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A Fire to Keep me Warm

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A Fire to Keep me Warm

***Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts***

of Bard College

***A Film by
Hannah Sparagana***

***Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016***

Artist Statement - *A Fire to Keep me Warm*

The process of creating this film was in many respects non-linear and highly organic in its evolution. I cannot pinpoint an exact moment when the project was solely decided upon and its structure formed, whether it was to be a dramatic narrative, a visual poem, an experimental essay. Even in its final stages I have discovered this labeling to be non-essential. Rather, I would have the viewer interpret the work, navigating the piece solely through the montage of images, sound and rhythm. In my experience, this is what meaningful and inspired work is able to do, accessing a particular and fleeting essence of emotional impression. It may either date itself, tied to a particular cultural landscape of relevance, or remain timeless, connecting generations of people and experiences through its exploration of the human experience. These are large ideas, and perhaps I am getting ahead of myself, ahead of my work in attempting to discuss them. But I find relevance in this attempt, as the beginnings of my senior film, *A Fire to Keep me Warm*, developed because of the exploration of these thoughts as well as from my desire to create a piece of work that triggered an emotional and nostalgic response in the viewer.

Attending Bard, I found myself inspired by the expansive and organic materials of the Hudson Valley, firstly through its landscape and secondly by the integration of man made structures, all of which are inherently impermanent. I began to see the landscape and architecture of the space to be a cyclical process of evolution and destruction, growth and decay which was tied to several dichotomous elements of the area, most notably the discrepancy of coexisting wealth and poverty. Driving between towns, I began to notice an odd occurrence – the structures of destroyed and abandoned buildings, most notably the ruins of several diners, revealing the evidence of fires. It seemed as if each town had its own little history- Rhinebeck, Elizaville, Pine Bush, and now Redhook, apparent in the recent fire at Rusty's Diner that destroyed several adjacent businesses. I found this to be particularly striking in the Hudson Valley, as this trend is largely invisible in thriving

cities, which are constantly reinventing and transforming themselves. As no one rushed to remove or repair these structures, I began to unwittingly anthropomorphize them, finding a strange and forlorn beauty about their ruin, as if the process of their deconstruction was honest, revelatory. They became sculptural, works of intention, much like the irony of paint swatches on buildings, which in their utilitarian intention of covering graffiti become a further dialogue with the artist.¹

Resulting questions then arose: who were the people behind this destruction, and what was their intention? Did this singular event in their lives cause them to suffer or profit due to tragedy? I began to hear stories from locals about the disturbing history of insurance arson in the Hudson Valley, which dates back to the 1980's, increasing in times of economic downturn and reflecting a complex sociological narrative. Through this, I began to note a larger pattern regarding the lives of those who are initially sustained by, and ultimately find revenue from these buildings through their last act of agency: destruction.

The desperation and moral ambiguities that stemmed from this action were intriguing to me, and subsequently allowed the nature of my film to become clear. In developing this work, I felt compelled to explore more ambiguous questions of human action and experience, influenced by outside factors that stem from desperation, economic distress and resulting regret. I was less interested in capturing or documenting the occurrence of arson itself, but more drawn to the exploration of an individual's motivation through a semi-narrative, fictitious interpretation of such experiences. Through this, the singular protagonist of the film was developed not to reflect judgment, but instead to examine a psychological and cinematic perspective, one in which the desire to exercise power through the agency of uncontrollable elements ultimately leaves the perpetrator more intrinsically powerless than they initially found themselves to be. The process of making this film has proved itself to be a way for me to connect with not only the vast and striking landscape of the Hudson Valley, but also aspects of the shared complexities of the human condition.

¹ This occurrence is notable in the short film by Matt McCormick, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* 16/mm Digital video - 2001

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