Daïchi Saïto and **Tomonari Nishikawa**
Interviewed by Katy Martin

12+ is pleased to present, as a double bill, two young Japanese filmmakers, Daïchi Saïto and Tomonari Nishikawa, who each create short, intense works that are strikingly visual and abstract. They both have taken an approach to filmmaking that emphasizes process, and the material aspects of cinema, as a basis for moving image poetics. Yet each has a different voice and sensibility, as revealed in the following interview, where they both respond via email to, basically, the same set of questions.

This conversation is truly global. Saïto now lives in Canada, and Nishikawa is currently located in Thailand. In addition to their work as artists, they are both actively involved in creating a context for avant-garde film and video – Saïto as co-founder of the Double Negative Collective in Montreal, and Nishikawa, as a recipient of a Nippon Foundation Fellowship to research experimental film/video in Southeast Asia.

Saïto's films have screened in various venues including the New York Film Festival, the London Film Festival, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Images Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, Cinematheque Ontario and Anthology Film Archives. Nishikawa's film and video pieces have been shown at major film festivals, including New York Film Festival, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and the Edinburgh International Film Festival. His mixed media installations have been exhibited at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, Still Motion in Toronto, and Berlinale.

<u>**Daïchi Saïto**</u>

Katy Martin: You and Tomonari are both young Japanese filmmakers living abroad. Can you tell me about your background, and why you are now living in Canada?

Daïchi Saïto: I would say my background is literature, and to a lesser extent, philosophy. What really formed my education comes from outside of academia. My initiation into the world of literature and philosophy, in my teens, was post-war Japanese poetry and novels, in particular by poets of the *Arechi* (*Waste Land*) school, and novelists like Kenzaburo Oë and Shiro Hasegawa. Then I would also read whatever influenced the poets and novelists I looked up to. For example, the *Arechi* poets introduced me to modernist poetry in English – Pound, Eliot, Cummings, Auden, and also Dylan Thomas; through Shiro Hasegawa, I discovered Brecht and Kafka; and

through Oë, French literature and philosophy, from the French humanist tradition to existentialism.

I say "background" but I realize these writers are hardly reflected in my film work. There are other things not directly related to my practice in film that I would consider part of my background nevertheless, such as my experience later on as a day laborer in construction (I was a steel worker and steeplejack for some years in Japan), or the two years I spent in India studying Hindi and Sanskrit. Ironically, my interest in Indian literature came via Western literature, especially T.S. Eliot, and it wasn't because, say, as Japanese I had a keen awareness of my cultural roots, or because of the fact that I went to a Buddhist high school. Eventually I got interested in so-called "classical" Sanskrit poetry and contemporary Hindi poetry, as well as certain aspects of Indian philosophy. I started to study Hindi while I was working in construction in Japan, and then I went to India to study more.

Looking back, my family background probably had more to do with my interest in film. My father was an editor in a publishing company, and worked for a magazine called *Sekai* (*The World*), which dealt with various social, political and cultural issues and was for many years an important reference for leftist intellectuals. My father, who was essentially a self-taught man, was not really an intellectual himself. But he was also a photographer and would sometimes teach photography in an art school at night. Oddly, he never taught me photography, but he had many books by his photographer friends so since I was small I would often spend time looking at photos in those books. Before she got married, my mother worked in a film distribution company in Tokyo that dealt with Japanese New Wave. She liked the French New Wave Films – Godard, Truffaut and the like – and also other European films. Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* was her favorite. When I was small, it was her habit to tell me and my older brother about films she saw when she was young, during suppertime in the absence of my father, who would always come home drunk at two or three in the morning. I got to know about many films that way, before actually seeing any of them. That was my first education on film.

I ended up in Montreal because of a woman from Montreal I met when I was living in the United States. I was studying philosophy then and working as a janitor in a youth hostel in exchange of free room and board, and she was one of the travelers staying at the hostel. After I met her, I dropped out of school, which I was losing interest in continuing anyway, packed up my stuff and headed for Montreal in order to join her. She was a dancer. Montreal turned out to be the place where I eventually studied in a film school, but that was much later. Before that I did lots of odd jobs, selling sandwiches in the streets, working as a farmhand picking fruits, and so on.

KM: Like Tomonari, you have studied philosophy in addition to film. Does any of the philosophy or literature you've read inform your approach to the process of making film?

