

# Mike Holboom Interviews John KneLler

# My Life at the Movies

JK: It's funny, people will wait at a bus stop or a laundromat, but can't sit through a five minute experimental film. And they get so angry. People take their movies very personally, they know what they like which is what's been sold to them. A few years ago, I had to stop watching. I just got tired of the way your emotions are manipulated. It's a weird feeling when tears are welling up in your eyes and there's a big lump in your throat and you're thinking that all over the world folks you've never met are feeling just the same. I grew up in a small town of five thousand people but there was a movie theatre, The Royal Theatre in Hudson, Quebec. When I was nine my parents took me to see **Lies My Father Told Me**, a Canadian movie. In one scene these little boys look through a window and see a man sucking the breasts of a woman and they couldn't understand why. I think I had an idea. In the movie the boy asks his grandfather about it - he wasn't breastfeeding, what was he doing? Well, sometimes you do it just for pleasure. It was weird seeing that with my parents. The Royal Theatre turned into a sports outlet and now of course it's a video store. It's all changed. I remember many a summer afternoon matinee and the way the sun would scorch your eyeballs as you left the theatre. In our small town the Royal was something that kept people together.

MH: You'd meet people there.

JK: Yeah, for parents it was a chance to get the kids out of the house for a couple of hours.

MH: The communal babysitter.

JK: It reminds me of this guy who used to have small booths with super-8 cartoon loops. The show would last a couple of minutes and cost a dollar and he kept it running into the late eighties. Parents would send their kids in there with ten bucks just to get rid of them for awhile. Now he's switched to videotape.

MH: When did you start making movies?

When I was fourteen my neighbour got a super-8 camera and I figured we should make a little slasher movie. There'd be four characters who are offed in various ways. When you're a kid you've seen a lot of murders on television. This was one way of letting some of that out. We had screenings in the neighborhood, all the kids were in it so they'd come over and see it. A few years later my parents were worried about me going to the local high school, that I needed something else, so they sent me to a boy's private school for three years, between 1980-83. At the time it seemed like the worst thing that could've happened; having to wear the uniforms, and being so anxious about girlfriends, sex in general. But now I think it was a good thing, I might have got stuck in a rut back in Hudson.

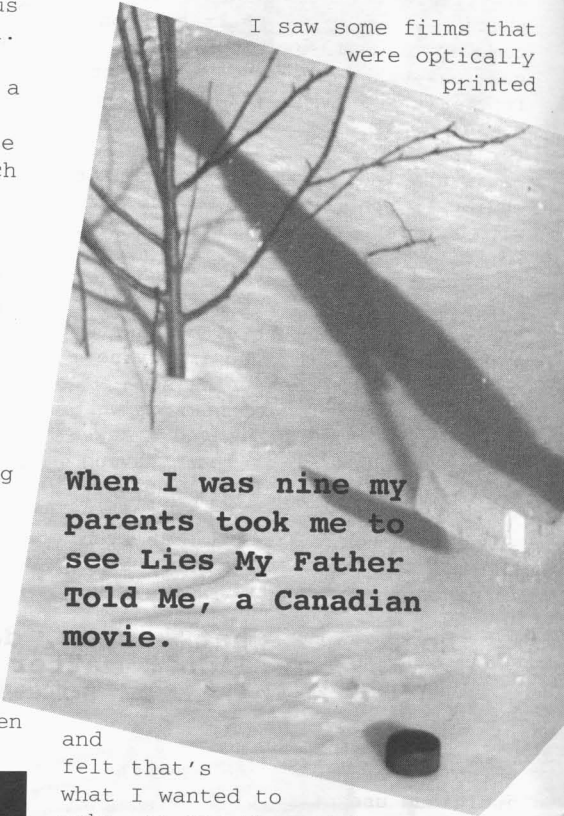
In CEGEP I enrolled in commerce because my parents didn't see much of a future in film. I saw my first Brakhage and Anger films. Afterwards I applied to the University of Concordia for film but didn't make it. I still have dreams about the interview, and have spoken with other filmmakers who all remember the terror of applying. I'd been going to movie nights run by a punk and when I told them what movies I was seeing they figured I wasn't for them. I think the interest was there, but in a small town you're limited in what you can see. You'll find **Faces of Death** but not **Dog Star Man** in your video store. I'd planned on staying in Montreal, but got accepted at the University of Toronto and I've been here ever since, ten years now.

You made films at the University?

