

2009 Wisconsin Film Festival, Day Three: The wisdom of crowds

by Linda Falkenstein

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The campus seemed a little empty Saturday as I hopped from film to film, all west of the Library Mall. All three films were about art and artists: *Chuck Close*, *Between the Folds*, and *Immortal Cupboard: In Search of Lorine Niedecker*. The greatest concentration of excitement was at the showing of *Between the Folds* at the Chazen Museum, and the auditorium was sold out, with ushers hunting down every last seat.

Why would *Between the Folds* generate so much more appeal than the documentary about *Chuck Close*, which showed only a few hours earlier to a sparsely populated Wisconsin Union Theater? Especially when you might think that both films would attract similar audiences?

"It's because people can do origami. People can't paint like Chuck Close," suggested filmgoer Scot Ross. That was before the film. *Between the Folds*, an exhilarating documentary about what might be described as extreme origami, should have quickly disabused audience members of their ability to create origami anything like these complex, kinetic sculptures. It would be much easier to come up with an approximation of a Chuck Close portrait.

These practitioners of origami take the art of paper folding far beyond the basic crane into areas that encompass math and science, and take paper from two dimensions to three into a fourth -- movement, choreography.

Between the Folds also had the Meg factor. Does word get out as to which films festival director Meg Hamel will be attending? Hamel limited her pre-screening comment to saying that she was "really looking forward" to director Vanessa Gould's film. Also, Hamel was trying to track down the owner of a copy of Geraldine Brooks' *People of the Book* that had been left at the Bartell earlier in the day "and we have reason to believe this person may be seeing this film here, now." No. It's that personal touch, though, that reminds you just why "We Like It Here." (Opinions vary on how well the campy trailer for this year's fest wears after you see it, oh, four or five times.)

Between the Folds also featured a post-screening q & a with its director and one of the paper folders included in the film. There were many questions for filmmaker Vanessa Gould, including a rather pointed one about why her film showcased primarily male scientist-artists. Gould's answer -- that the women she interviewed didn't really fit the story she was trying to tell -- was unsatisfying, even though she didn't seem the least self-conscious about having to make it. There were even more questions for origami tessellation-maker Eric Gjerde.

The documentary on Chuck Close was also inspiring. Close transformed and intensified his painting, without sacrificing his themes, after he became paralyzed. This was as thorough an explanation of an artist's work as I've seen on film, illuminating and serious. Maybe too serious.

Immortal Cupboard profiled poet Lorine Niedecker, who lived and worked outside of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, for most of her life. She kept company via letter with most of the major poets of the early 20th century. Yet her rural location made her almost invisible. Filmmaker Cathy Cook, who was also on hand for Q&A, attempted to "let Lorine's poems tell their own story," the film assembled as a sort of "collage" with nature visuals, interviews with those who knew Niedecker and sound evocations of the poems.

While not all the collage elements were effective, the film still illuminated new parts of the always enigmatic Niedecker. The audience? The Chazen auditorium wasn't empty, but there were plenty of available seats. This was for a film that won the 2009 Wisconsin's Own Jury Award. Kind of appalling. A few technical problems midway through were solved after about fifteen minutes.

Buzzkill: By Saturday noon, word seemed to be out about how tepid Saturday night sellout *Winter of Frozen Dreams* was. The film about the notorious Barbara Hoffman murder case showed up on the Lifetime channel Friday night -- poor timing for the WFF. The crowd for the Saturday night's showing had to settle for hunting for Governor Jim Doyle (featured very briefly in the film in his then-role as Dane County D.A.) in the ticket line.