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Ideas abound at Sundance's New Frontier exhibition

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Shari Frilot, curator of Sundance's New Frontier exhibition, is a 1983 graduate of Montbello High School in Denver. (Eric Tsou, Live@sundance)



Mark Boulos' installation "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air" played on a 15-minute loop at New Frontier. The title comes from a Karl Marx quote. (Sundance Film Festival)

Sunday, the Sundance Film Festival ended, having announced a slew of awards the night before. And the more than 40,000 festgoers who slam Park City, Utah, with an annual blizzard of moviemaking ambition and stargazing hope, breakthrough aspiration and shoestring-budget tenacity retreated, most likely to the coasts.

What's left in the wake is a moment to consider one of Sundance's more indelible programs. The New Frontier section is a forward-gazing, intellectually rousing and surprisingly touching exhibition of installations, screenings and performances.

Curated by senior programmer Shari Frilot, New Frontier trucks in images and sounds and so many ideas — about film, new media, storytelling, art and gaming —



Mark Boulos' installation "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air" played on a 15-minute loop at New Frontier. The title comes from a Karl Marx quote. (|)
it can short the synapses.

These overlapping tendencies shouldn't come as a surprise, really. They reflect the nation's premier film festival's desire to keep atop the currents. They may even say something about impresario Frilot's journey from biomedical engineering geek to programming maven.

But New Frontier also articulates a broader art-media-movie landscape in roiling flux

Now in its fifth year, New Frontier is beginning to prove the fest's prophetic mettle. And Frilot — along with festival director John Cooper — has been a force in nuturing a decidedly 21st-century program.

"When YouTube came around in 2005, we had to start to think very seriously about growing something at the festival that addressed how this new media technology is going to affect what we do here at the festival. How's it going to lead us into what we do next?" recalled Frilot.

"That's when we started to get serious. At the same time, we started to understand we had to take a deeper look at what's going on in the art world. Artists were engaging with making movies and engaging the cinematic. What's going on there?"

Frilot came to film late by some cinephile standards. She graduated in 1983 from Denver's Montbello High School. "Go Warriors!" she barked playfully, sitting in one of the New Frontier spaces. (There were three: the Red, Blue and Green buildings.)

She left Colorado for Harvard University, thanks to an engineering scholarship.

But, said Frilot, "In the '80s physics and science were becoming more elemental; they were more interested in the building blocks. I was more interested in what systems looked like. So I left that department."

She finished with a degree in government. "But I'm still an amateur scientist at heart," she added.

During her college years, she began making collage sculptures, then making films to go into those pieces. Then she made a film. "The Cosmic Demonstration of Sexuality" played in a number of festivals. But it was too often wedged into a black-gay niche.

Like a number of filmmakers who begin to program festivals, she saw an opportunity to reconfigure how festivals were done. She was festival director for New York City's MIX festival and co-programmer of Outfest. She has been with Sundance for 11 years.

Standing outside the converted Miner's Hospital on a brisk Park City morning, Frilot was describing the multistoried "Red Building," which housed most of New Frontier's installations.

"It's a fun house, a haunted house," she said, wearing silver sneakers, pigtails peeking out beneath her hat,

It was also a haunting house, rife with images and sounds that continue to reverberate. Among them: the beguiling 3-D motion-capture collaboration between dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones and the art collective OpenEnded Group called "After Ghostcatching."

"The Johnny Cash Project" was a gorgeous music-video tribute to the Man in Black. As of Sept. 30, 2010, 250,000 people had contributed a drawn frame to the flickering, elegiac, black-and-white animated work. Aptly, the song is Cash's "Ain't No Grave."

Aaron Koblin and Chris Milk, the artists responsible for the mournful gem, also contributed another entrancing piece, "The Wilderness Downtown." Using Arcade Fire's lilting song "We Used to Wait," the interactive, multiscreen music video offered viewers the chance to type a

childhood address and have, courtesy of Google Maps, images of the street woven into the video. It was shatteringly nostalgic.

Owning the Blue Building was Mark Boulos' installation "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air." It was simply constructed yet arguably the strongest piece in muscular company.

"All That Is Solid" played on a 15-minute loop. The title comes from a Karl Marx quote.

Two videos ran on opposing walls. One showed images of traders on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The other plunged viewers into life along a river of the Niger delta, an oil-rich, impoverished region where young African men fight the oil companies.

At one point the frenzy on the trading floor and the fevered rebel ritual of seeking spiritual guidance crescendoed, producing what could be called a din of inequity.

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