

THE HOT DOCS DAILY for May 5, 2006

IN CONVERSATION... THE CHANCES OF THE WORLD CHANGING

International Programmer Shannon Abel interviews filmmaker Eric Daniel Metzgar



Eric Daniel Metzgar speaks with his subject, Richard Ogust.

*Turning his apartment into a wildlife refuge for over 1200 endangered turtles, Richard Ogust's quest to open a turtle sanctuary starts to take its toll in this poignant film. *The Chances of the World Changing* is a different take on the traditional nature documentary, focusing on a man who devotes his life to saving an endangered species, but starts to see his own life unravel before his eyes. Director Eric Daniel Metzgar talks about his experiences filming a man whose contagious passion led to an intriguing documentary about the struggle between self and natural preservation.*

Shannon Abel: What did you think the film was going to be about when you first started shooting and how did it change when you had finished? In other words, how did the story evolve?

Eric Daniel Metzgar: The film was guided by Richard's pursuits, from beginning to end. His effort was the driving force behind everything. Our ultimate goal was to document his ultimate goal.

However, his pursuits were transformed over time. When it became clear that the film would not conclude as we thought it would, we had to adjust our expectations. And as I let go of the mental images I'd been hoping to document, I discovered that we had a very unique story on our hands. Then I began to feel more fluid and creative, and the film veered off the path.

But I think that the "aboutness" of a film is never created by the filmmaker. Though I directed, shot and edited the film, I did not sew the meaning, or "aboutness," of the film into the scenes. Nor did I attach the meaning to the end of the film as an adornment. I think that the meaning, the "aboutness," really lies in the beholder's reactions to the scenes.

It's fascinating to me how strongly our individual memories inform our reactions to everything we experience. I think a person's understanding of the film is built upon his or her own past experiences with time, isolation, animals, death and love, among other things. So, a film has many meanings. In other words, I have no idea what the film is really about. It's up to you.

SA: What aspect of Richard's story interested you most? Was it the turtles, the idea of conservation or preservation or was it Richard, the man?

EM: Every aspect fascinated me. I was certainly drawn to Richard's strength and the intensity of his love. And he's an artist, so I was fascinated by the duality of his passions. On the surface, most artists are very self-absorbed, and most conservationists are deemed quite the opposite. So I was curious about the relationship between self-preservation and preservation.

And of course I was drawn to the turtles, but at first only intellectually. But as I got to know them, I realized I had underestimated them enormously. Two years later, I can hardly put into words the way I feel about those creatures. I can say that they haunt me. I think of them as time-qualified sages. They remind me that I have only a small idea of the world.

SA: The film is beautifully photographed. Were you inspired by the subject or did you know beforehand that you wanted to make a visually rich film?

EM: Thank you for the nice compliment. I hope that any film I make will be a beautifully photographed, visually rich film. After all, film is a visual medium, and the images are one of the main points of exchange, so they need to be engaging.

But the main reason that the film looks so wonderful is that the turtles were such incredible subjects. They are so steady and deliberate. They are their essence. They do not hide. Early on, I discovered the best way to photograph them was very close up and because most of them are relatively docile, I had time to arrange compositions that brought to life the turtles' beauty, presence and authority. At the same time, I felt like there was no way to film them without exalting them. They are that astonishing.

And, of course, Richard is a wild animal himself. He's a beautiful being. You don't film him, you observe him in the wild. I filmed him for over a hundred hours, and I never tired of watching him, learning from him, and trying to understand his efforts. Richard, like all great minds, is too vast to hold because in himself he holds so much. That's why a photograph of him reveals more than any verbal analysis.

SA: It would seem that you and Nell, at times, were the people most present in Richard's life during some very difficult moments. How did that affect the process?

EM: Indeed, there were many difficult moments for Richard, but I can't pretend to believe that Nell and I were truly inside those moments. Richard was living this saga in his remote solitude, and while we did our best to support him in every way we could, we had nothing at stake. We were his friends, allies and defenders, but he was truly alone in his struggle.

That said we often turned the camera off to help care for the turtles because that was the priority. Helping the turtles always trumped filming another person helping the turtles, because with endangered species each surviving animal is priceless, genetically-speaking. Though, of course, all animals are priceless, regardless of their "value."

So, to answer your question, there were really two processes. First was the experience of being there, of suffering and enjoying the journey with Richard. Second was the filmmaking. Each process had beautiful and brutal moments, and some overlapped, and some were frozen by a camera.

Truly, being with Richard and the turtles outweighed the making of the film. After all, stories are reflective, and reflection through visual storytelling is helpful, but reflection is always late and safe. For me, no amount of reflection can enhance the meditative experience of spending an hour watching a turtle bask in the sun. That may sound boring to someone, as it did to me two years ago, but that's how much the experience shifted me.

SA: What does Richard's story say to you about the chances of the world changing?

EM: Richard rarely spoke of change. He was too embedded in the grimy reality of conservation. From the moment I met him, he radiated a particular energy, primal, fresh and wise, and it thrilled me, and it still thrills me.

I've found it interesting that some people who have seen the film consider Richard and his venture "crazy" or "absurd." I realize of course that his venture was grand and uncommon, but Richard is not crazy. To me, "crazy" and "absurd" describe blind religious faith, nationalism, the American dream, our health care system, the hours people spend watching television, the idea of colonizing Mars, the commercialization of nature, sex and violence, and the priorities, addictions and desires of many "civilized" folks... to name a few things.

In short, Richard looks crazy to those who don't think the house is on fire. That's the simplest way I can say it. When enough people think the house is on fire, then maybe we'll shift our priorities and begin to discuss ways to extinguish the blaze. I don't know the chances of that happening, but knowing Richard has given me a lot of hope.

The Chances of the World Changing screens tomorrow, Saturday, at 1:00 PM at the Isabel Bader Theatre.