. "Should I reveal that I have no time to do art?" she asks, laughing. So maybe the Salem witch trial film will have to wait on her next paycheck. "I'm much broader than just being an animator, and I have to be in order to make a living," she says. She just created a music video for the indie band Deerhoof, shows work in a few New York galleries, is participating in the Whitney Biennial and will be hitting the road for festivals in Belfast, Portland, Roanoke, Baltimore and Richmond. "Film festivals are a great way to get out of the art world in New York," she says. New York's a long way from the dramas of sex and violence enacted by poultry on the farm of her childhood, but for now, it's a necessary nightmare. **S** *The James River Film Festival runs through March 26 at various venues. "An Evening With Martha Colburn" takes place at Plant Zero, March 23 at 7:30 p.m. Admission is \$5. For more information, call 232-RMIC or visit www.rmicweb.org.*