

McElwee explores experimental video

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Vintage footage of New York, the famous temple Wat Rong Kuhn, Tokyo at night and swirling dots took the screen at the Winifred Moore Auditorium the night of April 18. This Webster University Film Series show, "Van McElwee and Friends," provided experimental video with live, improvised music.

McElwee, a professor in the electronic and photographic media department, was commissioned by the New Music Circle, a not for profit organization that presents improvisational and experimental music in St. Louis, to plan three events involving experimental music. The first event was held last year at the Art Museum.

The show at WU consisted of six experimental videos: two by McElwee, called "Alternity" and "Liquid Crystal," two by Austrian filmmaker and Holger Lang, called "Linear Landscapes" and "XYRAWSE" and two by filmmaker RD Zurick, called "White Wat" and "Angkor Zoom."

Improvised music accompanied three of the videos. Semi-Acoustic Noise Ensemble (SANE) provided music for "Linear Landscapes" and "XYRAWSE," while percussionist Rich O'Donnell, singer Emily Hemeyer and yang quin player Debora Summers provided music for "White Wat." It's nice to combine music with other media, Summers said.

"There comes a moment where you're totally inside the music of the film," Summers said. "It's about taking what's inside and meshing it with something else. Sometimes great things can come from that."

Filmmaker Zlatko Cosic improvised the video for "Visual Music Improv" while music was improvised to flow with it, creating a combination of video and music that would never be experienced again.

"I was happy with the way the visuals and the music gelled," McElwee said. "It was a surprise to everyone because Zlatko was doing a live video mix, and there was a lot of improvisation that really came together in a good way."

The musicians viewed the videos before the show and had only a vague idea of what they would play.

Lang said what he likes about working with experimental video is the vast amount of creative expression a person has.

"This kind of work provides the possibility for a lot of freedom in what you do because you don't have to relate to any market or anybody giving you a lot of money," Lang said. "You can really dive into your own ideas and express yourself the way you think you should do it. That's a freedom you don't have in many other fields."

Lang's video, "Linear Landscapes," was a black background with small, constantly moving white spots. The spots seemed to form different landscapes as they played tricks on the eyes. The footage was shot in the Austrian mountains and is supposed to represent the idea that art is the borderline between the sky and the earth, Lang said.

Not all of the filmmakers said their videos have a specific meaning like Lang's.

"They don't have a meaning," McElwee said, speaking of his videos. "They have meanings. A dream can have a lot of different meanings at the same time. Life is a mystery, so why should art be anything less."

Experimental video with improvised music stands out because it's so different, said attendee Amber Lutz, 33.

"I think that you just learn how they can take a simple image and distort it and play with it so much," she said. "It's amazing that you can't even recognize it anymore."

Many of the videos were normal places or objects, yet they were presented in a way that looked completely different.

Footage of New York appeared as a color-morphing turntable. Footage of a temple became a collage of symbolic images.

Shots of Tokyo presented the world through the eyes of a fly - shattered and distorted.

Some of the filmmakers have ties to WU. Cosic is a recent alumnus; the audio engineer, Joseph Pottoff, is a WU audio major; Zurick is a retired instructor; and Lang is a professor at WU's Vienna campus. McElwee said he believes it's good for students to see and experience experimental media to see things done in a different way and to see what their instructors are up to.

Lang said he seizes every opportunity he can to present and view experimental video.

"The chances to do that are very rare," Lang said. "And it's such a niche within art that I think it's hard to find an interested audience."

Van will present his third show for the New Music Circle sometime in 2010.