That's when I really got going though it was frowned upon, we were told there were too many filmmakers out there already. I started to experiment with super-8 on my own time, the university program is strictly film history, criticism and theory. I used to go to all the Innis Film Screenings and have

a lot of good memories, that's where I really saw experimental films. As soon as I saw some of those films I knew this was for me. It was a much more purist approach to film, unconcerned with demographics or test screenings. It was film for film. I loved Pat O'Neill's work, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, all that structuralist work, Joyce Wieland. I guess there's an admiration for what people were doing in the sixties. There were different approaches to lifestyles, and as a result different approaches to filmmaking, you sensed the changes in their world.

I saw some films that were optically printed



When I was nine my parents took me to see **Lies My Father Told Me**, a Canadian movie.

and felt that's what I wanted to make, to use the printer to express a feeling or an idea, not to make it look like there's a Tie fighter in front of the Death Star not to use it for standard movie magic special effects. To fool people. That's when I made those three 'S' films: **Spring** (4 min 1991), **Shimmer** (4 min 1988) and **Speck** (4.5 min 1989). I knew a lab guy that could put together three rolls of super-8, run them on separate pass-

es. I was fascinated with multiple exposures, to marry the images in the printing.

I was doing a lot of time lapse work shooting clouds and landscapes, which is what I'm still shooting now. A lot of the seeds were planted pretty early on -- Especially this fascination with water. If you're printing with low quality systems,



light comes into the finder, bounces off your eye and runs back onto the film. That particular effect is evident in parts of **Speck** and definitively in **Picture Start** (3 min silent 1985-90). The eyeball is magnified tremendously and luminous white eyelashes flutter about the focal plane. For a long time I was trying to perfect that. When I work with a camera I'm overly meticulous, spending too much time setting up, but I enjoy working that way, making every shot count.

Were you were shooting in a gathering mode as opposed to following a script?

Absolutely. I still get the urge and decide I have to go out today and shoot something. I just don't feel comfortable shooting strangers, filmmakers have a responsibility not just to take take take. It's amazing what's changed in ten years. Everything but me. I'm still doing exactly what I was doing then, I'm just a little better at it. I still go about filmmaking as a major part of my daily life. As technology changes abound, I've continued traditional film approaches with a little help from my digital friends!

In the late eighties I had an apartment down in Kensington Market which I set up as a little studio. I had a couple of super-8 cameras and a projector with a flip mirror so you could project on the screen. I had also been experimenting with slow burning film frames and all kinds of crazy set-ups for multiple projection re-photography. I was interested in reflections of light patterns on various hand-held gels. I made experiments using single frame re-photography. Some very crude methods were used including filming from an editor/viewer screen. All of these limited techniques found their way into the three-part superimposition film **Speck**.

**Spring's** a bit different though. I went into an old abandoned building and put it altogether in my head before starting to shoot. There was a presence there. It was a place for the homeless, full of shit and pornography and glue bottles. I was pretty naive then, it hadn't occurred to me that people would have to live like that. At the same time there was a certain

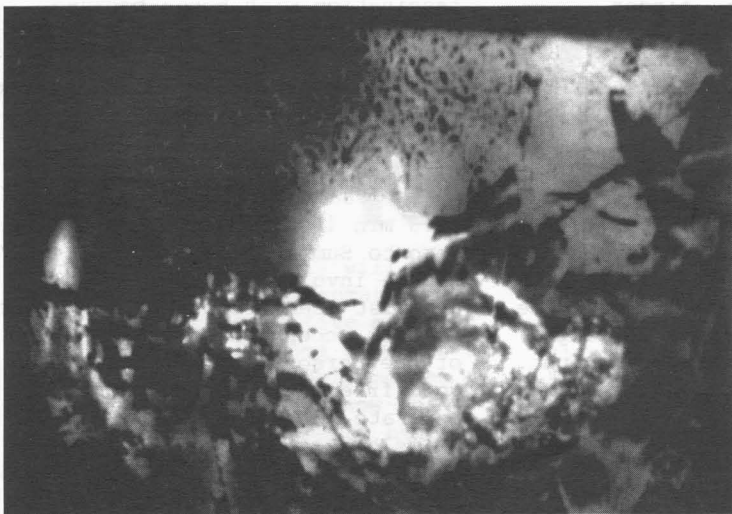
fascination with hobos because you're not tied to anything, you're free. The last shot of the film shows an oval window which the camera moves towards suggesting freedom, and its costs. Most opt for more regimented forms of freedom.