DS: I am not sure if there's any particular literature or philosophy I've read that informs my approach to filmmaking. In a way, I came to the world of image-making in order to

move away from the world of words and written texts. It was a reaction against the obsession I had with words, texts and language in general when I was steeped in literature. I wanted to become a writer before becoming involved in film, but I always had a difficult relationship with writing. Writing for me was like banging my head against an impenetrable wall. I was doing it only to confirm the ever-growing sense of alienation and distance I felt between language and myself. I would get the strange sensation of losing sight of myself in my own writing. It was as if by writing I constructed a veil behind which I hid myself. The more I tried to write, the thicker the veil became. I would write to hide myself. So image-making is for me an exercise in taking off this veil language builds around me, shedding it off so I can begin to see. It is "a desperate play," as Philip Guston once said, for learning how to unlearn.

That said, I do tend to draw some analogies between literature, or writing, and my filmmaking practice. I like to think that the black spaces between images are analogous to the blank white spaces between words and lines of a poem; and that the light beam of the projector that penetrates film frames is analogous to the breath that gives life to written words. After all, doesn't the filmmaker "inscribe" images on a piece of cellulose triacetate with light, while the writer inscribes words on a sheet of paper with a pen? The standard Japanese manuscript paper is lined vertically with columns containing a series of squares, each of which is to be filled with a letter, a Chinese character or a punctuation symbol. One column has 20 such squares, and there are 20 columns on one sheet. If you look at the paper, it almost looks like filmstrips lined up vertically one next to another.

KM: You both have such a strong awareness of materials – the actual materials of film and video. Can you talk about that please, and how you use this emphasis on materials to create your illusions?

DS: I feel the medium of film allows me to give more attention and care to the material I work with than video. As a physical material, film gives a very tangible and tactile sense of connection between your action and its effects or consequences on the material. The process of creation is a dialogue between the maker and his or her *matière*. And physical involvement is for me an important part of this dialogue. I have a penchant for physical work, and the process of filmmaking, whether it's hand-processing, optical printing, or editing, is very much a physical one.

Mostly I work frame by frame, so my working process is quite slow. And the slowness of it is something I appreciate. I need to get the sense of thinking along with the image, and the time it takes by working this way (I spend quite a bit of time just looking at individual frames on the filmstrips, for example) makes it possible to get that sense.

I'm also fascinated by the radical gap between the manifestation of a finished film when projected on the screen and the actual physical material – filmstrips – that I have worked on. That's a unique experience filmmaking offers. It is the filmstrips, and the individual frames on them, that you are dealing with throughout the process of making a film, and yet, what we see in projection is not the material itself, but its shadow. In projection, the

filmstrip becomes an agent for the light to materialize. I find it paradoxical, and very fascinating. So film has two different identities, two different aspects of its material nature. Its passage from stillness to movement is a passage of transformation from tactility to perceptual phenomena.

KM: Can we talk more about hand-processing film? There is something in here about loss of control, and perhaps even vulnerability.

DS: Hand-processing has this aspect of negotiation between what's controllable and what's not, between predictability and unpredictability, and that's what interests me, apart from the simple pleasure of doing physical work and sweating, and hurting your back from crouching over the bathtub too long, etc. You can certainly gain a greater, more flexible control over results, by carefully figuring out what ingredients to add or subtract, what temperature and how much time for each step, and so on. It's a rational and logical affair. But however you try to be precise, a margin of error always exists, and unexpected things happen here and there, especially to someone like myself who's not quite scientifically minded. Sometimes such accidents trigger new thoughts and make you see your work in a different light. You strive to control the medium and the medium betrays your intention. I like to make it into an integral part of my creative process, and *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis*, for instance, was made largely in that way.

KM: You both take a hands-on approach, and you both work very slowly, like animators. Can you please comment?

DS: My process of working "frame by frame" involves two different levels: one is actual filming, as in the case of my super-8 films that are made by single-frame photography in the camera; the other, the visual manipulation using an optical printer, and the editing of the filmed material. My super-8 films are much like simple documents of my spontaneous responses to the environments in which my filming takes place, guided by a loosely structured framework that gives much room for improvisation. It's about the immediacy of action, looking and feeling. As such, those films are rather crude in comparison with my films in 16mm or 35mm. Tomonari's super-8 films, on the other hand, seem to me to demonstrate higher precision and craft, even though he calls them "sketches" (the word sounds to me like an understatement but is perfectly appropriate in relation to his creative process, I think). In a way, my super-8 films are also sketches in the sense that some of them, like *Blind Alley Augury* and *Green Fuse*, formed the basis for other films in 16mm and 35mm, *All That Rises* and *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis*, respectively. In my case, I treat those films as raw materials to be reworked and transformed into new entities through the combination of printing, processing and editing.

