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Post Everything

This week on Post Everything, host **Ali Lopez** spoke with filmmaker **Alex Mackenzie**. His film, *Intertidal*, will be making its West Coast premiere at the 15th annual **Antimatter Film Festival** coming up this weekend.



Intertidal, 2012

Alex Mackenzie is an experimental film artist working primarily with analog film equipment and hand process imagery. His films have been screened around the world. His latest film, *Intertidal* is a 16mm x 2 analytic projector performance. *Intertidal* is inspired by the work of 1940s marine scientist Ed Ricketts and the technical approach of French filmmaker Jean Painlevé. The film presents a submersive exploration of the tidal zones and marine life off the shores of British Columbia while travelling as far west as Nootka Sound here on Vancouver Island and north to the tip of Naikoon on Haida Gwaii. Ali spoke with Mackenzie about the film, the process of making the piece, and his inspiration.

Link to original interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/cfuvposteverything/post-everything-antimatter>

Transcript below:

(Transcript is slightly edited/abridged for flow and easier reading.)

Your film *Intertidal* is comprised not only of live manipulation but you are also utilizing two 16mm analytic projectors. What sort of live manipulation can people expect?

Well, first off, 16mm analytic projectors are a technological relic originally built to alter the speed of film footage. They were actually used in sports – football specifically. So people would film the game

and then the coaches would get together with the team afterwards and study the plays – saying you should have gone right here instead of left, that kind of thing – by analyzing the film. They were also used in scientific circumstances, filming things at high speed and then looking at them slowed down on these projectors. So I am taking these machines and repurposing them for this show. In terms of manipulation the most obvious one is that I am going to be slowing down and speeding up the images that I have recorded. Beyond that, I am actually interfering with the light that is cast from the projectors on to the screen, and by interfering I mean I am intercepting it with either lenses or gels and also with my hands, to create dimness or flicker, and changing the shape of the image. Sometimes I am actually removing the lens so there is just a cast of light and not an actual image. So there are a lot of different things going on. And because there are two projectors I am also working with the framed images, so sometimes they are one on top of the other, overlaid, and other times they are side by side.

Are there any specific frames within your film that you cue yourself with in order to do that? Is there a certain atmospheric ambiance that you are trying to create at certain points throughout the film with the light manipulation?

It is actually a very composed piece. There is room for improvisation but it is clearly delineated for me where I do certain things and what I am going to be doing. I have a sort of log beside me while I am performing to remind myself where I am at, like sheet music. It is an hour-long piece so there is a fair bit of information to be going through. So I have that to guide me through what happens: when I bring the projectors together, when they come apart. And there are short black spaces between shots where I can freeze the projectors if I need to. So I have some latitude, but overall I've got a pretty clear idea of how I am going to execute the piece on any given performance. And yes, there is an ambiance that is directly related to the play of light on the screen.

You reference two main influences, two very important people in their fields – Ed Ricketts and Jean Painlevé. And I know Jean put a really heavy emphasis on the technique of slow motion and blurring and accelerating the speeds in his films – is that where you drew that influence to do the same in your films, especially using such an old form with the analytic projectors?

Well, he wouldn't have been doing that himself, specifically his manipulations would have been in camera or he used optical printing, because he would have been showing these films that he makes on a regular projector. But he definitely would fall in to the category of scientific use for manipulation of images, because certainly he was filming some things that were moving quite rapidly in the water and he would want to slow these down so that we as an audience would be able to see what was actually going on, for example.

Ed Ricketts is best known as an ecologist as well as heavily influencing John Steinbeck's writing. They were pals, and John Steinbeck considered him his greatest muse. Some people know, but the book *Cannery Row* is very much based on Ed Ricketts and the character "Doc" is in fact an emulation of Ricketts.

Apparently also in *The Grapes of Wrath* he influenced the character Casey as well, who was kind of loosely based on Ed Ricketts.

