

THE ARTIST AS PECKERNECK

The life, work and times of Walt Curtis, Portland's poet provocateur, are brought to the screen

by Christopher D. Cuttone

Of all the words that have been used to describe Walt Curtis, perhaps the most apt is...prolific. During a career spanning several decades, the 56-year-old author has been published in various venues, from community newspapers to poetry anthologies, from chapbooks to *Mala Noche and Other "Illegal" Adventures*, a recently released collection all his own.

The publication of that book, which includes

Cinema

the novella that inspired Gus Van Sant's directorial debut, also titled *Mala Noche*, has made Curtis something of a media darling. He has been profiled in recent weeks in *Our Town*, *Willamette Week* and the *Oregonian*, and the *Portlandia Review of Books* christened him "Oregon's unofficial poet laureate."

All through the month of July, Mark Woolley Gallery in downtown Portland showed Curtis' paintings and hosted an ancillary reading from the book on July 27.

Curtis is currently secretary of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, and is in his 27th year on the air for KBOO-FM radio.

As if all that weren't enough, he is the subject of the film *Walt Curtis: Peckerneck Poet* by Bill Plympton, which will premiere Aug. 8 at the Northwest Film Center in Portland.

Despite growing up in the same smallish town of Oregon City and having attended the same high school (four years apart), Curtis and Plympton did not meet until 1973, when Curtis' reading at the Portland Poetry Festival inspired the cinematic eye of Plympton, a filmmaker and animator then working out of New York.

Years later, in the summer of '95, Plympton returned to Portland with a

camera crew to record a film that in many ways defies description—even the makers aren't sure what to call it: It's part live performance—some apparently spontaneous and others more theatrical—with slice-of-life scenes that follow Curtis around town in his beat-up Plymouth Skylark to familiar places and some undisclosed locations. (Curtis has said Plympton "is full of BS" for calling the film a documentary.)

Both artists have a penchant for surreal humor and ignoring the limits of good taste, and the sexual tension—and occasional nudity—is all part of the game. Curtis admits (after some dodging) that underneath the spoof and satire his poetry is in part designed to push people's buttons, although not without good reason.

Poetry is a world of fantasy where, Curtis says, he is still reacting to the pre-gay-liberation and religious repressions he experienced in growing up. Much of his work, be it poetry, prose or painting, rails against societal constraints and makes a case for environmentalism and feminism. Curtis' aggressive performance style, reminiscent of the bombast of granddaddy to the queer poets Walt Whitman, is fueled by a desire to break free from patriarchy and other destructive forces, and to send a wake-up call. So it's not altogether surprising that Curtis' delivery has been known to raise eyebrows (and revive some long-suppressed facial tics)—even in the sexual

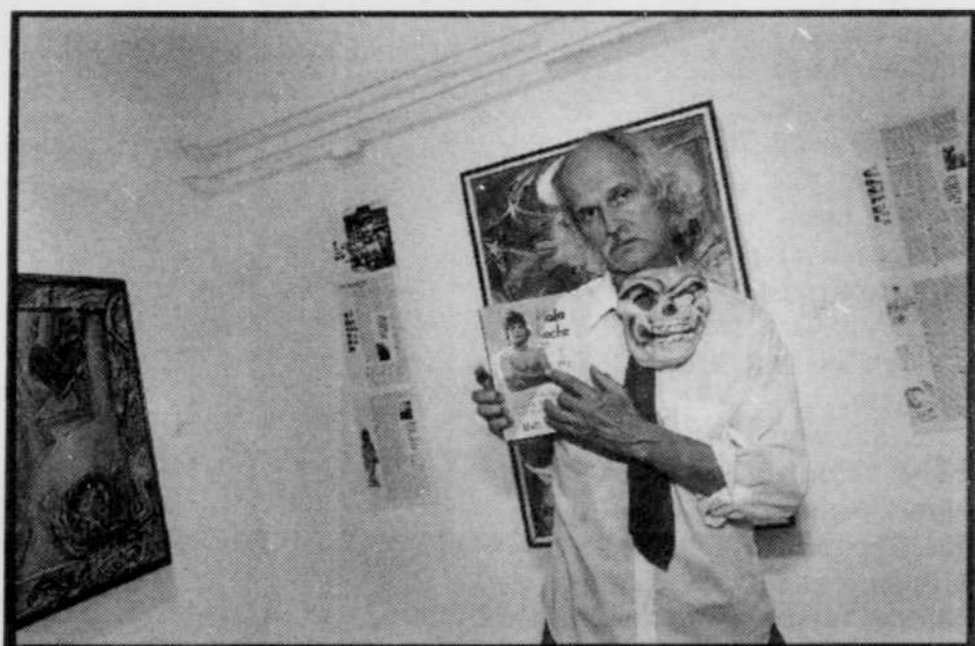
minority community, where his subject matter is less shocking.

The controversial nature of Curtis' work is embodied in the segment of *Peckerneck Poet* that juxtaposes "Cash Paid for Levi 501 Jeans," an erotic and/or raunchy (in the eye of the beholder) poem about skin-tight button-flies, with images of cowboys at the Clackamas County Fair rodeo. Although the poem's male narrator mentions his girlfriend, there is a current of homoeroticism and sexual ambiguity supplied by Curtis' reading. The film also captures a tense interaction between Curtis and the police and rodeo organizers that provides a true-to-life response to one man's subversive fantasy.

Another segment, paired with the poem "Skinny-dipping," shows Curtis and a younger friend swimming sans trunks at Willamette Falls. Both visually and aurally, the scene hints at the sort of unrequited and unauthorized love so well expressed by Curtis in *Mala Noche*.

The fun in the buff continues with "Rotorooter Man": In the film's closing scenes, Curtis' poem is chanted call-and-response style with a group of his friends. But the words begin to fade, becoming at last pure rhythm without meaning, subsumed into the images of naked bodies writhing in the mud. While there's some obvious excitement on the part of at least one reveler, the overall feeling is one of tranquility—a place of rest and comfort after a long and jolting journey.

The film does an excellent job of capturing



Walt Curtis

Curtis' spirit, a credit both to the powerful imagery of his poetry and the talent and vision of Bill Plympton. While Curtis insists that he had no control over the film (later admitting to having had only a tiny bit of control), he says he is generally pleased with the product. Despite his satisfaction with individual segments, however, Curtis is anxious about how they all work together—something he worries about, while he concedes to Plympton's experience as a filmmaker.

Following its Portland showing, the next stop for *Walt Curtis: Peckerneck Poet* is the film festival circuit, where Plympton is hoping it will pick up some theatrical play dates before going to cable television and video. As for the poet himself, he is living in Oregon City and enjoying some well-deserved attention for his body of work.

Both Curtis and Plympton will appear at the premiere of Walt Curtis: Peckerneck Poet at 8 pm Friday, Aug. 8, at the Berg Swann Auditorium, 1219 SW Park Ave. Admission is \$6 general, \$5 for members.

Mala Noche and Other "Illegal" Adventures by Walt Curtis. BridgeCity Books, 1997; \$14.95 paper. Curtis will read from his book at 7:30 pm Wednesday, Aug. 27, at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W Burnside St.

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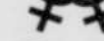
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