Looking at individual frames, be it on filmstrips while editing or through the viewfinder of an optical printer, is a contemplative process, a process of close engagement with the solidity of static images whose power points "pastward," as it were. So for me this is an

entirely different process from that of filming something with the camera. In this process, composing the ensemble of static images gives me the feeling of "breathing a fatal stillness," to use the words of the poet, e. e. cummings. This fatal stillness is a universe of containment, and what I try to do is to de-solidify it, render it open and malleable in the present tense of projection, which makes it possible through its curious process of quasi-dematerialization in the fragile, ephemeral realm of perception.

KM: Like Tomonari, you have various strategies for making representational images abstract. You both compose with strong graphic elements. Tomonari finds or creates geometric patterns, and you use close up, high contrast and silhouette. Can you talk about this please?

DS: I have always been attracted to artworks that exist on the threshold of abstraction and figuration, creating a tension between them through the economy of expression, or artworks that evoke an impression of representation through monochromatic abstraction. Drawings and paintings by Alberto Giacometti and Henri Michaux, ink paintings by Gao Xingjian, and calligraphic art in general interest me in this regard. The process of abstraction in my black and white films somewhat reflects my interests in those types of art.

Chiasmus plays with abstraction by means of close-up and silhouette, fragmenting images and leaving the details out. I was interested in the suggestive power of abstraction and using it in such a way that what you were seeing on the screen drew your attention to what was not shown on the screen or what was missing from it. The felt presence of absence is what makes abstraction alive, and the visual limitation becomes an agent for engaging the viewer in an active viewing experience in which the lack of wholeness and clarity of the images compels the viewer's perception to reassemble and complete them.

High-contrast imagery in black and white, with its hard-edged contour of shadow and solid white, does seem to me to bring out the active presence of light; it articulates well the way the light beam sculpts images as it pierces through the filmstrip and touches the surface of the screen.   This aspect I think is more pronounced in *Chasmic Dance,* where the light beam of the projection is really the protagonist of the film.

KM: Please say more about those blank spaces between images, and the negative/positive aspects of film. Please also expand on the metaphor of breath, timing, and pause that gives a sense of voice, that feeling of someone taking a breath between phrases, literally to animate their thoughts.

DS: Whether it's between or within images, in my films I make use of "negative" spaces in order to activate in some way the energy of "positive" spaces or to create a tension through their interaction with each other. In *Chiasmus*, there are frequent visual shifts in which the images of the body become negative and positive spaces interchangeably,

sometimes blurring the border between the two spaces. The interrelationship between the contraries – the two supporting one another – interests me. Calligraphy, for example, would be lifeless without the presence of the emptiness that surrounds it. And Japanese traditional music or theatre in particular, also give a strong emphasis on the silent spaces between sounds, or pausing moments between actions or movements, treating them as active elements in a piece. Drawing a parallel like this in talking about my work may sound strange, as my films are often characterized by rapid bursts of fleeting images, but personally it's a relevant matter.

I feel there is almost a lyrical quality to the pulsation of light and the rhythm that the pausing and releasing of light creates, if we see it as a kind of breath. Like a voice that reads a poem or a hand that plays an acoustic instrument, pausing from time to time to listen to the silence. So the blank spaces between images are like moments of pause where the viewer hears the resonance of the images. When I used the alternation of brief phrasings of images and pauses in black in *All That Rises*, I was thinking in those terms. Also, when I use sound in my work, I pay as much attention to silent moments as the sound itself.

Tomonari Nishikawa

Katy Martin: Can you tell me about your background, and why you are now living in Thailand? Also, please talk about your education. I know you went to the State University of New York (SUNY) Binghamton, and the last interview I did was with Vincent Grenier, who teaches there

Tomonari Nishikawa: I first went to a university in Japan. I majored in economics because I did not have any particular field of interest, and I thought economics was a safe choice to get a job. I skipped classes often, and spent more time working at a local restaurant and hanging out with friends. It was during that time I started watching non-Hollywood movies – French, German, Russian, and Japanese, especially Art Theater Guild productions, including feature films by Shuji Terayama and Toshio Matsumoto. Eventually, I dropped out of school and decided to study cinema abroad.

I couldn't go studying abroad right away because I did not have enough money. So I started working as a truck driver, which I didn't like, but the pay was good. When I made enough money, I quit the job and flew to Australia. I wanted to touch western culture while improving my English. I found a job at a nursery farm near Sydney, working eight hours a day in exchange for accommodation and meals. Not a good deal probably, but I liked living in a rural area. I then moved to Perth, where I worked at youth hostel. Later I went to Canada, and then came back to Japan. I needed to work again to earn money.