Yeah that's right – you can see Ed Ricketts in a lot of Steinbeck characters. And so I became interested in Ed Ricketts' work on the west coast here in Canada though he was based in the States, in California, back in the '40s. And at the same time I was taking an interest in Ed Ricketts I was also taking a renewed interest in the work of Jean Painlevé. And coincidentally shortly after I started this project and as luck would have it, Criterion put out a collection of Painlevé's work, so that suddenly made it a whole lot easier to see his work, though I had seen a few of his pieces in the past. So these guys were both working around the same time at the heights of their careers, one in France and one on the West Coast of North America, doing very different things, but both involved with marine life and an interest in ecology. Ricketts was strictly a scientist and collector of specimens, and spent his time exploring the various marine life we find on the west coast and their successes and failures given man's intrusion on nature. Painlevé was over in France creating these films and getting more and more interest from the Surrealists who at the time were in their heyday, whereas the scientific community at the time really didn't have a lot of interest in what Painlevé was doing. But the Surrealist community took him on and championed his work because the kind of things he was filming, most famously things like seahorses, were really quite striking and fit in to the shape and form of what the Surrealists were doing at the time. And so I had access to both of these guys and their work and interests and I thought wouldn't it be interesting to imagine what would have happened had these two men met way back then and what that meeting might have looked like in terms of an output of cinema. And so, at the time of Ricketts' death he was just on the verge of heading back after an initial trip to complete a journey up the west coast of Canada, on the west coast of Vancouver Island and then up to Haida Gwaii. His plan was to go up there and continue to study the area with Steinbeck. And then, suddenly, he was struck by a train in his car right by Cannery Row. So that life and that journey ended far sooner than anyone expected. John Steinbeck was devastated and so that chapter ended and he never had the chance to head back up here. So I thought wouldn't it be interesting to retrace his steps and explore the same areas that he was planning on exploring and had explored. I studied a lot of what he wrote at the time and researched where he might have been going and where he had been and thought wouldn't it be great to revisit these places. And then with Jean Painlevé in my back pocket I decided I was going to try and research and film in similar ways that Painlevé might have filmed had he done this trip. When Painlevé was filming – this is a guy who precedes Jacques Cousteau in terms of filming underwater, long before people had tanks on their backs and there wasn't any easy way to film underwater for one – he spent a lot of time researching and inventing ways to do so that included having two guys – it's sort of comedic – up top cranking a turbine that was feeding him air while he was under water. There is also a hilarious account of these guys arguing about whose turn it was to crank while he was starving for air underwater and him coming up and saying what are you guys doing? I need air down there! So I didn't do any of that myself, but I did create a few little mechanisms for filming, I used an underwater housing for an old Bolex camera that I actually borrowed from somebody at the Bamfield Marine Science Centre, another area where Ricketts was planning on going and had gone.

That's exactly what Painlevé did – he constructed a box in order to submerge his camera underwater.

That's right. And of course the lower you go the more pressure there is so you have to make these boxes pretty strong to make sure the glass doesn't bust in with the pressure and soak your camera. Of course his equipment was much larger than what we have today. I definitely wanted to both emulate an imagining of what might have happened with these two guys and also come up with my own ideas

about where things might have gone for them and also just take it into my own zone of inquiry of how I imagine things looking. My work is much more abstract than a lot of what Painlevé was doing but the marine life is still there and the proximity of it. There is a lot of magnification. Then I move into a terrain that is, as I say, much more abstract where I am creating rayograms or photograms – rayograms being the term we use when we think of Man Ray who popularized photograms which is essentially when you lay material on to the photographic paper and then cast light on the paper so you get a shadowy effect of whatever the object is on top as oppose to an actual photo. So I was doing that with a lot of marine life, literally placing it on 16mm film and getting photograms. So that is some of the abstract material that I have in my piece as well as more conceptual ideas like throwing loose film into the water and letting the tides scratch it up and pulling it out and processing it and seeing what I get. There are some really tactile elements to the show as well as very abstract elements and then much more actual imagery that you would recognize as marine life. It is an interesting piece, it really moves in a lot of different directions, but the overarching thematic really is about the fragility of sea life and the fragility of life, finally. It's a fairly moody piece and I am pretty happy with it. It is a lot of fun to perform as well.

I think it is very interesting that you drew influences from people who were so heavily immersed in marine life in the past and how that is still something that is extremely relevant in contemporary society, that we have issues where our marine life is in danger. The fact that it draws attention to our specific region of marine life and displays the fragility is something much more familiar to contemporary eyes. Not that the environment wasn't suffering in the past... is that something that was unintentional or would you just consider it a cultural byproduct of the subject matter?

It is interesting to ask the question of were we concerned or preoccupied with this back in the '40s and I would say that in studying Ricketts' work he was certainly preoccupied with it – being an ecologist before the term was even being widely used. He was someone who had great concern about the depletion of marine life on the west coast and around the world through overfishing and pollution that, as you say, are things we are much more familiar with today and are much more broadly understood. He wrote articles about this kind of stuff all the time back then, famously quoted when asked Where have all the sardines gone? They're in cans – the stocks of sardines where he was living at the time were really low and it was an issue even then. He expressed a lot of concern about this but he wasn't getting a lot of response from the government or the general population the way we might be getting a little bit more of now, but realistically we are still obviously in big trouble. We are not reacting to these issues of ocean health nearly to the degree that we should be. I certainly take an interest in these issues in a more broad sense with regards to the direction that we are taking as human beings on the planet, which has always been a great interest and preoccupation of mine. And so when I started investigating this material, that was certainly at the forefront of my mind and was really why I was put on to even start looking at Ed Ricketts' work and start researching this stuff. So it's certainly not coincidental, but it is kind of shocking the parallels to be found with regards to the state of the ocean back then and his concerns and how we continue those concerns and then have new strange things that we are doing like farming Atlantic salmon off the Pacific Coast. I think we are much more clued in to it here on the west coast because we are living it. And there will come a day in the very near future where we won't be able to order that fish on our plate the way that we could have in the past and not only that, but it may not be a very healthy meal.