In 1988 I made **Toronto Summit** (6.5 min 1988), a document of the Toronto Summit rally and march. I'd become involved in the local activist scene, though I was reluctant to accept this easy equation of the personal and political. A good friend, it seemed, couldn't separate the two at all, whatever he felt that day was the reigning politic. Artists are guilty of this too, you have to let other things go to do the work, you have to be selfish to get it done, but it can create problems with your relationships. It takes a toll.

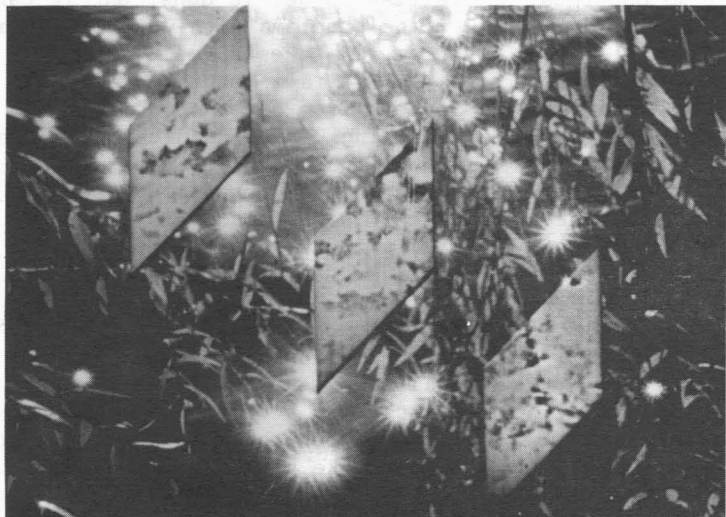
The G7 is a meeting of world leaders from seven countries, including Canada, and that year the meeting was held in Toronto. They spoke at the Convention Centre which was surrounded by a giant wall with helicopters circling night and day. There was one big, well-publicized protest that drew a lot of people. We were going to march from the legislature to the walls and tear them down, or at least bring attention to this barrier between the elite and regular shmoes like us. It was my first taste of a big city rally. It had never been my calling to do documentary type work but I was fascinated with the photojournalist's idea of capturing a decisive moment. It all took about three hours, there was singing and speeches and then a march. There were cops in riot gear and a sit-down protest. Anyone who tried to climb the barriers got arrested, and mostly it was very reserved. But with that many people it could quickly become dangerous. A newspaper box was toppled and burned and a circle of people danced around it, while in the background you see endless rows of cops. You can hardly imagine it's Toronto, it looks like something out of a war zone. That's when you saw how fragile democracy was. There was a line, and you wondered at what point would the cops take out their truncheons and start beating people? It was a scary time to be living in. Cold war. Reagan was saying crazy things. I'd grown up with the immanent threat of nuclear war. No one talks about it anymore, but a few years ago my teachers would pray that no one crazy would take office and press the button. That was the

water seems to hold its image quality longer than other kinds of images, it stays extra sharp on film. I was also fascinated with the feedback you can get through a reflex viewfinder on a super-8 camera, if you look right into the sun. I'd set the frame up with the sun in the corner looking out a window, with the light spraying across the frame. You get your eye wet, and if you press your eyeball right up against the glass in the viewfinder, the





still from John Kneller's *Speck*



still from Kneller's *We Are Experimental*

fear. We knew there was nothing like a limited scale nuclear war. It meant the end of everything.

In 1986 I lived in residence which was very new and awakening for a guy coming from a small town. Steve Lerner lived next door and we got along like brothers, both away from home for the first time. But to get anything out of the guy was murder. I had this little film I was working on and wanted to shoot in his room, but before he said yes I had to type essays and run errands, it was driving me nuts. He had a bunch of regular-8 home movies from his family and I had a projector. Every once in a while he's have a hot date and as one of his ploys, he'd borrow my movie projector and show his home movies. I was jealous because I wasn't getting any action at all, it was terrible, years went by. But things were going well for him because of these movies and finally he showed them to me. He said there's this one which is really strange, there's something wrong with it. He put it on and it

blew me away. It's a very simple home movie showing a baby being washed, playing, rocking, being held by his parents. A very basic home movie with in-camera cutting. But something happened during processing, the emulsion's not entirely there, it's peeled off and folded back, leaving lateral excisions. The overall effect is that this banal home movie has a beautiful new life given to it by the material nature of the film. That was

