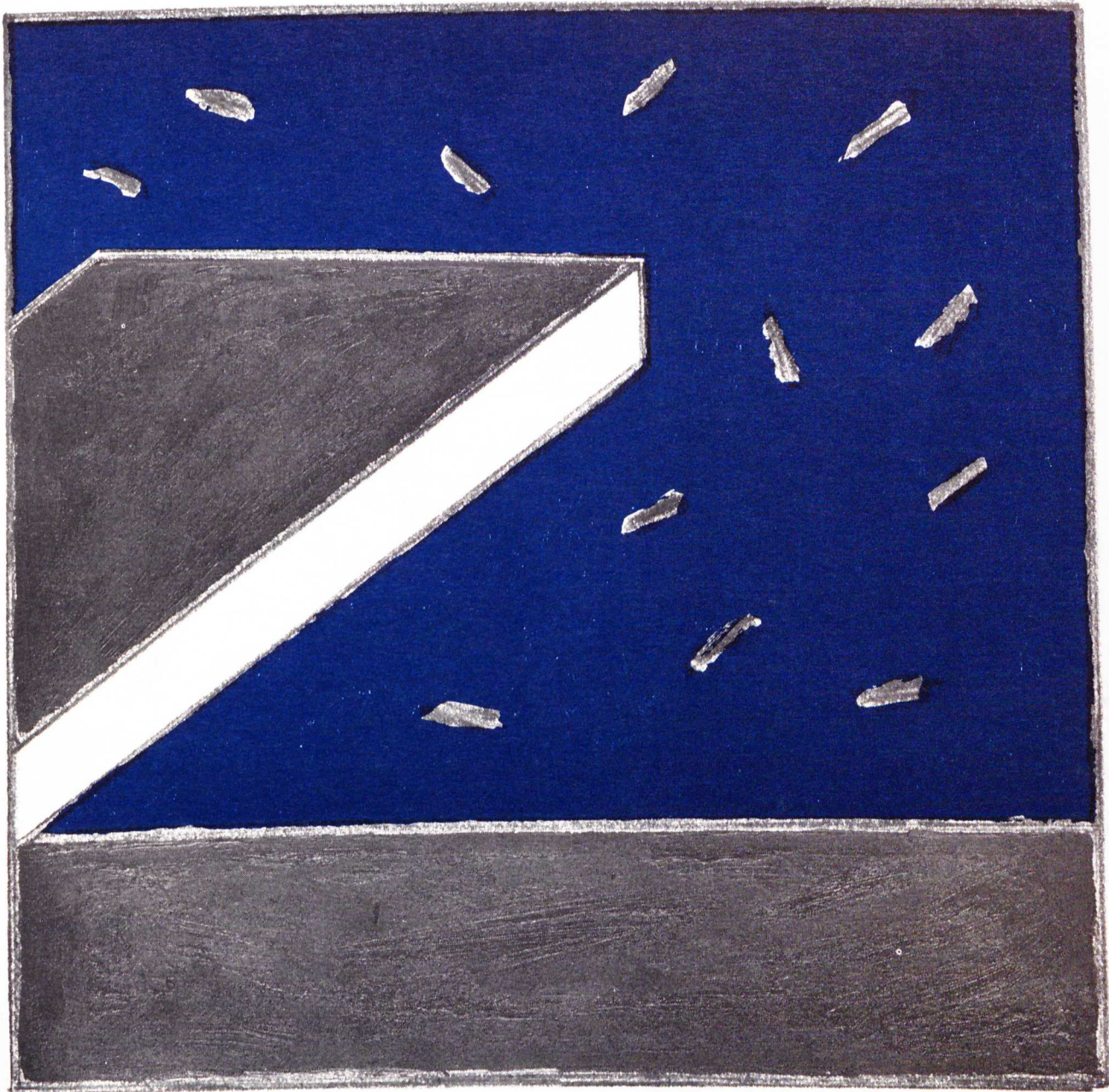


# The Downtown Review

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Robert Haller

## One Simple Plea

Would all of you who have passed on to me, in one form or another, a compliment concerning this journal, would (I repeat) all of you please *encourage* (1) your friends to subscribe; (2) your state arts panel to support our (modest) grant requests; (3) your colleagues at the national endowments to look with favor upon our needs; (4) your acquaintances to buy the magazine at their local bookstores; and (5) your constituent organizations to take out ads in the next issue? *The Downtown Review* has grown dramatically over the past year or so, but the financial needs continue to be pressing, even life-threatening. We need your help, all of you who are in this community of strugglers, whose goals we share, and whose work we cherish.

