## Film/Video | program notes

Visiting Filmmakers

*Strangely Ordinary This Devotion (SOTD)*

(Dani Leventhal and Sheilah Wilson, 2017)

Tue, Sept 19, 2017 | 7pm

Columbus, Ohio-based artists Dani Leventhal and Sheilah Wilson have embarked on an artistic relationship that is formally and emotionally adjacent to their domestic lives, a quotidian zone they share with their young daughter Rose. Both artists have established careers on their own. Neither Leventhal’s video work (written about with customary perspicacity by [the Wex’s own!] Chris Stults in *Cinema Scope* 47) and Wilson’s multimedia performance and installation work (discussed in some detail in an interview with Leeza Meksin: temporaryartreview.com/the-invisible-inside-the-visible-a-conversation-with-sheilah-wilson) could exactly prepare us for the force of the women’s collaborative efforts.

Although their joint body of work includes a performance based on the reading of love letters, *Shameless Light* (2016), and a new video installation, *A Hand in Two Ways (Fisted)* (2017), created for the Columbus Museum of Art, the major artwork to thus far emerge from the duo is their medium-length video *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (or *SOTD*). Featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial and now making its international debut at TIFF’s Wavelengths, one can recognize in *SOTD* certain familiar aspects of Leventhal’s previous work, in particular her assertive editing matrices driven by colour, gesture, and shape.

But there is a new lightness in *SOTD* that speaks to Wilson’s obvious contribution—a playful, performative engagement with materials (rock, water, ocean kelp), along with the introduction of parenting, not only as a represented activity, but also as a guiding epistemology within the film. Overall, *SOTD* is a domestic mini-epic capacious enough to include witches in the heartland, the painterly use of blood or blood substitutes, Chantal Akerman and Prince, the oral application of smooth stones, gardens and mesas, the draining of a sebaceous cyst, and the enthusiastic eating of pussy. It is very possibly the film of the year.

**Cinema Scope:** How did your creative collaborations begin?

**Dani Leventhal:** Well, we both have 18 answers. What’s yours today?

**Sheilah Wilson:** The first thing I remember was Dani helping me make this silk-screen print of a text I wrote.

**Leventhal:** It was a hundred pieces of newsprint, so we were working with white ink on newsprint, or yellow, and the image was the phrase, “strangely ordinary this devotion.” The idea was to make a hundred pieces of printed paper for daily writing and drawing for Sheilah.

**Wilson:** That phrase became for both of us a curiosity about how to engage with the daily…

**Leventhal:** Well, yeah, when you start printing and you get into the repetition, you consider the words themselves and the language more. The way I understood Sheilah’s use of the word “devotion” was in terms of the relationship between her and Rose. Rose is entwined in Sheilah’s practice. Rose gets involved at the drop of a hat.

I’ve seen it. All of a sudden, Rose is dressed in a cape, Sheilah whips out the camera, and things snowball from there. Then I watch them all through the days and I see relentless devotion from Sheilah to Rose. I see this and in my POV there is nothing ordinary about it. I am much more familiar with neglect or abandonment from parents.

Devoted is my current curiosity. What is that? How can someone be and do that? Sheilah’s use of the word “ordinary” doesn’t ring true for me, and so I wanted to climb into her project, and we started drawing on some of the pages together.

**Wilson:** I get so offended when Dani says that! I feel like she doesn’t understand that my relationship to motherhood is deeply ambivalent. It isn’t some kind of selfless sacrifice to Rose, or to motherhood per se. We still have this conflict, and I think it’s a productive one, but at the time of that print I was wondering what it is to be devoted to a practice at the same time that you’re devoted to a child, while you’re also devoted to being a lover. So it was like considering the splitting of devotion, where we usually think of devotion in a singular fashion.

**Scope:** You seem to be coming at that idea of the “strangely ordinary” from different directions, and I’m curious about how you came to negotiate those similarities in spite of apparent difference?

**Leventhal**: We both take note of our immediate surroundings and find it qualifies for art production. That’s pretty special, that we’re on the same page that way.

Wilson: I think that sensitivity, to dealing with just what’s happening, is heightened by being with someone who is also deeply sensitive to it. Because it’s kind of one of those things that you grow up and you’re deeply sensitive to what’s happening around you, but you often have to muffle that in order to live. And so there’s something really productive, and maybe exhausting, about being with someone who is responding just as intensely to that here-and-now interface with life.

Our actual collaboration began when we made a video to show students in Dani’s course at OSU how you could make a narrative from the quotidian.

**Leventhal:** That’s where we got the first shot of *SOTD*.

**Wilson:** And we kind of came up with this story—a rock, her mouth, a child surviving without water—this implication of a narrative. And we both really responded to that potential, that somehow these things could be woven together. Here’s daily life, here’s this fantastical narrative, and you can spring from one to the other. One minute we’re brainstorming, “Why were these lesbian witches in Ohio?” The next minute we’re filming Rose on the toilet.