It was 1999 when I finally went to the US, dreaming of becoming an independent film director. I first went to a community college in upstate New York, majoring in General

Studies and minor in Photography. In 2001, I transferred to SUNY Binghamton where I had a double major in Cinema and Philosophy. This was one of reasons I decided to study abroad, as we cannot have more than one major at universities in Japan. I chose SUNY Binghamton because it was not too expensive and it had a well-known Cinema Department. At first, I was disappointed when I figured out the department did not offer film directing or script writing courses.

KM: Right! Its focus is on experimental film and video art.

TN: Yes. But it was fun taking film classes. I was so excited to use movie cameras, projectors, and editing equipments for the first time. Also, I liked the way all the teachers encouraged students to experiment. I spent plenty of time using optical printers and the animation stand, and also hand-processing film in the darkroom. At the time, the Cinema Department had four faculty members: Ariana Gerstein, Julie Murray, Ken Jacobs, and Vincent Grenier. I worked as a Teaching Assistant for Vincent's video-making class, and I learned a lot from him about interpreting cinema, composing in time, and articulating ideas through moving images. Ken Jacobs was the one who probably influenced me the most. He started my great interest in cinema apparatus, and making abstract forms from representational images.

I got my MFA in Film at the San Francisco Art Institute, which offered old-school experimental filmmaking, very similar to the Cinema Department at SUNY Binghamton. I studied closely with Janis Crystal Lipzin and Ernie Gehr, and I started making film installation works, using pinhole techniques. The San Francisco Bay Area has a very strong experimental film community, and I enjoyed going out for screenings.

Now, I am in Bangkok, as a recipient of Asian Public Intellectual from The Nippon Foundation, doing research on experimental cinema in Southeast Asia. I am trying to establish a network of experimental cinema through Asia too. I will stay here until mid-February 2009, and then I will move to Kuala Lumpur for another 6-month research.

KM: Let's take a minute and talk about the "cinema apparatus" since this phrase brings with it a lot of history and film theory. Without getting into a whole discussion of theory, may I ask what you mean by the term?

TN: I'm not sure where to start talking about the history of cinema. Thaumatropes deal with persistence of vision, and flipbooks, phenakistoscopes, and zoetropes all produce apparent motion. The experiments of Eadward Muybridge, using still cameras to shoot movement, would be another precursor of cinema. Then, after Thomas Edison invented the kinetoscope, the Lumière Brothers finally invented a device to show films for the mass audience. Cinema has changed as new technology has come out, but the basic mechanisms of the cinema apparatus have not changed since the 1890s.

KM: Yes. It all depends on a physiological phenomenon called "persistence of vision" where still images that are separated by intermittent darkness produce the illusion of motion.

TN: Right. When watching a narrative movie, a viewer may not sense the cinema apparatus. This is because they are so into the story provided by the natural movements of images on the screen. At the same time, they are forgetting their real situation inside of the theater.

There is cinema that is more about experience. In my single-frame projects, viewers would understand how fast a movie projector advances frames for projection. They would also understand how we perceive apparent movements through the animation sequences.

KM: Like Daïchi, you have studied philosophy. Does it inform your approach to making film?

TN: Readings from philosophers' ideas may have influenced my filmmaking approach, but not directly, except for my film, *Apollo*. I made it when I was reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and thinking about what he said about Apollonian and Dionysian art.   In *Apollo*, I tried to have a perfect balance of Apollonian and Dionysian elements in film. Throughout the piece, I juxtaposed Apollonian and Dionysian elements – geometric and organic forms, and regularity and randomness.

It was hard to get enough Dionysian elements. So to make that film, I used reticulation, which is an effect caused by breaking down the emulsion layer to make images look cracked or melted. I dedicated plenty of time to finding a way to do this. I had seen Phil Solomon's *Psalm III: Night of the Meek*, and it blew my mind. To try and get this effect, I started processing films with sodium carbonate in my kitchen at night. After months of experimenting, I finally discovered a way to reticulate films.

I wanted to have this effect for *Apollo* because it would produce uncontrollable organic forms, literally breaking representational images, and showing Dionysian characteristics. Also, I wanted to get images that would look like damage caused by the heat of the projector light, for a metaphorical expression of Apollo in Greek mythology, a god of the light coming from the sun.