R4E

Cover: **Don Voisine**

Editor and Publisher: **Raymond Foery**

Editorial Assistance: **Cynthia Hollis**  
**George Hunka**  
**Cate Miodini**  
**Tal Yarden**

Associate Editor: **John Pruitt**

Graphics: **Tracy Farrell**

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The work is the man's flight from his entire horoscope . . .

**William Butler Yeats**



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# Andrew Noren's *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*

(Part I: *Huge Pupils*; Part II: *False Pretenses*;

Part III: *The Phantom Enthusiast*; Part IV: *Charmed Particles*)

The gullible way in which we often accept cinematic images borders on the superstitious; that is, we endow them with untold power and thus even the best of us become sitting ducks for cinema's facility to offer cheap allure and sensational horror. No big deal: we are stupid, and as a consequence film maintains its preeminent ability to offend in our culture, more so than, say, the word. Luckily, because of this, one thing is certain: Bruce Conner's *A Movie* will always be hilarious, a grand black joke on ourselves, those who are sitting and watching.

But it is unfortunate that the work of such a sensitive and genuine artist as Andrew Noren should be inappropriately linked with issues of titillation and offense. Such a context keeps him from really being seen as he should be. If one happens to glance into the Andrew Noren file at The Anthology Film Archives Library, one can hardly help but be amused, chagrined at what comprises the majority of its contents, namely newspaper clippings which document various encounters with the law one exhibitor or another suffered when screening an early Noren opus. There are numerous editorials that argue for and against censorship, sexual explicitness on the screen, etc., many of which inadvertently testify to an era when the audience for independent film was much larger because half the viewers were looking for thrills the commercial cinema was as yet not ready to supply. The file is slightly ironic, arguably irrelevant (there is, however, one long, excellent unpublished interview), and finally quite characteristic of how Noren's films are still unfortunately accepted—at literal, face value.

The typically misguided (both enthusiasts and detractors) take Noren as a kind of personal filmmaker par excellence. In the independent film world (Owen Land, a.k.a. George Landow, calls it "The Avant Garde Film Club of America") the epithet "personal film" is a term of unqualified praise, as if being personal were somehow an end in itself. As a term, I don't like it, but within this scheme, Noren then becomes the filmmaker who is the most open, the most intimate with his camera, so much so, in fact, that I have noticed that young college students still squirm and giggle during moments that are particularly explicit sexually. *Huge Pupils*, the first section of Noren's long, open-ended series, *The Adventures of the Exquisite*

*Corpse*, has done much to lend a myth of notoriety to the filmmaker in this regard. The feminists, too, have a problem, though of a different order. The erotic quality of much of the imagery has led them to conclude somehow that what they see on the screen stands for Noren's entire view of women. Thus can Amy Taubin in a recent review turn against the filmmaker when she realizes that "cunt obsession" is just another form of "cunt hatred." Whether she is right or wrong, I feel, nevertheless, that hers is a gut reaction which sells Noren short in the process. It is reduction pure and simple; the man is a far more complex filmmaker than one might at first think, and just how personal he is in his films is an arguable point. As far as I am concerned, Noren's alleged intimacy is fraught with some fascinating contradictions. To take one obvious case in the Anthology file, one learns that early on in his filmmaking activity, Noren was associated with cinema verité documentaries, but that quite rightly and intelligently he saw cinema verité as presenting a fiction with laws of its own just as artificial as any other. That is the kind of basic insight with which good filmmakers are made and one which throws a considerably large monkey wrench into the frequently simplistic approach to Noren's films.

Many have referred to the brilliance of Noren's original title for his *Exquisite Corpse* series, *Kodak Ghost Poems* ("the best title ever?" asked Ken Jacobs). It is a shame that the films can't be known officially under that rubric (Eastman Kodak, Inc. has objected) because the phrase's metaphoric thrust so adequately captures the essence of Noren's work, as well as in a greater sense embraces film in general. All cinematic images have a ghostliness about them, Noren seems to be saying.

