

Short, but sweet, videos

Some 33 international filmmakers took part in this year's Venturous Vanguard Video Festival and Callan Fraser reports on growing awareness of the effectiveness of the video medium to get a message across



In a small timber roofed pottery workshop on Taikang Road, a screening of works from the Venturous Vanguard Video Festival 2005, previously held in Los Angeles in April, kicked off before a modest-sized Shanghai crowd last Saturday night. Although the numbers showing up were small, the scope of the short films screened was anything but small.

The theme for this year's festival was "This Insane World" and this encompassed everything from the political to an individual's inner world. "I believe video is a universal language," says Shoshana Brand, founder of the film festival and a filmmaker herself. She stresses that it is not the language or the professionalism of the film that is important; rather it is the concept behind it that is important. Brand was in Shanghai to promote the event — the second after last year's debut festival when the theme was "City Life."

When asked why she founded the film festival last year she replies that she is

"very much fond of video art — it's different from commercial video and movies" and she adds that she also feels it is important to bring video to the awareness of teenagers as another medium of expression.

Brand views video as another art form. "Video art will have a tendency to get to more artists" because of its accessibility, she says. It is an art form that does not require a production company or a team to create — it can be controlled completely by the individual artist.

The film artists at the festival ranged in age from teenage first-timers to experienced makers of short films giving the event a broad scope. Most of the filmmakers came from the United States, however there were films from Canada, the Netherlands, Russia, Italy, England and the Czech Republic.

No Chinese films were shown but Brand was excited by the chance to seek entries for next year's festival from Chinese artists.

In total, 33 videos were shown in a little over two hours with some of them being the

work of experienced artists such as Douglas McCulloh ("Surge"), Ido Fluk ("What I Want") and Catrina Notte ("Domus de Janas"). However, there were also many first-time filmmakers including Armando Aparicio ("Drunken Boxer"), and three short movies by Jacqueline Kalisch, Alison Mathis and Angel Luis.

The festival has already toured the United States, Canada, the Czech Republic, China and India. In addition to Shanghai, Kunming in South China's Yunnan Province is also on the screening schedule this year.

After the local showing there was a vote to select the best video and a talk about the festival and video art. The festival sparked interest among the Shanghai audience with some asking how they could be involved in the festival in the future or wanting to show off their own work.

One of the most impressive films has been screened was "Surge" by McCulloh. It was different from the others in that it consisted of thousands of still photographs that had been put together to form a moving

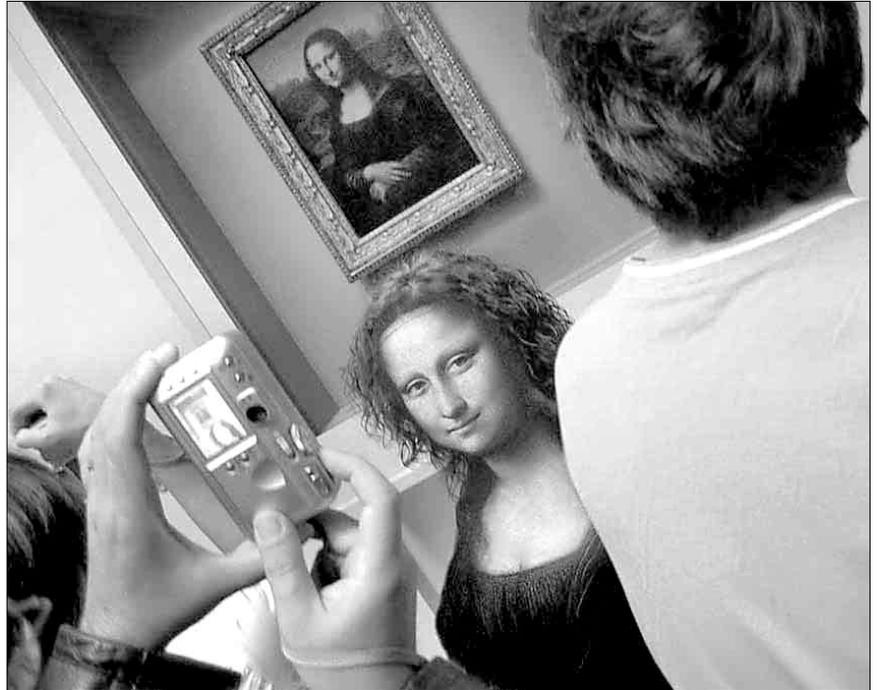


image. Each image after editing gave a feeling of fast and sometimes erratic movement. The film centered on the image of the Mona Lisa and showed a lot of people taking pictures of the painting. Images of the Mona Lisa were also edited into the crowd in some still shots resulting in an impressive display of imagination and skillful filmmaking.

"Surge" has no dialogue or script which makes it available

and accessible to any national-ity. McCulloh replicates this use of technology in all his projects which feature layered information in the form of photographs, text, maps and other data.

