R. BRUCE ELDER SHINES THE LIGHT

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The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto is a non-profit charitable organization that provides Toronto's vibrant independent filmmaking community with affordable access to production equipment and post-production facilities, educational services, film screenings and much more. For over two decades, LIFT has played an integral part in advancing and promoting the art of independent filmmaking in Toronto.

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EYE WEEKLY
THE SACRED LIGHT:
IN CONVERSATION WITH R. BRUCE ELDER

By Anya Wassenberg
“Years ago, I used to tell people, only half facetiously, that I was a filmmaker because I wasn’t a creative artist.” So begins R. Bruce Elder, avant-garde filmmaker, writer and long time professor at Ryerson University. Currently, he is program director of the Ryerson/York Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture. His films have been shown at galleries such as AGO, MoMA, the Centre Georges Pompidou and in various cities including around the world. In 1981, he was awarded a Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Independent/Experimental Film and Video. Most recently Elder has been working on The Young Prince, a film that examines notions of transformation along alchemical themes.

“I’ve been working with tools that leave lots of scope for chance operations in my films,” he explains. “They contain two kinds of ‘chance events’. I’ve been writing programs that assign processing to the images randomly. In addition, I’ve been hand processing and treating the film a little roughly, so the fluctuations in chemistry are very evident. It’s a dialogue between old technology and new technology.”
The grounding of his work in philosophies, along with reference to other art forms, is a central proposition in much of Elder's work. The Young Prince is simply the culmination of a decade's long thought.

"I didn't have any designs on nature myself. I collect things. In the earlier years of my career, I was able to work largely without ideas. That's a rather blissful state: A state of no mind to not allow ideas or conceptions to get in the way, to have no filter between me and the world.

"I used to take my camera everywhere and collect the gifts that were waiting for me. But that came to an end. In the early 90s, it became apparent I could no longer do that. I had reams and reams of film. The way I'd been working became completely unaffordable. I thought about quitting film, making videos, but film really does evoke in me the feelings of being in a church. I associate the light of film with a kind of sacred light — similar to that of gothic cathedrals, and even when videos are projected, I don't feel that same kind of sacred resonance.
"It occurred to me that this interest in light as being something sacred could be connected with another longstanding interest in numbers and certain harmonies. Musical patterns can be represented in mathematical terms. Pythagorean ideas interested me as well: harmony + light + number. Since I was quite young, I wondered whether light could be represented that way.

"I began using algorithms, composed music, but I had a nagging sense of dissatisfaction. I wasn't any longer simply collecting these gifts I'd encountered on my path, I was more and more a traditional artist. But, then I began to find [American experimental music composer, writer and visual artist] John Cage's ideas interesting. His work had the advantage of suggesting how one could allow work to come forth, but not impose on it. If you begin to use repetitive chance operations, if you let your work be decided by them, it turns the work over to a natural process."
The Young Prince is fifth in a new cycle of films beginning with A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy (1997) and he's been aided in the labour intensive process by a team of assistants, with some help from the engineering department at Ryerson. The new cycle is called The Book of Praise, after the Presbyterian hymnal.

"I did talk myself into believing that film is a way of imparting energy. I became convinced that strong pieces have the effect of bringing the energies in you into some kind of harmony. I'm convinced that's how Baroque composers understood their polyphonies. The chemical and electrical processing I've been doing has been a way of reflecting on this kind of construct."
"One way in which we’re aware of this transmission of energies is in the erotic. We hope for that transmission of energies." The body, and nude human forms, including the frankly erotic, are often the base subject of Elder’s work. He sees his reverent view of that aspect of humanity as standing in opposition to much of current thought. “I’m absolutely appalled at the way the body is represented. What’s troubling is this idea that our flesh bodies aren’t somehow adequate.” Elder includes his holistic view of sexuality and the body in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in particular, with respect to Hebrew thought. “The natural world was brought about from divine energy, and manifests divine energy. Because of its association with soul, the body is something we should accept, and not consider the body as something available for endless transformation. The natural world possesses an order we must respect, and not impose.”
The artist as not imposing, the filmmaker as not creating. "It's allowing nature to bring forth works of art. We only create the conditions."