



**NARRATIVE BODIES**  
**FILMS AND VIDEOS BY ABIGAIL CHILD**

APRIL 2, 2012 8:30 PM

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

**CaLARTS**

# NARRATIVE BODIES

## FILMS AND VIDEOS BY ABIGAIL CHILD

Mon Apr 2 | 8:30 pm |

Poet, essayist and filmmaker Abigail Child sees her creations as a curious and particular intersection, often humorous, sometimes alchemical, between sound and image. Bodies, fetishes, symbols, icons and relics are reinvented and refitted to new realities and new desires. The total assembly is a movement metaphorically (with the ghostly re-emergence of Griffith on one side and on the other Eisenstein), and the images and poetic rhythms use structure as a magnifying glass to uncover the lies and injustices of history. Child's film cycle, *Is This What You Were Born For* (1981–89), is a landmark of contemporary avant-garde cinema, and her recent works continue to be widely shown and celebrated. Films include *Peripeteia I* (1977), *Perils* (1986), *Mayhem* (1987), *The Future is Behind You* (2004–05), *Mirror World* (2006) and *Ligatures* (2009).

### **In person: Abigail Child**

"In effect, a feminist Muybridge, breaking down gestures and actions to reveal unconscious and otherwise invisible patterns." – Tom Gunning

"Abigail Child's series *Is This What You Were Born For?* is one of the most assured and important projects to have emerged over the last decade. Constructing from and subverting a wide galaxy of source materials, these films are archeological digs into the very stuff, the conceptions, we are born into. Child decomposes the materials and gestures that would compose us. The films are charged with a startling and playful musicality and poetic and rigorous compression. Each image and sound cuts deep and works over time containing hidden and unhidden detonations working against the manufactured ambush that images have in store. Agile dances through treacherous debris, they negotiate an obstacle course of polar anatomies zig-zagging with corkscrew twists and nuclear splits – a gambol against the hazards." – Mark McElhatten

### **PROGRAM**

#### *Peripeteia I*

1977, Film (16mm), 10 min, Color, Silent.

Navigation spiraling sunwards. Exploring the movement of forest and body, seeking the larger pattern of my digressive attendance. Filmed in the Oregon coastal rain forest, fall. (AC)

#### *Perils*

1986, Film (16mm), 5 min, B/W and Color, Sound.

Part 4 of *Is This What You Were Born For?*

Sound montage constructed by Charles Noyes and Christian Marclay from Warner Brothers cartoons and improvisations.

*Perils* is a homage to silent film—the clash of ambiguous innocence and unsophisticated villainy—dramatizing the theatrical postures of melodrama to confront and examine our ideas of romance, action, and drama. "I had long conceived of a film composed only of reaction shots in which all causality was erased. What would be left would be the resonant voluptuous suggestions of history and the human face." (AC)

### *Mayhem*

1987, Film (16 mm), 20 min, B/W, Sound.  
Part 6 of *Is This What You Were Born For?*

Through a catalogue of looks, movements, and gestures, *Mayhem* presents a social order run amok in a libidinous retracing of film noir conventions. Sexuality flows in an atmosphere of sexual tension, danger, violence, and glamour; antagonism between the sexes is symbolized in the costuming of women in polka dots and men in stripes. Censored in Tokyo for its use of Japanese lesbian erotica, this tape creates an image bank of what signifies the sexual and the seductive in the history of imagemaking, pointing to the way we learn about our bodies, and how to use them from images. (AC)

### *The Future Is Behind You.*

2004–2005, Film to Video, 20 min, B/W, Sound.  
Music by John Zorn, arranged and played by Sylvie Courvoisier and Mark Feldman

*The Future Is Behind You* creates a fictional story composed from an anonymous family archive, reconstructed to emphasize gender acculturation in two sisters who play, race, fight, kiss and grow up together under a shadow of oncoming history. In the found material I used, I was looking for the story below the story, manifested here at least three levels. 1) The home movie in which a family from 1930s Germany near the Swiss border poses for the camera, preternaturally happy. Unusually, the mother is main cinematographer. 2) The historical moment which remains as text trace, undermining the image and serving as covert motive for the action. 3) The development of gender identities—the innocent freedom of the elder transformed into a socially bruised ‘bride,’ the irrepressibility of the younger moving from tomboy to awkward, diffident adult. (AC)