Nowhere is this ghostliness more haunting than in the first film of the series, *Huge Pupils*, possibly still Noren's best work. There the viewer feels most strongly Noren's attempt to convey sensual phenomena and (especially in relation to the later films) specifically tactile experience. Hands caress skin; a woman sits eating a jellied bagel; a couple takes a bath together; cats, humans, half-empty teacups and forgotten cigarettes alike bask in the warm sunlight. With apparent and touching naiveté, a jade bracelet is picked up and turned in the hand so that the camera can get a good look at it. Here is



a moment not unlike those encountered in the most banal home movies: Uncle Joe and Aunt Elizabeth caught forever in front of the '66 Christmas tree. But there is a telling difference, for Noren realizes that nothing has been really caught as unconsciously intended. It would be nice to be able to purchase a little black box for \$19.95 with which to arrest time, but this just isn't so. The camera can render appearance but cannot convey substance, the sense of touch, true presence. The more vividly Noren immerses us in his intensely sensual world, the more we as spectators recognize a bizarre and disturbing absence. Though, for example, we see explicit lovemaking on the screen, it all seems strange to us because the images don't carry the actual feeling of sensual arousal which gives sex its meaning. Ultimately it is ethereal, bodiless sex, a contradiction in terms. Perhaps one thinks of the so-called deafening roar when a comedian drops a tray of dishes in a silent film. There we are jolted by the lack of that very sense phenomenon which most distinguishes the event.

With that inherent contradiction, *Huge Pupils* achieves a tremendous tension. As with all of Noren's films, there is a great desire to present objects as they are, with no recourse to metaphor or abstraction. By means of his camera, the filmmaker gives himself up to the great otherness of the outside world. Clock time breaks down; moments are entirely self-contained, great holes in the flow of events. Yet there is always the camera, that infernal metaphor-making machine. Just as Noren approaches the object, so it recedes from him, dissolves into a play of light and shadow. In the films following *Huge Pupils*, the tension is diminished somewhat, for Noren skirts the issue through a kind of abstraction. He accepts more consciously light and shadow per se as his theme (Noren, "the light bandit") and comparatively speaking, his films then become increasingly built on the more formal possibilities of how to convey the myriad variations of light phenomena. This change culminates in the great tour de force which is *Charmed Particles*, wherein (as the title implies) the camera disembodies matter and transforms it into a dazzling tapestry of light and darkness. Nevertheless, the central quality, that tension, which makes *Huge Pupils* so memorable, is still there, however subtly, in the later films, and I will go so far as to say that one's understanding of the works which follow *Huge Pupils* is largely dependent on understanding the film which initiated the series.

Perhaps the most obvious theme which is carried through the four films is that of woman. She is the central figure of that imposing other world into

which the poet/filmmaker wishes to lose himself. And there are giddy moments of immersion (for me, most intensely in *Charmed Particles*) where male and female seem indistinguishable, where bodies flow together. Yet these moments are always tentative, not absolutely fulfilling, if for no other reason than the filmmaker has yet to put down his camera for good. In Noren's long studies of female companions, one must see a frustrated though exuberant obsession. His erotic desire is never quite satisfied, and why should it be? At times in his films, the female presence is awesome (in the root sense of the word); the women sit apart, are self-contained, indifferent, and Noren's camera is a pathetic instrument which the women before it continually elude, despite appearances. I am personally reminded of the close of Robert Kelly's poem *Orpheus*, in which the songster boldly announces that the allure of his music has come to take possession of her who had inspired it in the first place:

Lady

integrable  
with my needs I abash  
before the selfish  
will of my will,  
my vajra vigor  
claims you my  
songs understand you—

The lady's answer is ironic and beautiful:

"Them?  
I have heard  
those programs before,  
baked in sunday childhood boring  
as before,  
nonetheless I rise to you  
along the Avenue of Dogs  
the clement ever clement  
weather of late Hell  
to attend your  
noises,  
never  
hope to see me  
as I am."

