

*"When I shoot a film,
the tension between narrative
and abstraction is crucial.
Because I've learned about
cinema through films
by painters. Through their
way of reworking film and not
adhering to the traditional
cinematic rules that govern it.
It's never mattered to me what
the industry tells you to do or
not do – and this continues
to be my concern nowadays."*
Gus Van Sant

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Gus Van Sant is the first exhibition to be dedicated to the American film director, contemporary artist and photographer, whose work was shown in 2011 at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. An emblem of bold and radical cinema, Gus Van Sant is an eminently paradoxical director, deftly weaving in and out of independent and mainstream circles, as witnessed by his successful movies *Good Will Hunting* and *Milk*, produced by Hollywood movie Studios, acclaimed by the public and winners of several prestigious awards (Best Actor in a supporting role for Robin Williams and Best Actor for Sean Penn, respectively).

Modern heir to the Beat Generation, embracing its political and provocative values (so much so that he conceives several underground projects with writer William S. Burroughs), Van Sant is by definition the director of youth caught in the turmoil of its passion for life. He creates a feeling of intimacy with his shots of skateboarders, students and rock/grunge musicians, at the margins of an adult world that rejects

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TO THE PERSONNEL IN THE HALL OR AT THE INDICATED STAND.
VISITORS ARE REMINDED THAT THE AREA IS UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE.**

them. A passion for arrogant and seducing bodies that we recognize in his Polaroid images of the 80/90's immortalizing those who would become modern-day movie stars (Joaquin Phoenix, Keanu Reeves, Nicole Kidman, Matt Damon, Uma Thurman, Ben Affleck, granting them the status of eternal youth), in his photos collages, large size stylized watercolors (evocative of David Hockney's or Elizabeth Peyton's works), as well as in his videos.

The exhibition dives into Gus Van Sant's protean artistic universe. Unfolding along an organized discourse, it presents his plastic art works, his movies, as well as his original collaborations with other artists, such as William Eggleston, Bruce Weber, M. Blash or David Bowie, in particular, focusing on his direct relationship with perception, on his unique sense of space, where dreamlike images and reality meet: from the infinite undulation of the desert in *Gerry*, the high school labyrinth in *Elephant* and the orthogonal grid pattern of Portland streets in *Mala Noche* to the curves of the disreputable skate park in *Paranoid Park*.

Matthieu Orléan, curator

PHOTOGRAPHY

Gus Van Sant bought his first camera when he was sixteen. But it was not until 1975, after his graduating in artistic studies, that he began to focus on photography. Film was still in the realm of fantasy. Photography, being more immediate and solitary, was thus pivotal in his career.

During the mid 80s, while in Portland preparing to shoot his first feature films *Mala Noche* and then *Drugstore Cowboy*, Van Sant got hold of a Polaroid with an excellent lens that functioned with negatives. He would use it spontaneously, to immortalize places and especially people who inspired him. The eye of his lens captured hundreds of actors, actresses, writers and anonymous individuals, all exceptionally talented and compelling. What matters for Van Sant is personal charisma, the play of light and shadow. With disarming naturalness, and without excessive conceptualization, he surrenders to the impact of a literally chemical encounter with these bodies, giving rise to strange solarisation effects on the photographic print.

As a revealer of star-quality in alternative America, Andy Warhol had his Screen Tests. Van Sant has his Polaroids: they have the power to reveal sublimation as it happens, that decisive moment when desire takes shape, and when imagination supersedes reality. Van Sant discarded his Polaroid in the late 90s. But he continued to photograph, in parallel to his films, whether shooting pictures for a fashion magazine or for a rock band. A deliberate way of pushing limits, of honing his penchant for composition, and above all, of seeking sources of inspiration beyond the cinematic context.

CINEPARK

Gus Van Sant's filmmaking is the light-sensitive plate of America's postmodern era (post Pop, post New Hollywood, post militancy). He is a figurehead of indie films and promoter of an artistic freedom that irradiates from the margins. Without proclaiming a manifesto. Every single one of his sixteen feature films arouses astonishment and bewilderment, due to their complex narrative structure and quirky rhythm. With a predominantly male slant, violence and desire, melancholy and humor are never portrayed as opposites.

Van Sant's heterogeneous filmography compels us to rethink what comprises an auteur of cinema. He continuously covers his tracks and starts again from scratch, with each film embarking on a new cinematic dream. Sometimes the dream consists of taking shelter in the Studios, where hierarchy and rules protect his craftsmanship. At other times, the dream is a quest for unconditional freedom: ardently self-produced experimental films, culminating in his 21st century "Death Tetralogy" (Gerry, Elephant, Last Days, Paranoid Park, capped in 2011 by Restless), a series of radical formal experiments that gracefully and piercingly redefine American spaces. Desert, high school, forest, and skate park have never come across so poetically and disturbingly.

