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short film corner | Interview 2018

Festival de Cannes

Annette Cyr

Blindness

Debut Short

United States | Fiction | Drama | 2017, 15m

An artist struggles to finish paintings for an exhibit. She learns she has the same gene as her father, now going blind. She refuses to do something besides art. Inspired by her father's relearning to play Chopin, she creates sparkling sculptures in wire, not unlike the stars she can no longer see.

Hi Annette thanks for talking to tNC, how's everything going?

Thank you tNC! All a swirl here for me in San Diego, CA despite the same climate as Cannes. Lots of to do lists. Packing, repacking, and what I call epacking – you know what that is. “*Blindness*” is a proof of concept for the mini-series, “*Emerging*” about an artist’s life, from age 10 to 100, so must finish the pilot outline for “*Emerging*” asap.

Congratulations on having *Blindness* in this years Cannes Short Film Corner, how does it feel to be part of the festival?

Very excited! Wondering how much longer my “*15 minutes of fame*”* will last with my friends. Very grateful to the entire cast and crew of “Blindness” for their quality work and talent.

With this being your debut short are there any nerves ahead of the festival?

Absolutely. I’m keeping the focus on what to wear to distract myself from having a shyness attack. I’m likely the oldest debut filmmaker in the entire festival, so it’s time to get over my shyness. Hopefully someone else will be more shy than me and I can befriend them. Are you shy? Will you be there?

"..I was going from what I call selfie films, where I did everything myself..."

Can you tell me a little but about Blindness, how did this film come about?

All my films are about an artist, going through her life. “*Blindness*” is actually my thesis film for a graduate degree in digital cinema from National University. It is mostly online with a great month-long residency in LA with professionals.



What was it the inspiration behind your script?

I'm also a painter and was in a state of painter's impasse (my term for a writer's block for painters). This had never happened to me before. It was like a kind of blindness really. With all the responsibilities of middle age upon me, I nevertheless had to find a way to get to the next place in my painting.

I am isolated here on the bottom left hand corner of the USA (the border with Mexico is 20 minutes away, 2 hours with traffic) so found a mentor in the 17th German/Dutch artist **Maria Sybilla Merian** to

help me get over my “*painter’s impasse*”. At first “*Blindness*” was going to be an experimental doc about how an artist from a prior century mentored me back to creativity: “*Merian & ME*”. But I’d already made documentaries, so I decided to take the same story and make it a narrative with actors and crew. I like to do what I’ve never done before. This was way more scary and fun!

What was the most challenging part of bringing *Blindness* life?

To make “*Blindness*”, I was going from what I call selfie films, where I did everything myself, to working with a professional cast and crew on a mini budget. To do so, I had to pull together a cast and crew in San Diego where I didn’t know anyone in the film world. Finding great people through Mandy.com, LACasting.com and the local San Diego Filmmakers, made it possible.

Looking back is there anything you would do differently on this film?

I would do 3 things differently:

- 1.** If I found myself in a new region, I would work first with local filmmakers on their films, before doing my project. Yet I was very lucky and everything went really well.
- 2.** The RT of “*Blindness*” is 15 minutes. Would you like to see the 10-minute version?

3. Our house and my garage studio were the set, (except for the *California Museum of Art* in Escondido, which graciously let us use the museum as the gallery scene). This meant our bedroom became the green room at 5:30 am every day. I was so excited each day; I hardly combed my hair. I didn't care at the time, and everyone was very respectful towards me, but I look dreadful, just dreadful in all the BTS shots. Next time, I will have the make up artist make me beautiful at 5:30 am.

"Digital technology makes filmmaking just like painting..."



Have you always been interested in filmmaking?

I've been filming with my eyes since riding in the back seat of the station wagon looking at the moon magically keeping up with us. When I graduated from college, I told my painting instructor I wanted to go

into film. He said, “*Forget it Annette. It’s a corporate activity.*” So I became a painter- which I am still and always and I love. Painting is the best base for any career. I went to graduate school at Yale, moved to New York City, got a loft, and all that. Film – real film- was too expensive for me and video just too ugly.

As soon as technology meant you could do everything yourself with a digital camera and computer, I was right there, making selfie films. Digital technology makes filmmaking just like painting: you create the whole world of the film yourself, just as you do on the canvas. Along the way I learned I love working with other creatives. Absolutely love it. With its camaraderie, film is for the extrovert part of myself, and with its solitude, painting is for the introvert part of myself.

Now that your debut short is complete what have been the most valuable lessons you've taken from this experience?

3 Things to do as a Debut Director:

1. Find the best AD you can, who can advise you in preproduction and run the set.
2. Find the best DP you can, someone who speaks the same visual language as you do. **Valentina Caniglia**, AIC-IMAGO, and I spoke in painting terms: I could tell her which painting was the visual source for each Act: *Rembrandt* (the Father at the piano), *Vermeer* (Renee opening the letter) and *Gainsborough* (Renee being inspired) and she got it. She knew exactly what I meant. And we got it all in “*Blindness*”.
3. In Production, know the dramatic intent of each scene by heart and go for that, no matter what.

For more about me and more advice, see the interview at [Bender.Today](#).



"Know exactly the feeling, the story you want to convey."

What has been the best advice you've been given?

“The Director/DP relationship is the most important. And no, *Annette*, as Director, you cannot do both. You have to find someone you can trust.” **

“High quality DPs will be willing to work on your short if the story is good enough.” **

“Sound is 50% of the film.” ***

“You don’t want students on your crew.”** (BTW I used several smart, recent graduates from *San Diego State University*.)

Be totally prepared before you undertake Production.

(I spent 3 years in Development & Preproduction for a 5-day shoot for a 15-minute film.)

Now you can be reflective do you have any advice you would offer a fellow first time writer / director?

Advice to a writer: Put in everything you want in the actions as much as in the dialogue. The actors will then know what to think, what to feel, what actions to take, and at the end of the day, most the dialogue will be unnecessary. “*If it’s not on the page, it’s not on the stage*”. + The actors will convey their inner motives and feelings through action, subtle expressions and voice tone. This is more like real life.

Advice to a director: As fast paced and pressured as filmmaking seems, it really is a marathon. Keep going for clarity and depth in your story – in every stage: Pre, Production and Post. Know exactly the feeling, the story you want to convey. Then you can be open to suggestions from others as to how to best convey this. Listen. Go for quality. Always.

One strength of “*Blindness*” is the casting. As a novice director I had to find actors in whom I recognised my characters. To other novice directors, I suggest knowing the core character of each character in your story. When you cast, open a wide net for appearances. Keep

auditioning until you find the actor who you recognise as your character. Trust that.

The two most important personal qualities filmmaking requires are: curiosity and stubbornness. That is what it will take. Especially stubbornness. Especially in postproduction.

Before we end, I have a question for you:

When is someone in Britain going to produce films based on the novels of **Georgette Heyer**? Can I direct?

And finally, what do you hope people will take away from this film?

I want everyone to be reminded (and inspired by the fact) that a creative person needs to create. If one way of being creative becomes impossible, she or he will find another.

I'm grateful to these sources:

*Andy Warhol

**Christopher Rossiter, ICG

***Daniel B. Gold, DP