KM: Daïchi's description of the grid on a piece of Japanese writing paper makes me think of your chain link fence piece and your film strip installations

Tomonari: Yes, it's very interesting. I didn't think about the grid on Japanese writing paper while I was working on the installations. But I was aware of the traditional way we write or read Japanese texts, and that is how I spliced the filmstrips for the moving

images of the pinhole film installations. It projects from the rightmost filmstrip of the still image, then projects its left next.

That was my first installation, *A Pinhole Behind Fences*, which I made using a pinhole camera. I started pinhole filmmaking during my first semester in San Francisco. When I was looking for alternative filmmaking methods based on Helen Hill's *Recipes for Disaster*, I found an article by Melinda Stone, explaining how to make a pinhole super 8 cartridge to shoot a film. While practicing this method, I started shooting 16mm with my Bolex camera. Then I made a pinhole camera to shoot a series of 16mm filmstrips for installation pieces. After finishing the installation, I started experimenting with pinhole video-making.

KM: Let's talk about your strong awareness of materials and how you use it to make your films.

TN: I think my interest in film materials first came from my background in photography. Before making films, I spent so much time in a darkroom, and I was into alternative darkroom technique – toning and tinting, cross processing, and solarization. I did not like an arbitrary experiment, so I kept writing down data for the next experiment. I also tried to control everything, to create an image I wanted to get.

Later I had the similar attitude toward filmmaking. Although I hand-processed films and used splicing tapes without editing gloves, I tried to get a clean look. Later, in San Francisco, I began to appreciate unexpected results; the look of the work became less important than the concept of the work. One of the concepts of my on-going project, *Sketch Films*, is finishing the entire film by in-camera editing. When I hand-processed *Sketch Film #1* by the spaghetti method with a bucket, a part of the film was not processed properly and it turned out black. I was not upset at all. In fact, I liked it because it would be like an ink stain on a painter's sketchbook, enhancing the sense of sketch.

KM: Let's talk more about your *Sketch Film* series.

TN: I have two main concepts for the *Sketch Film* series. The first is of shooting film as practice. One of my painting teachers once said, "carry your sketchbook all the time and do sketch whenever you find time." (By the way, I minored in Painting and I spent more time on painting than filmmaking in my Binghamton years). Years later, I started thinking what could be an everyday practice for filmmaking. So for the *Sketch Film* project, I carry a super 8 camera and do sketches, single-framing, thinking of the movements and changes that would appear on the screen. I do not have ideas for the entire structure of the piece when I start working on a project, and I stop shooting after the footage counter reaches around 45 feet. All is edited in camera. I sometimes shoot several frames continuously by mistake, but I do not take away such parts from the film because then it would lose the quality of sketch. In a sketchbook, whenever I made a

mistake, I would not erase it but would rather draw over the mistake or start a new drawing in the next sheet.

Hand-processing is a part of this project so far, except for a Kodachrome film, *Sketch Film #4*. I use a big processing tank or a bucket, squeezing a roll of film into it for processing. As a result, there are many scratches on the film emulsion, and sometimes parts of film are not processed properly. Again, I do not take off any flaws, as they are important elements that show the process of making the film and enhance the characteristics of sketch.

The second main concept of the *Sketch Film* series is that of using the finished projects as reference to make a new film on a larger format. This is similar to the way a painter first sketches for a painting. After finishing *Sketch Films #1 and #2*, I made a 16mm film, *Market Street*. The structure for almost all the sequences in *Market Street* can be found in these two *Sketch Films*.

KM: Let's end by discussing something you said at the start about "making abstract forms from representational images." That's a key concept. Can we develop it please?

TN: Since first time I touched a movie filmstrip, my interests are in the cinema apparatus and human visual perception, especially the gaps between frames that create apparent motion and changes of images through a projector. My single-frame projects are animations made by shapes and lines in the photographic images. When I was working on *Sketch Film #2,* I started experimenting to create shapes between frames, shapes that do not exist within a frame but exist apparently on the screen when the film is projected. That way, in the work, the audience sees the apparent motion of apparent shapes.

Another element that makes my single-framing works abstract is a time and space issue. Each photographic image has a sense of time and space where a filmmaker shot the image. These works focus on the animation of shapes, and viewers may not focus on the overall images but only the motion of a simple abstract form in the foreground, with a rapidly changing background. Viewers might not sense much of the time and place where the images were shot, and instead sense how the movement of these forms is created by the projector. This is actually the real time and space where they are. So watching these films would make the viewers perceive the phenomenon created by the projector as a real time experience.