**Leventhal:** But just to back up, that course was called From Fact to Fiction: A Course in Walking. That’s tied to a critical interest for me in traditional narrative. The first part of the assignment was to spend two days circling your immediate environment on foot and seeing it. And then the second part was to push what you saw into a fiction. So here we are in the backyard with the hammock and the rocks, and we made the video as an example.

**Scope:** While listening, something occurred to me relating to this issue of narrative. It sounds as if the two of you are attentive to moments in time: you capture them, and then use them as raw material to build into a collaborative work that will entail narrative. But it doesn’t sound as if you’re working towards the narrative from the beginning. It emerges through the process. Is that correct?

**Leventhal:** It’s *becoming*. It keeps becoming.

**Wilson:** In terms of how the narrative gets structured, I think the visual prompts and grows the narrative. For instance, when we were at Headlands, we found this amazing bull kelp seaweed down at the beach. And it was such an amazing object that we immediately wanted to use it. I thought of bringing it into the red gym floor that was also something we had crushed out on at Headlands. And somehow the visual desire to combine these elements birthed the shot of women rolling this material

on the floor, on their knees. Yet the shot also becomes one of the elements of ritual, female-centered and visceral, that continue throughout the piece.

**Scope:** The narrative is certainly oblique. Because the shots are a series of striking moments that have their own individual integrity. These individual shots have a kind of intense presentness, but they actually do build into something like a story. So the components are doing double duty.

**Leventhal:** That’s exactly how it goes.

**Scope:** But it’s constructed out of fragments of semi-daily occurrences. It seems there’s a parallel to the way that a young child is liable to experience many things.

**Wilson:** That commitment to presentness is influenced by Rose’s commitment to the fantasy world. But we are also at least partly embedded or enmeshed in the conventional narrative, and celebrate and inhabit/overinhabit its tropes as well. For instance, I don’t know if the fight scene would have ever been something that we would have included if it weren’t such a known archetype. Desire to inhabit the hyper known in our own bodies also prompted some of the scenes.

**Leventhal:** It’s like something out of a Hollywood film.

**Wilson:** I feel like there are multiple levels of being present. And they all get mashed together. I think there’s the gathering part of it, which is spontaneous, and then there’s the part where you pull back and put things together and decide you like this yellow, and you want it to go next to *this* yellow. It is presentness, but it’s more like *sequencing* the presentness for the hyper-present.

**Scope:** Since you’re talking about how you form narratives out of these moments, I wonder how intensely the two of you invest in the specific narratives you fashion from the fragments. *SOTD* talks about the water babies who are being formed by the lesbians of Ohio. I’m wondering about this trope of magic. How metaphorical is that? What is magic?

**Leventhal:** I’m excited about this question. No one’s ever asked us this before. First, I feel devastated by our current regime, and the environmental disasters we’re in the midst of and are continuing to ignore. We went to the Women’s March on Washington, and I felt depressed. It didn’t do anything for me in terms of feeling like we have a chance - that we’re gonna rise up. I just feel devastated. So the idea of magic as the only solution…So for me it comes from a negative place regarding what is. And I’m asking for magic to get out of problems. Because the reality is, to make changes I should really become a lawyer or a politician, but I don’t want to do that work. I’m furious, like I said, devastated. And I want magic to fix it.

Also, David Levi Strauss, who was one of my teachers at Bard, writes gorgeous essays about art and photography and politics. And he believes in magic, for real. And he’s willing to bring that word into contemporary art discourse. And I respect him for it. And we tied the idea of the water babies to the magic of creating the fetus with powers to survive without water. We claim it’s an ancient practice. It’s not Sheilah’s and my invention. We learned from our foremothers.

**Wilson:** It’s unfortunate how that word “magic” has been turned into a cliché. But then, maybe that’s okay. Maybe it’s a cliché that’s worth reinhabiting. I think of all the negative connotations that word has in the contemporary art world, the way certain words and certain things are fashionable and other things aren’t…

**Leventhal:** Love. God.

**Wilson:** Magic. Children.

**Leventhal:** Motherhood.

**Wilson:** There’s a long list! So it’s like, fuck, man. Let’s just forget about what’s cool and just use this thing because it’s one of the only ways that we know out of here. A way out of what this reality is.

**Leventhal:** That’s something that Rose does on a daily basis. She’s outta here.

**Wilson:** We’ll walk in the room and who knows where Rose’s mind is. And she doesn’t want us to be around. She wants privacy to be in her magic place. She doesn’t even want us to listen to what she’s doing in her magical world. We’re putting forward the domestic, motherhood, magic…

**Leventhal:** Lesbian sex!

**Wilson:** Pretty much. So the way I look at it, once you’re okay with inhabiting all those things, there’s the potential for rupture. Magic is the path of rupture.

- MICHAEL SICINSKI, *Cinema Scope* 72, Fall 2017 (excerpt)

Read the whole interview at: http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-online/strangely-ordinary-this-devotion-dani-leventhal-sheilah-wilson-usa-wavelengths/