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2017 Salt Spring Film Festival – Konline: Our Land Beautiful

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The following article was written by Connie Kuhns as part of a series of articles about filmmakers coming to the Salt Spring Film Festival on March 3-5, 2017. Filmmaker Nettie Wild will be attending the festival and leading a discussion about the film following the screening. The Filmmaker series is sponsored by Stonehouse Bed and Breakfast.

Filmmaker interview: Director Nettie Wild. Konline: our land beautiful

By Connie Kuhns

One night at a screening in Powell River, B.C. a man left the theatre “steaming mad” at what he had just seen in Nettie Wild’s latest film *Konline: our land beautiful*. “Assumptions just keep piling up depending on who is watching and what they bring into the theatre”, Wild tells me in an email. For a woman who has taken her camera behind the scenes of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, and filmed the radicalization of drug users on Vancouver streets as they fight to open a safe injection site, her exquisite tribute to the magnificent landscape of northwestern British Columbia and the people who live there may be her most contentious.

“The land was always, for me, the central character, which is what makes *Konline: our land beautiful* different than my other films. *Blockade*, for instance, (a 1993 film about the land claims conflict between the Gitksan and the descendants of the white settlers) takes place 700 miles to the south and pretty much deals with the same issue, but formally in a very different way. *Blockade* followed the central character (Gitksan member) Art Loring, and while I was striving for different points of view, I was eliciting from the characters their political point of view.

“In *Konline* I am striving to bring the viewer into a cinematic experience with the land through the eyes of different characters. Not so much talk. It is a search on my part to see if I can find the physical poetry in every character, and to see if I could be surprised if I parked my assumptions about them, by that poetry. I was surprised. Many times over”.

Konline: our land beautiful is filmed in a small corner of Canada most of us will never see. It is the traditional territory of the Tahltan First Nation and the location of the Red Chris Mine. It is the home of hunters, outfitters, line-men, and miners; women, men (and children) who thrive in this beautiful harshness with physical and spiritual strength. Their attachment to the land is deep; they know change is coming.

Wild goes into the homes of language scholar Oscar Dennis (Hotseta Na-Dene), his parents Mary and James, and other Tahltan families. She films their gambling games, house concerts and the inside of their smoke sheds. She accompanies them fishing and on a moose hunt.

With spectacular aerial shots, Wild travels with Heidi Gutfrucht, a local outfitter, on a harrowing thousand mile trek north as she takes over a dozen horses and supplies across a rushing river and over the crests of mountains to where she will lead visiting hunters. “This is home”, she says in the film. “People like me would die in the city”. Wild visits Teena and John Wright in their taxidermy decorated Tatogga Lake Resort, a lodge that caters to hunters and is a hangout for local children. The mine workers are represented, too. “I live up in the clouds”, says one man. Another explains with a kind of awe, that the samples he has removed from the ground are 192 million years old. An assistant driller, a Tahltan, shares his knowledge as he assembles a heavy drill dropped by helicopter into his hands.

The mine is the easy target. It is the lifestyle of these northerners that some viewers find difficult to accept. There is rawness to life on the ground.

In response to my question about bias or lack of understanding expressed by the audience towards the people she filmed, Wild said, “There is far less criticism of the Tahltan than there are of non natives working in the industry. And it drives northerners crazy when people are so quick to use what they mine out of the earth, and just as quick to criticize the workers who pull this stuff out of the earth. This is what Oscar Dennis means when he sighs and says, ‘We need the mine’. He is not just speaking of Tahltan jobs at the mine site, he is speaking to the fact that he is a contemporary Tahltan who uses a cell phone, computer, truck and cannot see a modern world without them”.

The viewer in Powell River walked out because of his opposition to big-game hunting and to the perceived ill-treatment of the outfitter’s horses. “Up north in Smithers”, Wild says, “we also had a big reaction to the killing of the female moose which precipitated a debate about First Nations hunting”.

In the beginning, Wild was “completely closed out of the mining industry” until Harvey Tremblay, the owner and CEO of Hy-Tech Drilling “said yes, instead of no, to my camera. He said that he was not ashamed of what he did and if people had a bone to pick with him, then he was ready to talk to them. He thought that the mining industry as a whole should do the same, so he gave our camera to his diamond drilling crews and this encouraged Pretivm Resources to allow us to film Harvey’s crew at their Bruce Jack mine site.

“On the Tahltan side, access was also initially problematic. The woman running the blockade asked me if I would contribute my truck to help block the road for a couple of nights. I explained to her that I couldn’t do that because it would destroy my access to the mining side. I tried to argue that my camera might prove to be more useful to her than my truck. She was not convinced and denied me access to the blockade. So at one point I did not have any access to either the mine or the blockade. (Wild later films some difficult conversations between the elders and Chad Day, the young President of the Tahltan Central Government, and

officials from the mine and BC Ministry).

"Imperial Metals, the company who owns the Red Chris Mine, which was being blockaded by the Tahltan, never did give me any access. Rokstad Power, which was building the transmission line however allowed us to film, and that resulted in one of the most unlikely and poetic sequences that I have ever filmed. Every frame had its surprising poetry".

But a favourite scene for Wild was when the community came together to rescue the salmon which had been cut off from their spawning grounds by a rock slide. With bare hands, fishing rods and helicopters, the salmon were transported around the slide and back into the river. "I really like this scene because it uses the technology so often linked to industry to try to help save the salmon, and the effort could only work with the DFO (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) working with Tahltan Fisheries and community members, First Nations and white.

"My sense about the north is that those folks live the controversy, we talk about it. I doubt there is a Tahltan family for instance that does not have someone working in the mining industry at their dinner table. And every table also has someone who has blockaded a proposed mine or seized a drill rig. This is a complex world that they are living.

"I came to see my role in it all a bit clearer, which was a real liberation. I think there is a real role for art to play in these controversial times. I found that my job was to create a cinematic experience, not to articulate a polemic. It's not my job to offer up solutions. It is my job to park my assumptions and seek to find the poetry and beauty in complexity. To frame the familiar in an unfamiliar way to see if both myself, as the filmmaker, and my audience can be surprised".

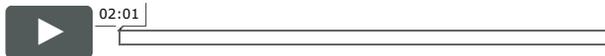
In *Konline: our land beautiful*, Nettie Wild shares an emotional space with photographer Walker Evans. She takes an even-handed and loving approach to the people she meets, and an unflinching view of their lifestyles. Her approach is dignified and daring, and the land is truly beautiful.

[Read the full film festival program and guide.](#)



KONELINE: Our Land Beautiful (Trailer)

from Mark Lazeski



Director Nettie Wild

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