### *Mirror World*

2006, Video, 15 min, Color, Sound.  
With Gary Sullivan (part of *Foreign Film Series*)

A reshaping of Mehboob Khan’s classic Bollywood feature *Aan* into a comic and disturbing study of class and sexuality. Formal play and poetic subtitles deconstruct the narrative to locate the sub-version: the princess becomes the maid, the maid becomes queen. *Mirror World* wrenches narrative causality, and discovers with digital printing, ways to wreck havoc on our perceptions of the world. Hypnotic and beautiful: you cannot turn away. (AC)

### *(If I Can Sing a Song About) Ligatures*

2009, Digital Video, 5 min.  
With Nada Gordon (part of *Foreign Film Series*)

Third in the series of Foreign Films exploring relations of text and image, how text turns the image. In *(If I Can Sing A Song About) Ligatures*, words taken from lines of Nada Gordon’s unrequited love poems, whose sentences are taken, in their turn, from anonymous web poems, reveal a history of sexuality. *Ligatures* pronounces the poignancy of desire; its power and its vulnerability. The women are visions, girls, desirous, delicate, illusory. The illusionary nature is made manifest—transversing boundaries, expectations and physical limits—by the close. We in the audience, creating our own identities in the moments, remain trans-fixed. (AC)

**Abigail Child** is an internationally-known media artist and writer whose original montage pushes the envelope of sound-image relations exploring gesture as language, and creating radical strategies to rewrite narrative. She makes “brilliant exciting work...a vibrant political film that’s attentive to form” (*LA Weekly*). In the last decade, Child has expanded her vertical montage to multi-screen installation, exhibiting at The Walker Museum and Harvard University among others. Child has had retrospectives

nationally and internationally; her art is in the permanent collection of MoMA, NY and Centre Pompidou, Paris, among others; and Harvard Film Center has created an "Abigail Child Collection" which will preserve and exhibit her films. Child is also a writer whose poetry collections include *A Motive for Mathem* and *Scatter Matrix* as well as the recent collection of critical writings, *This is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film* (University of Alabama Press, 2005). Child is senior faculty at the School of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and calls NYC home.

See <http://abigailchild.com>

#### Selected Additional Filmography

*Some Exterior Presence* (1977, short)  
*Pacific Far East Line* (1979, short)  
*Ornamentals* (1979, short)  
*Prefaces Part I* (1981, short)  
*Mutiny Part II* (1983, short)  
*Covert Action Part IV* (1984, short)  
*Both Part III* (1988, short)  
*Mercy Part VII* (1989, short)  
*Swamp* (1990, short)  
*Eight Million* (1992, short)  
*Through the Looking Glass* (1995, short)  
*B/side* (1996, short)  
*Below the New: A Russian Chronicle* (1999, short)  
*Surface Noise* (2000, short)  
*Dark Dark* (2001, short)  
*Subtalk* (2002, short)  
*Cake and Steak* (2003, short)  
*By Desire* (2006, instal)  
*On the Downlow* (2007, doc)  
*Surf and Turf* (2008, short)  
*Riding the Tiger: Letters from Capitalist China* (2010, doc)  
*L'impero invertito* (2010, instal)  
*Hacking Empire* (2010, short)  
*The Suburban Trilogy* (2011, short)  
*A Shape of Error* (2011)

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud

The Jack H. Skirball Series is funded in part with generous support from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



#### UPCOMING FILM/VIDEO PROGRAMS AT REDCAT WINTER/SPRING 2012

**Mon Apr 9: Sharon Lockhart: *Double Tide***

**Mon Apr 16: Seeing and Awakening: New Films by Nathaniel Dorsky**

**Mon Apr 23: Bill Morrison: Miners, Bridges, Lost Love and Other Retrieved Treasures**

**Mon Apr 30: The Imaginary Voyages of Maureen Selwood: Beyond Enchantment**

**Tue May 1: *Transparent Cities***

**May 2-5: Film/Video CalArts Student Showcases**

**May 5-13: REDCAT International Children's Film Festival**

**Mon May 7: Cine Povera: Mexican Experiments in 16MM**

**Mon May 21: New Day at 40: A Community's Celebration**