Van Sant is in sync with the pulse, whether real or unconscious, of his country: the America of outcasts, of media invasion and of imperiled ecology, yet also the America that invented an irreverent and 'on the road' way of being in the world. His films flirt with dreamscapes and psychedelicism, while paradoxically conveying a deeply human chord of contemporary cinema. Gus Van Sant is an ever-evolving artist.

CONSTELLATIONS

Gus Van Sant has been living in Portland since 1983. This forest-rimmed city with an unspectacular topography is transformed by his camera into a place of encounters and fictions, with a group spirit: the gang of junkie outlaws in Drugstore Cowboy, the band of "Dharma bums" in My Own Private Idaho, or the street kids in Paranoid Park.

Much like a chronicle of Portland, Mala Noche reveals the city's working-class neighborhoods and horde of illegal Mexican immigrants. This expressionist drama, which employs chiaroscuro and low-angle shots, is a free adaptation of the novel written in 1977 by Portland native and beatnik poet-artist Walt Curtis. Van Sant has preserved the flavor of the Beat Generation's political and sexual views, which reach a climax in Milk, a biopic about the renowned gay militant who was assassinated. Van Sant acknowledged the Beat Generation leaders as spiritual fathers, such as the writer William S. Burroughs, whom he directed in three films. In the short film A Thanksgiving Prayer, Burroughs faces the camera as he reads his vitriolic poem against imperialistic America.

Nurtured by this underground past, Van Sant jubilantly undermines cinematic codes. He underscores the importance of working within a community that is bound by trust, amid a constellation of trustworthy influences. Such was the case, for instance, with the actors Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, who were also cowriters of *Gerry*. A penchant for risk that explicitly comes across in *Psycho* and *Elephant*, both of which were devised in a play of filiations: with Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which Van Sant copied shot-for-shot; and with Brit Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), which refers to the metaphorical elephant in the living room, which everyone ignores. In these violence-haunted films, Gus Van Sant probes the social context, such as in *Good Will Hunting*, where the hero is a reckless delinquent on the road to becoming a mathematical genius. Gus Van Sant films youth with depth and sensuality, while paying homage to his precursors with originality and liberty.

PAINTING

Paintings and drawings have figured among Gus Van Sant's output at various stages in his life. Several collages date back to the 70s, whereas his series of large-scale watercolors displayed at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles was made in 2011. Some of these watercolors capture on canvas dreamlike flashes, mesmerizing visions against a backdrop of desert wilderness in the American West. Others are portraits of unknown teenagers with defiant faces clipped from the Internet, with a brushstroke that brings to mind certain portraits by David Hockney. Surrealist humor is juxtaposed with youthful turmoil.

For Van Sant, the activity of painting is independent from his films. Nevertheless, there are conspicuous bridges between both mediums, heightening the consistency of an oeuvre that abounds in recurring motifs. On canvas, the naked giant walking on Los Angeles recalls the heroine's oversized thumb in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. The unhinged Elvis playing golf recalls Janice's arching back as she figure-skates on the very lake where the body of her hated sister-in-law (played by Nicole Kidman) is hidden, in *To Die For*. Whereas the man in burgundy sweats recalls the hero's weariness in *Last Days*.

Van Sant's painting is amateur, in the etymological sense of one who loves. Painting has enabled him to create a working space that reveals moments of sheer emotion. Gus Van Sant never tells about his life; he tames and metaphorizes it, especially in his paintings. He paints his childhood home. He paints the landscapes that have shaped him. He paints the murky objects of his desire. He paints his icons. He paints his demons.

MUSIC

Gus Van Sant has turned film music, though its broad diversity, into a language in its own right: specially composed soundtracks (country songs sung by K.D.Lang for *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*); classical works (Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* illuminating the grey sky in *Elephant*); or songs created by Van Sant himself, who performs in *Mala Noche* and *Restless*, thus completing the circle of a multi-medium approach to filmmaking.

Each of Van Sant's films features this musical counterpoint to the image, thereby unsettling the plot. Music is conceived as a friction zone between what is seen and what is felt: an echo chamber for the characters' inner journeys. Out of all his films, *Last Days*, made in 2005, is the one that most deftly explores this layered soundscape. The film highlights the last days of the singer Kurt Cobain, who before committing suicide tried to break free from the claws of show business. Intentionally frustrating and stunning the audience, Van Sant did not incorporate a single number by Nirvana, and instead asked Michael Pitt, the main actor, to compose part of the soundtrack. The film thus features *Venus in Furs* by Velvet Underground, *Doors of Perception* by Hildegard Westerkamp as well as *On Bended Knee* by the R&B vocal group Boyz II Men, whose music video Gus Van Sant daringly shows at length within the film.

The music video format, which straddles art and commerce, is especially fascinating due to its unclassifiable nature. Since 1990, the director of *My Own Private Idaho* has made a number of them, for David Bowie, for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and for Hanson. At the junction between music and film, the music video is marked by a dazzle that links it to the tradition of experimental film, to which Gus Van Sant undeniably belongs.