



The International Experimental
Cinema Exposition

The Films of Janie Geiser

Faded paper dolls, chipped figurines and cartoon rain: the images and objects in Janie Geiser's films are immediately recognizable, culled from our earliest imaginings. As children, we might have held these objects and given them voice or movement. We might have slipped them furtively into our pockets, or lost them, one tiny piece at a time. And those of us drawn to Saturday morning television programs might have gazed too close at the screen, resting on our elbows.

Somewhere in the intersection of memory and imagination, Geiser crafts her films. In her worlds, the worn surfaces of beloved and forgotten objects suggest landscapes of psychic resonances. Geiser's first film, *The Red Book*, was based in part on a story about a man who was wounded in war and became afflicted with amnesia. To be without memory is to be without time, wandering ceaselessly between here and there, then and now. We are reminded of *Lost Motion's* hero, a cast metal doll bearing an unchanging Sisyphean smile, or the interlaced somnambulist of *The Fourth Watch*; more phantoms than flesh, eternally lost and looking, Geiser's characters drift through storms and superimpositions, scientific illustrations and delicate wallpapers. They inhabit dense yet fragile spaces that rearrange the familiar into the uncanny. Geiser's films have rightly been described as haunted: in them we glimpse strange inhabitations and hinted narratives literally animated by the tokens of the past.

Janie Geiser is an internationally recognized filmmaker and theater artist whose work is known for its sense of mystery, its detailed evocation of self-contained worlds, and its strength of design. Her work in contemporary puppet theater has been recognized with an Obie and a Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, Creative Capital, the Henson Foundation, and others. Geiser began making films in 1990, both as an element of her performance work, and as a separate form. Her films have been shown at numerous venues in the US and abroad, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the New York Film Festival, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, and the Toronto Film Festival. She currently resides in Los Angeles.

The Secret Story

A film by Janie Geiser

Music composed and arranged by Dick Connette
Vocals by Sonya Cohen

16mm, color, 8:30 minutes
(1996)

Music produced and arranged by Dick Connette and Scott Lehrer, engineered by Scott Lehrer. Soundtrack by Janie Geiser and Dick Connette, engineered by Beo Morales.

The Secret Story arose as a response to several beautifully decayed toy figures from the 1930's that were given to me as a gift. These figures, and other toys, objects, and illustrations that I found from the period between the world wars, suggested a kind of unearthed hidden narrative which I have attempted to re-piece together, as if these figures were the hieroglyphics of a just-forgotten tongue. *The Secret Story* revolves around the central figure of the woman, and her girl-double, who look somewhat like a versions of Snow White. She wanders through landscapes of rivers and floods, home and war, and memory and illness, culminating in an ecstatic walk in the forest, suggesting both the dark and cathartic trajectories of the richest fairy tales. –Janie Geiser

In his review of the 1996 New York Film Festival in *Film Comment*, Paul Arthur writes:

“Geiser’s film ...creates a child’s vision of domestic immersion and foreboding out of crudely articulated antique dolls, toy blocks, and paper cutouts. Against a photographic backdrop of a floodbound house, figures of mother and daughter exchange symbiotic knowledge of household routines, tasks, or games ... Recurrent images of a doctor and a nun, along with shifting veils of color, evoke a condition merging physical illness with spiritual floating. The “secret is never spelled out, the degree of emotional affect generated by or around Geiser’s expressionless objects is compelling.”

The Secret Story was chosen by *Film Comment*’s Gavin Smith as one of the Best Short Films of 1996.

Lost Motion

A film by Janie Geiser

Music: Tom Recchion

16mm, color, 11 minutes
(1999)

Lost Motion uses small cast metal figures, toy trains, decayed skyscrapers, and other found objects to follow a man’s search for a mysterious woman. From an illegible note found on a dollhouse bed, through impossible landscapes, the man waits for her train which never arrives. His wanderings lead him to the other side of the tracks, a forgotten landscape of derelict erector- set buildings populated by lost souls. Dream merges with nightmare in this post-industrial land of vivid night.