While "Surge's" high quality feel and creative concept easily made it one of the best films of the festival, the film that was the most memorable, mainly for its comedic value, would have to be "Drunken Boxer" by

Armando Aparicio. A parody of a kung fu fight scene, the film was rewarded by laughter from everyone present — a sure indication that even though the dialogue was in English, the heart and meaning of the film had not been missed.

Aparicio was one of the youngest filmmakers to be showcased. He is a 17-year-old student at Sylmar High School in California and his effort

should give teenagers who may be a little tentative about creating a short film confidence by proving that age is no barrier in this form of expression.

"I have watched it probably over 1,000 times but every time I watch it, it makes me want to pick up a camera and go make a film," says Brand giving an accurate testimonial to the effect the festival had on the audience.

Scenes from Douglas McCulloh's "Surge" (above) and Kiron Travis's "Untitled" — two entries in this year's Venturous Vanguard Video Festival. The festival showed screenings in Los Angeles in April and moved to Shanghai last weekend.

'Cinderella' wins by a knockout

Director Ron Howard and star Russell Crowe's latest collaboration is an inspiring boxing movie based on the comeback of a true champion, James J. Braddock. Christy Lemire reports that it may be a contender at next year's Oscars



Russell Crowe arrives for the premiere of Universal Pictures' "Cinderella Man," a benefit screening for the Children's Defense Fund last Wednesday in New York. — AP

"People are sentimental, you know," says Paul Giamatti as Jim Braddock's persuasive boxing manager in "Cinderella Man." "Some people are sentimental."

Director Ron Howard is one of them. It's a trait that hampered him in some of his earlier films ("Cocoon," "Parenthood") but one that he learned to temper with "A Beautiful Mind" and in the process earned Oscars for best picture and best director in 2002.

Howard has brought back that film's sense of emotional balance with "Cinderella Man" — though he goes a bit goey toward the end along with its star (Russell Crowe) and screenwriter (Akiva Goldsman). So as you would expect, it's flawlessly crafted, superbly acted and intelligently written.

And it manages to overcome, with grace and style, some inherent problems. We know what we're getting — "Million Dollar Baby" looked like "Rocky" but wasn't; "Cinderella Man" looks like "Rocky" and is. It's as traditional a boxing picture as you can get, with equal parts warm inspiration and cold, hard punches that send the

sweat flying, camera bulbs flashing and crowds roaring.

We also know how the story ends. Braddock was a real-life prize-fighter who came from behind to serve as a symbol of hope to folks who were down on their luck during the Depression (and received his titular moniker from Damon Runyon). That includes his own family, for whom he's able to provide a comfortable home in suburban New Jersey at the film's start.

But as Howard shows with a seamless shift in time and tenor, Braddock is forced to move them into a run-down basement apartment when his fights and fortunes run out four years later. He now must compete for daily work on the docks while wife Mae (Renée Zellweger in full feisty mode) takes in sewing and waters the milk for their three kids.

Paddy Considine from "In America" contributes to the film's realism as Braddock's friend, Mike Wilson, a former stock broker now scraping by on physical labor and shacking up in Central Park.

Then Braddock's former manager, Joe Gould (Giamatti), comes calling

with a proposal. A boxer has had to drop out of a fight at the last minute and Gould has snagged a way for Braddock (even though he's lost his license) to get back in the ring against an up-and-coming star.

There is, of course, the obligatory training montage leading up to the bout itself. Having been away for so long, Braddock is barely expected to last a couple of rounds. He ends up winning, which sets up a heavy-weight championship fight against the monstrous Max Baer (a convincingly slimy Craig Bierko) who has literally killed a couple of his previous opponents.

Though it's clearly an inspirational, crowd-pleasing story, writers Goldsman and Cliff Hollingsworth can't resist tugging at a few more heartstrings leading into the big title bout.

"You're the bulldog of Bergen, the pride of New Jersey and you are the champion of my heart, James J. Braddock," the dutiful, loving Mae tells her husband before sending him into the ring.

He does seem too good to be true and in the hands of a lesser actor, he could have been. Crowe also has a perfect face for this period and this

material — a world-weary look that exudes determination and infinite sadness, even at the height of Braddock's popularity.

Even his voice sounds different — in a deeper register, almost gravely — which helps set this character apart from other memorable fighters he's played (in "Gladiator" and "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World") and further solidifies his versatility. You can't help but root for him to win.

The real knockout performance, though — if you'll pardon the pun — comes from Giamatti as a man who puts his considerable energy and resourcefulness into maintaining the appearance that he's still thriving financially. Speaking of versatile, Giamatti proves after heavier, introspective roles in "American Splendor" and "Sideways" that he's just as capable of tearing it up as a fast-talking force of nature.

But can a boxing movie win the Academy Award for best picture two years in a row? Probably not. Still, "Cinderella Man" could be a contender.

(The Associated Press)