

Waving the Flag of Naughtiness: “Friends with Benefits” at Film Society of Lincoln Center

BY CRAIG HUBERT | FEBRUARY 05, 2016



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A still from Benjamin Crotty's "Fort Buchanan."
(Courtesy Film Society of Lincoln Center)

Benjamin Crotty, Gabriel Abrantes, Daniel Schmidt, and Alexander Carver — the filmmakers whose work is the focus of the new series “Friends with Benefits,” at the Film Society of Lincoln Center — don’t actually make films, at least not in the traditional sense: Their creations straddle a line, appealing to both a movie and an art audience, suited equally to a black box and a white cube. And although the four share formal and narrative concerns and techniques, occupying a middle ground between Andy Warhol avant-garde and television movies of the week, and collaborate in different combinations, they are reluctant to define themselves as a movement, or a school, or even a group.

“There’s a strong community,” Abrantes admits after prodding. “[But] I don’t think we have the presumption to call ourselves anything that we would brand with a word like ‘mumblecore.’ It’s just a few friends, and I think we have crossed paths long enough.”

The four filmmakers emphasize that those paths are part of a larger creative network within which they situate themselves while also standing somewhat apart. “I think being in conversation with fellow artists and filmmakers [like Ben Rivers, Ben Russell, and Mati Diop], as well as other thinkers, has been, every year, more and more of a substantial and nurturing and inspiring thing,” Schmidt says. “But I feel like the work that we make is pretty different from what Russell or what Rivers does, to a certain extent. But from an alien point of view, it’s similar.”

Abrantes, Crotty, and Carver all started as painters but found the insularity stifling. “I was initially kind of seduced by the solitary, hermetic aspect of painting,” says Crotty, who studied painting at Yale. “And then with time you start to see all the downsides and drawbacks to it.” The collaborative nature of moviemaking was a welcome contrast.

“You’re in the studio alone, and it lost any of the significance that art has for me, which is as a community thing,” says Abrantes. “Film was that.”

While still an undergraduate at Cooper Union, in New York, where he and Carver met while studying art, Abrantes codirected “Olympia I & II” (2006) with Kate Widloski. The nine-minute film sets the tone that imbues much of his later work. It consists of two sections representing two different takes on Manet’s famous painting, with first Widloski and then Abrantes playing the reclining nude, complete with provocative stare. All the dialogue, on screen and off, is dubbed, giving it an extra layer of distance. Both sections subvert the original’s narrative and assumptions about sexual and racial dynamics, engaging in a playful artistic code switching that Carver identifies as a theme running through all four filmmakers’ work.

Abrantes’s next collaborations were with Crotty, with whom he became friends at Le Fresnoy, the National Studio for Contemporary Arts in France. In “Visionary Iraq” (2009), the two play all the roles, including a Portuguese brother and his Angolan half-sister, who are leaving home to join Operation Iraqi Freedom, and their parents. The film resembles both a performance piece — it was shot in a gallery, where Abrantes and Crotty spent a month building the sets and writing the script—and a home movie made by teenagers exploring the fluidly erotic potential of war. In its unrefined campiness, “Visionary Iraq” contrasts strongly with “Liberdade” (2011), in which the two filmmakers, according to Crotty, “wanted to produce a very weird, neutral, Hollywood-ian glaze over the film,” exhibiting an almost total absence of humor.

This pendulum swing between playfulness and gravity is manifested in different ways in the oeuvre of all four artists. In Abrantes’s solo work — “Too Many Daddies, Mommies, and Babies” (2009), “Baby Back Costa Rica” (2011), “Ennui Ennui” (2013), “Taprobana” (2014), and “Freud und Friends” (2015) — humor has been an increasingly dominant element. “Something like ‘Visionary Iraq’ was a reaction to what happened after two decades of postmodernism and people getting sick of art meaning very little in most cases,” the artist says. “I’m exploring comedy right now for a lot of the same reasons —trying to make people laugh because that is almost a firm confirmation that a connection is being made. If

somebody laughs, the thing is working.” This trend is also evident in Abrantes’s collaborations with Schmidt — “A History of Mutual Respect” (2010), “Palaces of Pity” (2011) — where comedic elements coexist with increasingly political statements.

Two recent works by members of the group depart from the earlier ones in actively, and successfully, attempting to meld humor with seriousness. Schmidt and Carver’s “The Unity of All Things,” the most ambitious film in the series, combines science fiction with erotic melodrama in a loose narrative that encompasses particle physics, gender swapping and teenage angst. “On a certain level that film was radically opaque,” Carver says. “There is a lot of humor, but it’s lost on people because there is an austerity to it initially. So I think cinema audiences can watch that film, certain cinema audiences, and see it as very sincere and moving, like the poetic avant-garde, and other cinema audiences can find it very grating, pretentious, and absolutely alienating.”

Similarly, Crotty’s latest work, “Fort Buchanan” — which comprises four sections corresponding to the four seasons, each exploring a different mood—represents an attempt at tragicomedy. The film, which screened at New Directors/New Films last year and will receive a weeklong theatrical release as part of the the Film Society series, “has these extremely hilarious moments but then moments where you’re really connecting with these characters,” says Crotty. To which Abrantes adds, “I think that’s a direction we’re definitely both going.”

Crotty, Abrantes, Schmidt, and Carver are all currently busy with different projects. Carver, who has lately returned to painting, is working with Schmidt on a project whose ultimate form is as yet unclear. Crotty, having just finished his first documentary, is collaborating on a film with James Kienitz Wilkins, another Cooper Union classmate of Abrantes and Carver, and mulling over ideas for a television show. Abrantes, the most prolific of the group, has already completed a new film in collaboration with Ben Rivers and is working on a series for Portuguese television. Like Carver, he has returned to painting and is also making ceramics in his studio, but within something closer to what he calls a “cinematic structure,” with the same sense of collaboration and community.

“We’ve taken it as our mission and with the flag of perversion or naughtiness,” Abrantes says. “It’s a logic to our work that spans the choice of using nonprofessional actors and dubbing a whole film, which is considered wrong. It even guides my interest in ceramics, which is something I’ve never really done before. We’re always doing things wrong as an emancipatory message: Yes, you can be an amateur, you can do all of this stuff. That’s exhilarating.”