Fred Camper writes in the *Chicago Reader* (May 25, 2000):

“*Lost Motion* is the sumptuously told tale of a failed search... In her most visually lush film to date, Geiser superimposes images and drapes her scenes in moving shadow patterns. She depicts the train’s arrival by superimposing images of dolls exiting model trains over the searching man’s figure... Ultimately the film’s fragmentary constructions become more than modernist denials of illusion and assertions of materiality: essential to the film’s tone, Geiser’s obviously illusory images evoke strong feelings as the mundane drama of a failed meeting becomes intertwined with an essay on the way our lushest dreams fail by virtue of their very extravagance.”

Ultima Thule

A film by Janie Geiser

(direction, design, camera, editing by Janie Geiser)
Sound design by Leon Rothenberg

16mm, color, 10:16 minutes
(2002)

In her recent films, Geiser has been exploring the possibilities found in merging video texture with film, creating a kind of deep, ambiguous space, a suggestion of “the floating world.” In *Ultima Thule*, gravity fails, land and sky lose their historical meaning. A small silver plane navigates an ultramarine storm, flying over barely-glimpsed hills, an unlikely ferry to “Ultima Thule”: the farthest point north, the limit of any journey. The seduction of immersion in blue is too strong to avoid, the land fills with water, and time loses its line.

Terrace 49

A film by Janie Geiser

Sound: Leon Rothenberg

color, optical sound, 5:37 minutes
(2004)

Images of impending disaster – slamming doors, a truck careening down a hill, and a frayed, almost snapping, elevator rope – collide with the repeated image of a woman’s body, cycling toward ephemerality as the woman disappears into the texture of the film itself.

In my recent films, I have been exploring the possibilities found in merging video texture with film, creating a lush, disorienting, ambiguous film space, and an atmosphere of

temporal suspension. In *Terrace 49*, the space is shattered further, broken into shards; as fractured as memory and as fragile as glass. –Janie Geiser

The Fourth Watch

A film by Janie Geiser

(Direction, design, camera, editing by Janie Geiser)

Music: Tom Recchion

16mm, color, 11 minutes
(2000)

The ancient Greeks divided the night into four sections; the last section before morning was called the fourth watch. In these hours before dawn, an endless succession of rooms is inhabited by silent film figures occupying flickering space in a mid-century house made of printed tin. Their presence is at once inevitable and uncanny. A boy turns his head in dread, a woman's eyes look askance, a sleepwalker reaches into a cabinet which dissolves with her touch, and hands write letters behind disappearing windows. The rooms reveal themselves and fill with impossible, shadowed light. It is not clear who is watching and who is trespassing in this nocturnal drama of lost souls.

Mark McElhatten, co-curator of the 2000 New York Film Festival's Views From the Avant-Garde, where *The Fourth Watch* premiered, writes:

“A small masterpiece of the uncanny brought about through beautifully controlled use of superimposition and scale and a cross breeding of “incompatible” species of texture and (cathode – solar) light. Glacial blue poltergeist – somnabulists, melodramatic stars and damaged children from silent films – emerge at night into a tin dollhouse opening up invisible envelopes of space, comingling with hypnotic chiaroscuro cast by trembling sunlight.”

Kristin M. Jones, in her review “NYFF: Views from the Avant-Garde” in the November-December 2000 issue of *Film Comment*, writes:

“Of the three Janie Geiser works screened, perhaps most haunting was *The Fourth Watch*, in which images of people in black-and-white movies rephotographed from a video monitor are superimposed on shots of a dollhouse interior. Bluish, spectral figures float by as sunlight mingles with flickering shadows on brightly colored tin. A beautiful somnambulist vanishing into TV bar rolls suggests a poetic metaphor for the current state of avant-garde cinema, when the medium's past, future, and even its own death are being transformed into material for provocative new films.”