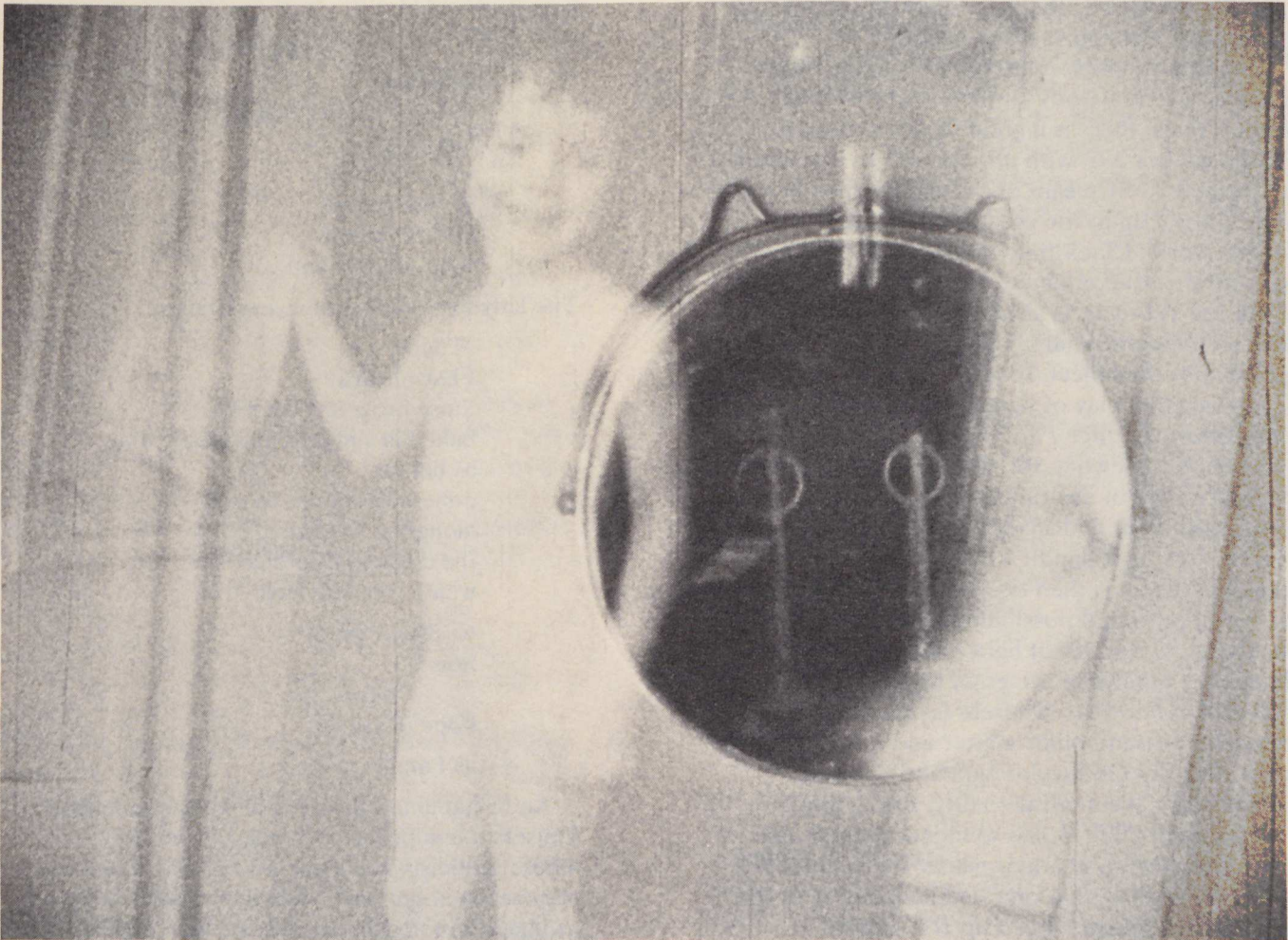
And what about the poet/filmmaker as a figure himself, our supposed personal diarist, Noren, whose eroticism and great gift for evoking such concentrated sympathy with the world of objects around him reminds one in some ways of John Keats? For like Keats, Noren displays a subtle morbidity, a longing for self-immolation. *False Pretenses* begins with what appear to be shots cribbed from old Hollywood films. There is a flash of lightning; a man falters, apparently on his way to



the gallows. At the end of the film, we see a photograph of Noren, asleep, almost as if death were the true end of the quest, the film, all of which takes place in an eternal split-second. And whenever our personal filmmaker is caught alone before the camera, there is always the deliberately slow gait, the dangling cigarette, the pensive facial expression, and the boots, the jade jewelry. One guesses that like James's Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse*, Noren feels uneasy about having his

formal portrait taken. Not wanting to be caught, he takes up the mask of a poseur; he clutches a role. As a consequence, as a metaphor, Noren's own real subject, himself, remains elusive as well. In the beginning of *The Phantom Enthusiast*, Noren is a mere shadow and ultimately he remains so throughout all of his films. It was Keats, too, who said that the true poet had no personality to speak of, that he gave himself totally to the world, the unknown, the unsure.

**John Pruitt**



*from Huge Pupils*