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FILM

Still life within four walls

Cinema collective presents the work
of late gay filmmaker Warren Sonbert

BY GARY MORRIS



Above: *Friendly Witness* examined the miraculous poetry of everyday life a decade before *American Beauty*.
Below: Warren Sonbert in the 1960s.

As a fellow critic for some of San Francisco's queer weeklies, I had the good fortune to know Warren Sonbert slightly in the last few years of his life, before AIDS claimed him in 1995 at age 47.

I was always delighted to meet him at screenings, eager to hear him sling the dish as only he could. His daggerlike digs, delivered sotto voce, were thrilling to hear, and he had no compunction about storming out of screenings early, practically tripping over the puzzled publicist.

I often wondered if those who saw him knew anything more than his exit suggested—another irritated, impatient, overcaffeinated critic.

Sonbert was, in fact, well known in the world of avant-garde cinema as both theoretician and filmmaker. A master of the form whose name—the impressionistic “diary film”—he detested, he made 18 short films between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s that are rightly ranked with the best of their time and genre. An ongoing restoration project by the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS has brought these movies back into circulation, helped by retrospectives at the Guggenheim Museum and San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art.

Sonbert's early works—like 1966's *Amphetamine*, made at age 19 in collaboration with Wendy Appel—were influenced by the grungy drug and sex subculture in New York at the time. It runs a mere 10 minutes but captures in its grainy black and white the lure of a queer druggy demimonde in its images of handsome boys shooting up and making out. Portending his later work, Sonbert pointedly added a pop music score—in this case, early Supremes songs—as ironic commentary on the seedy happenings.

As his style evolved, his films became ever more intense chronicles of the vivid but always ephemeral, fleeting pleasures of the world. For a curmudgeon, he produced splendidly generous work, filled with color and drama and a sheer appreciation of life's beauty.

1989's *Friendly Witness* represents the apex of this style: a series of brief, heavenly images of celebration, ritual and the poetry of everyday



life. It was filmed in San Francisco and various far-away places, especially the Middle East, where Sonbert often traveled.

Structured around a series of classic R & B songs followed by a Glück symphonic piece, *Witness* lovingly surveys couples embracing, gay

men at play, fireworks, rodeos and other timeless tableaux. The sheer joy of being alive and the need to fix that joy on film—making it at least temporarily real—is a recurring motif.

1995's *Whiplash* transforms Sonbert's travels into heady surveys of sheer experience. With brief, gorgeous, often whimsical images of everything from a dog on a high wire to a handsome Bedouin man cleaning a carpet in the desert, it typifies the filmmaker's ability to evoke a world of dazzling beauty as he himself drifted far from it into illness and death.

None of Sonbert's films are available on video and may never have been shown in Portland before. Four Wall Cinema is taking care of that, though, with *A Still Life of Postcards: Films by Warren Sonbert* March 11 and 12. It's a rare chance to see the aforementioned films and several others.

The film collective, hidden in the industrial district of Southeast Third Avenue, is an ideal venue for this material, because in some sense it shares Sonbert's vision of reminding people to look hard at what's around them and find new forms to appreciate—or new ways of appreciating the familiar.

According to Alain LeTourneau and Pam Minty, Four Wall grew out of a small basement-type venue, the Cinema Next Door, which they ran together. “The collective formed partly in response to the war in Afghanistan,” LeTourneau explains. Its first program was ambitious by any standard: *The Journey*, Peter Watkins' rarely screened 14 1/2-hour documentary about the growth of the U.S. military-industrial complex.

A Still Life of Postcards typifies the kind of important cinema that has been increasingly marginalized but offers singular pleasures. “Exhibiting these films can elicit such an