Small Glimpses of Hope and Regeneration: Ken Paul Rosenthal's *Crooked Beauty*

by Steve Polta, Artistic Director San Francisco Cinematheque
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> *I film to…*
> *suckle the sun*
> *thread the light which needles my eye…*
>
> — Ken Paul Rosenthal

> *And that late afternoon sadness rolls in like the luminous California fog crossing over the hills. And some part of me is convinced that I might have never really felt joy. And yet there is a mythical quality to the garlic mustard, the afternoon, the angle of light that fills me with a peculiar, heartbreaking beauty. And I wonder, as I often do, if things will ever be simple.*
>
> — Jacks Ashley McNamara

Ken Paul Rosenthal's *Crooked Beauty* is an expansive portrait of artist, writer and mental health activist Jacks McNamara, documenting her life-long struggles with 'madness', her intense personal quest to live with hope and dignity. It also describes her establishment of the Icarus Project, an international network dedicated to helping individuals overcome social alienation and the stigmas associated with mental illness and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness. He writes:

> *In the winter of 2005, I read an article by artist Jacks McNamara that touched the core of my identity as a filmmaker. In her story 'Anatomy of Flight,' which chronicles her transformation from being a patient of the Western psychiatric establishment to a radical mental health activist, Jacks describes how "…the world seemed to hit me so much harder and fill me so much fuller than anyone else I knew. Slanted sunlight could make me dizzy with its beauty and witnessing unkindness filled me with physical pain."*
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> *My own experience of the world had always been one of visual osmosis; light clung to me like liquid to a dry sponge. As a child, I would frequently stare down the sun, holding my gaze until the sensation was unbearable. Whether holding my hand to hot irons, teetering on the precipice of great heights, or playing Russian roulette with my X-acto blades, I felt invited to reach for places that were clearly unsafe. Was there something wrong with me, or was I in need of models and mentorship that could help me make the transition from having my sensitivities overwhelm me, to having*

them give me information I could use? Like a moth drawn to flame, I was intoxicated by how far—and how furiously—I could fly.

In *Crooked Beauty*, Ken Paul Rosenthal's characteristically tender and luminous super-8 cinematography provides a perfect compliment to the story and expressive recitations of Jacks McNamara. Images of pending dissolution abound. Gentle and heroic shrubberies strain toward the sky through concrete enclosures while neat houses sit in pillbox rows. Shuddering trees simultaneously express strength and vulnerability while flocking birds suggest tentative and wary communities.

The film is indeed a veritable catalog of contrasts: sunlight dances on water or is obliterated by fog; creeping inky shadows scale walls and collide with glaring brightness. Importantly, images of sunlight flaring through Rosenthal's camera lens recur, subtly yet almost obsessively, throughout *Crooked Beauty*. Taking clear inspiration from the light-based spiritual questing of Stan Brakhage and his own profound use of the trope, the flare is perhaps the film's most important metaphor for the concrete spirituality articulated by McNamara, an expression of the concrescence of luminous spirituality given form by the crystalline matter of the glass, the afternoon filled with heartbreaking beauty.

Importantly, *Crooked Beauty* continues a long tradition of introspective film lyrics that build profound spiritual introspections from Bay Area landscape studies. A clear and acknowledged influence on Rosenthal's film is the meditative late work of Nathaniel Dorsky, not only in its patience but in its constant return to metaphors of solidity and dissolution. Quoting Rosenthal, the film "connects the fissures and fault lines of human nature to the unstable topography and mercurial weather patterns of the San Francisco Bay Area and situates both the speaking subject and viewer in a broad and complex field of forces and phenomena that shape our collective human experience." In this sense *Crooked Beauty* deserves a comparison with Ernie Gehr's vertiginous masterpiece *Side/Walk/Shuttle*; despite their obvious differences, each film expresses a delirious atmospheric precarity and stands as a rich portrait of our apocalyptic seismic city.

McNamara herself describes her journey as one through darkness toward strength, her condition as a dangerous gift, and her creativity as "fragile fire." In *Crooked Beauty* Ken Paul Rosenthal burns with McNamara's fire; his images sing against her passionate story. Placing himself at odds with the typical issue-driven documentary, yet daring to fuse said "issues" with cinema's lyrical form, *Crooked Beauty*, like its subject, ventures dangerously into uncharted territories. And, like the work of his heroic subject, the film stands as a "small glimpse of hope and regeneration" for those in a position to receive its messages, a true spark against darkness.

With this film I strove to embody a sensual intelligence.
I believe Crooked Beauty *functions as visual medicine.*

—Ken Paul Rosenthal