It's already the reality for many people in certain areas where there have been repercussions from oil spills where fishermen have no choice but to feed their families toxic fish, and that is actually a very sad reality.

We are doing a pretty lousy job of managing our resources. And it never ceases to amaze me the ignorance that people maintain and choose, really, to ignore what is going on.

I think also one major contributing factor is the disproportionate access there is to information, and I think that a lot of the ignorance is due to the fact that a lot of people don't even have access to the information that would dispel their ignorance, which is also another failure in contemporary society.

It is such a great irony that we live in the so-called information age where there is all sorts of information and yet people living in large urban centres going to Macdonalds for a burger have no clear idea of what they are eating or that you know, for example, there are a hundred cows in that burger, those kind of factoids that are shocking and disturbing. But I still firmly believe that as much as it is hard to access information, those who do have access and live in information rich areas continue to turn their head the other way because they don't want to take responsibility for their actions. They have become quite accustomed to living the so-called good life, which is a life defined – at least in western culture – as one of a lack of responsibility, and not taking on the essential responsibilities that needs to be taken. And corporations are certainly responsible for part of that, for pushing things and presenting options that individuals feel they have to partake in or participate in, and certainly our western culture, the shape of it, has a lot to do with that ignorance as well.

It's also interesting the parallels of the way culture seems to go cyclically, or tends to respond in the same way. I feel like the Surrealists and the work that Jean Painlevé were doing was a reaction to the culture at their time, a revolt against the norm, to the rise of commercialization that was just beginning then. And now it is so prominent to the point that it is so blatantly obvious I feel there is another return to the revolt back against that and I think forms of art are now starting to return to analog forms of production, whether it be photography going back to real film or cinema, we are now seeing a lot more experimentation with the actual film itself instead, a kind of turn away from the technological age that we are headed to and the rise of technology, going back to analog instead of digital. Do you feel that is something that you can agree with, that artistically it is that sort of response?

Well, in terms of being a retro-age there are certainly earmarks that are reflections of the past that seem to be coming into contemporary popular culture as well as the artistic community. I have been working in this medium for long enough now that when I started in it, it was the defacto standard, 16mm film for example. I didn't have an option when I started doing this in the early '90s, it was just the beginning of having the availability of consumer products like video cameras on a cheap and wide basis and the quality was poor. I was coming from a film background and studying film so my interest was with film at that time and continues to be with film, though that doesn't mean I don't also take an interest in video and digital technology. I guess my fear is that as much as, yeah, there is a reaction to the digital age and interest in getting back to things that are a bit more analog, I think there is also a significant commercial interest in that which makes me less comfortable with it. Something as seemingly banal as Instagram for example, using all sorts of filters that emulate old film stocks, is a

harkening back to a time that most people who use Instagram never even saw and have never even experienced and don't even realize what these filters are, where they come from, what a film stock can do or can't do. Not that this ignorance is central or of a concern to me, just that it is a product that has become something that is bought and sold, and it is a little strange to me that we continue to look back. It's almost like we have come as far as we can and now we have to turn around again and gather up our information from the past and see what we can do with it. The concern for me is that it feels a lot like more and more commercialization of this stuff. It's not like we lived in innocent times a hundred years ago or 50 years ago – everything was commercialized. Another work of mine addresses those particular issues - the advent of cinema and how initially these sort of things were interesting and oddball, brand new. Nobody even knew what cinema could be, but it was in very short order clamped on to by the potential of money making as oppose to hobbyism, or just curiosity or something you do in your leisure, that didn't have any profit motives behind it. And in its advent, cinema was just a way that people had learned to make moving images, to be able to reflect photographs in a moving sequence as oppose to a static series, and within a year of that invention they were already standardizing it and moving from about a hundred different formats with different gauges and millimeters and camera and projector formats and reducing it down to some very homogeneous material of projection and of image-gatherin. In no time we were dealing with something that was really a product almost straight out of the gate, and that is when we started making decisions about the way that we saw the world through cinematic eyes as something not that different than a play in terms of containing a narrative, a beginning, a middle and an end. It seems to me that there was a moment there where we could have gone in different directions with it, and we didn't have to be telling a conventional story the way that we look at Hollywood today and see. And that is the site of interest for me, moving away from story and more into an abstract and expressionistic terrain that doesn't have anything to do with the telling of a tale.

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