**Traces, Fragments**

(4 min 1986). I don't really consider it my film, I just found it. I bothered Steve for years about it and in the end he acquiesced, he saw that I was seri-

ous, that I was committed to this kind of filmmaking, and it was nice for him to help me along. I had all these ideas of turning it into a multi-screen extravaganza. In the clear areas of the image I wanted to show fragments from 1960s newsreels - moonshots, JFK assassination, the King assassination. There would be scenes from the baby's later life, growing up and high school. I tried to do all this on a contact printer at home on regular-8, but never achieved it. Kika Thorne was always urging me to show the original, saying that it was beautiful the way it was. In the end I realized she was right. For two years I made prints from the original and tried to rework it, but finally realized the footage was limited and stopped.

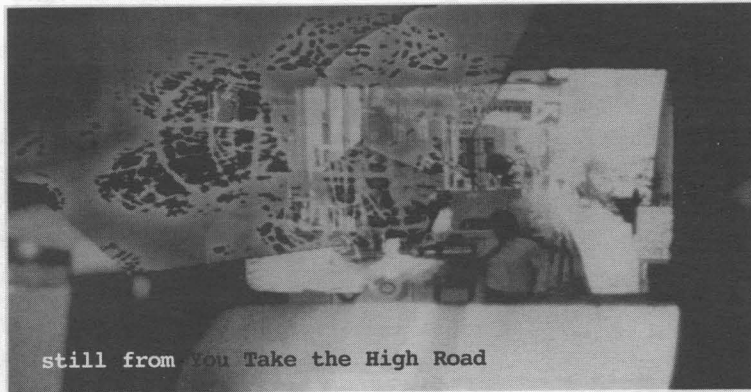
Through the years I've assembled all my films on large reels, but then I start optical printing and they all get broken down again. It's like an endless expansion and

contraction, never being able to decide what I want to do with this stuff. It's always been process first. From 1992-95 I worked intensely on the printer and pilfered materials from past work to make new things. I had the idea that **Speck** could benefit from a complete reworking given the new possibilities of the optical printer. As was the case with **Traces, Fragments** this endless reworking of old originals did not prove entirely fruitful. So, I've finally decided (the hard way), to remaster all of the older superimposition films from the original super-8 A-B-C rolls exactly as originally intended.





John Kneller



still from *You Take the High Road*

There's often different versions of the same film, or re-worked materials which blurs the boundary between films. What I find incredible is that your films are very thoroughly worked through, and then never finished. They become part of a long continuum which privileges process.

Honestly I think I have to get away from that, after going through this massive editing project trying to make some sense of it all. For the first time I'm going back and deciding what's a film and what isn't, and having proper prints made.

Tell me about your leaf obsession.

Every fall between 1990-93 I'd go out and shoot leaves. It would take me a month to shoot seven seconds because every shot was set up like a still photo. I remember Robert Breer doing frame by frame work in **Fistfight**, using a different image for each frame. It had a fascinating kinetic effect on the screen, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. That shooting was the beginning of **Architectures and Landscapes Compilation** (17 min 1993). I'd also been photographing a lot of water images which were processed by hand. Every day I woke up at seven and did a day's worth of processing, sat at a table and did it. This went on for five months and the results were lousy, it was all very flat, lacking contrast. I thought maybe it needed more agitation but then there were areas of oxidation and brown spots on the film. I cut all the brown sections out and the remainder became the backing matte for the colour leaves work. They were run together in the optical printer, and that became a pretty important

part of the film. It was my signature style for awhile. I'd also collected all this regular-8 footage from garage sales. You shoot one side of the roll, then take the film out of the camera, turn it around, and shoot the other side. Usually when it's processed, they slit the film in half and give it back to you. But if it's not slit it can be cut directly into 16mm footage, producing a four-screen effect. It was all Kodachrome so the colour was beautiful and saturated. This was incorporated with the water/leaves and some stained glass windows I shot. The windows are something made by humans which try to imitate the beauty of nature, to evoke those translucent, saturated colours. The film compares these two moments, and reflects on its own making, its own evocation of colour. There's a shot of Hitler in the film and some said I should take it out, but it's followed by these pixilated flowers I shot slowed down on the printer, red against a black background, which have a very somber quality. The idea being that there's beauty but such horror as well.

Do you think your work is more akin to painting?

