

Army Wives, Incest and Uncomfortable Racial Politics in “Friends with Benefits,” at the Film Society of Lincoln Center

BY SARAH SAVOLAARA

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Fort Buchanan

Friends with Benefits: An Anthology of Four New American Filmmakers

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The four filmmakers in Lincoln Center’s “Friends with Benefits” retrospective— Benjamin Crotty, Gabriel Abrantes, and Brooklyn residents Daniel Schmidt and Alexander Carver—share an obsessive commitment to distilling the perfect cocktail of high- and low-brow cinema. Amid colonial, literary and scatological pursuits, the directors mine situational satire through deadpan dialogue, locked-off camerawork and anachronistic aesthetics to varying degrees of success. With a weeklong run as the series centerpiece, it is perhaps fitting that Crotty’s *Fort Buchanan* is the most effective and cohesive offering across the six programs. In his feature debut, Crotty

doubles down on Shklovsky's "making strange" device by re-contextualizing dialogue from American soap operas as the stilted bargaining chips amongst a handful of French army wives and husbands, including the protagonist Roger, whose beloved Frank is off waging war in Djibouti. The quotidian aspects of the titular camp, a far cry from "don't ask, don't tell"-dom, are innately queered by this bizarrely direct language and Crotty's disorienting editing tactics—namely his use of extreme close-ups to punctuate a given scene when you least expect it. He has fun with the premise, too, teasing the stereotype of the repressed army wife in waiting by having a slew of characters compete for the affections of Roger's tetchy daughter in a series of amusing seductions.

While Crotty accounts for explorations of gender and sexuality through his narrative framework, such tropes can appear more deliberately put on in the work of his collaborators. American sexual colonialism is the central and only preoccupation of Abrantes and Schmidt's *A History of Mutual Respect*, which sees the two directors playing shallow, blissed-out men in Brasilia on the hunt for "clean girls" to fuck. It's supposed to play as an indictment of the entitled American male abroad, but it trades anger for a low-key absurdism that almost puts the viewer at ease. Abrantes in particular is more comfortable diverting where you'd expect him to push the envelope. His two best films in the series, *Freud und Friends* and *Ennui Ennui*, strut some ribald formal satire of reality TV, Obama and Afghan arms dealers but occasionally trade shock value for a committed response to the issues he probes, like, say, a pantomimed rape scene devolving into a fart joke.



Olympia I & II

On the other hand, his short *Olympia I & II*, co-directed by Katie Widloski, translates the Manet painting into two vignettes primed for optimum discomfort. The first casts Abrantes behind the camera as Olympia's estranged, incestuous sibling, whose gaze and unseen presence function almost as a proxy for the painter; in the second, Abrantes plays the titular prostitute, while his "Mammy" Widloski, done up in blackface, consoles him on a night of slow business, eventually transferring her paint onto his face as they swap spit. The latter reads as a muddled attempt to invert the power dynamic between the women in the painting, imagining the servant as a madam, but it mainly leaves the viewer with an unsettled feeling toward its depiction of race.

As the earliest piece of work in the retrospective, *Olympia I & II* sets forth the group's fascination with incest (Schmidt and Carver's *The Unity of All Things* casts actresses to play brothers in lust), but more crucially, the disconnect between the delivery of language and its intentions. *Olympia* is dubbed and subtitled in Portuguese, while its actors speak in the hushed, collected whispers that become Abrantes's trademark. Both he and Crotty employ the timbre to disquieting effect in *Visionary Iraq*, a

standout short about an incestuous brother (Crotty) and his adopted sister (Abrantes in blackface) on the eve of deployment, which includes the zinger, “I guess, I mean Iraqi democracy is still worth fighting for.” The film is shot in deeply saturated red hues that preempt off-screen bloodshed, and the dialogue—and at times, the picture—is conspicuously out of sync with its subtitles, suggesting a rupture between the characters and their supposed convictions. With sets constructed out of the sort of metallic upholstery found in industrial basements, *Visionary Iraq* is also one of the only lower-budget films showcased in the series. The majority of the works in “Friends With Benefits” feature cross-continental excursions and bold visual effects suggesting that the only way for these four American directors to realize this scope of whimsy was to pack it in and take it abroad.