No, but maybe there are some similarities in the way colour is controlled or affected. Water never travels in straight lines, it always curves, and it's flat, and often has a shimmering surface. The leaves provide translucence and contrast, so they look terrific mixed with one another. Those negatives I hand processed years ago came in handy because I needed the blacks to be a little soft, so that the leaves could show through them. When you're sandwiching images together one picture will show through the clear images of the next, and slight areas of grey will also admit some of the image, in this case the trees. Mixing this grey with the colour trees saturates the image even more. I love those deep blues, reds, and purples. It seems to me that good



still from You Take the High Road



experimental filmmakers have beautiful colours. Working in black and white has never been of great interest to me. Black and white's in vogue now but even mainstream audiences don't always like it. It's funny, I remember this guy who made a beautiful video for the New Country Network TV station. After it aired people called in saying, "Look, I just bought this big colour TV and no way in hell do I want to watch black and white videos".

Do you worry about your audiences? Is there enough of an audience for your work?

In 1990 I got a call from Pleasure

## Experimental film is the way and the truth.

Dome (an artist's film/video exhibition group in Toronto). They asked if I wanted to show and I said I'm surprised you're calling me, I'm really just getting started, I'm honoured. And they said, well actually we wanted someone else but they cancelled (laughs). But I think Pleasure Dome does a good job and have been supportive of my work. There used to be the Innis Film Society here but attendance became so bad it was embarrassing. I remember the Ernie Gehry show where six people came. You start wondering why am I putting all this time into the work? A show's never lousy though. Even if there's just one person out there, there's something happening. A good film is when you bring home images, when something sticks.

Is there something political about making a film that has no use value?

If I made documentaries I honestly don't think I'd be shooting on

film. You want to shoot as much as you can to capture those moments. And that's not the best use for motion pictures anymore. Agnes Varda came to the States and after seeing a number of Kenneth Anger films said, "Well that seems like a pretty easy way to make a film". They think experimental filmmakers have it easy because of the freedom but I've always wanted to work on film at my own speed. In my own way. I haven't pushed the promotion end of things, I'd get the films so close to being finished that I'd lose interest because the challenge was no longer there, I'd learned everything I wanted to from that particular film. Then I'd move onto the next thing. Because I was so

eager and excited to understand film a lot of those early films were in disarray. I was scared of the big film labs, because I've always done everything myself, made all of my own prints. People are amazed that I'm able to keep going on my own terms. They imagine there's only so long you can be a film or jazz martyr, (someone who plays jazz just for the love of it). But it's more important for me to make films than a comfortable living. I have a day job and can keep going.

I made **Architectures and Landscape Compilation** in 1993, revised it a year later, then kept working on it until it became **We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties** (17 min 1997). It also shows an intersection of landscapes and architectures with humanity in between. But it's a lot denser using travelling mattes, images within images, and shows a differ-

ent treatment of colour. I used a lot of high contrast, self-processed water imagery, which was re-photographed using alternating colour filters with a slide projector as the light source. This produces a flickering colour field against the high contrast field. The stained glass windows return, but while they're shown in their pristine original in the background, the foreground shows the same windows with fifteen added layers of superimposition. I used my projector to run into the printer so the images are very quick, fifty times faster than normal. This contrast between the two kinds of windows suggests that as much as religion strives for the best in human experience it's also responsible for the boys in Mount Cashel or going to war. We're in such a high tech age but in other ways we're completely backwards. I find the combination of religious right extremism, anti-government sentiment and fire-arms to be particularly odious.

Experimental film is the way and the truth. I do believe that. It has such freedom because you're not catering to a market, you're interested in ideas. But why would you make those films - everyone who sticks with it is miserable, or they go crazy or shoot themselves. A lot of people show promise and stop. I saw a student film which

was fantastic but now this filmmaker installs car antennas for a living. But I think there's a way. When I first saw **Dog Star Man** I was eighteen and very open and impressed, but as soon as people hit their twenties they just head for the dollars and leave these films behind. They're missing out on something great. I guess I'm a bit of a purist. I don't even work with a Steenbeck, I always work on a bench. People say oh that's so archaic, but I find it useful when you're winding the film back you're thinking of whether your decision is a good one or not. Just because you can edit fast doesn't make you a good cutter. One thing about working on a printer is that you're actually exposing film to light and as soon as you start taking film into the digital domain, you're getting further away from it being light and into information. I still love the quality of projected light. And there's something to be said about taking time over things. I just prefer working that way, if that makes me a dinosaur, well...

I guess we're all independent filmmakers

