

Artists in the Community

Review by Rachel E. Beattie

PORTRAIT OF RESISTANCE: THE ART AND ACTIVISM OF CAROLE CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

Directed/Produced by Roz Owen; Edited/Produced by Jim Miller
anti-amnesiac productions, 2011 (anti-amnesiac.net)

THE DOCUMENTARY *Portrait of Resistance: The Art and Activism of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge* opens with images from the G20 protests in Toronto in 2010; protestors square off against police in full riot gear and, in the middle of this, photographers Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge document the scene. Quickly, the scene shifts to the pair on a shoot at Holland Marsh, Ontario, for backgrounds to their project about migrant workers. The juxtaposition of these two scenes perfectly sets up the multiple levels in Condé and Beveridge's work. The couple, whose easy chemistry and working rapport are completely apparent, are community-

oriented activists but, also, consummate artists creating incredibly well-constructed photo pieces.

Portrait of Resistance is an intimate examination of the work of this legendary Canadian artist duo, whose art (a series of staged photographs) is both incredibly art-literate and full of references to classical art, but also deeply political. The film documents Condé and Beveridge's art and personal history, which is embedded in Canada's social justice movement. Their art covers issues from gender equality, to workers' rights to, in more recent years, a focus on the issues of globalization.

Condé and Beveridge's work has also

focused numerous times on union history and workers' collective action. For instance, they powerfully presented the history of Canadian Auto Workers Local 222, in Oshawa, Ontario, ("Oshawa: A History of Local 222"), as well as documented a strike of female workers in a Barrie, Ontario ("First Contract"). More recently they have documented Canadian Union of Public Employees health care workers' struggles with budget cuts and the general disrespect they receive from governments ("Ill Wind").

Condé and Beveridge are deeply involved in the movements they document. Their work about unions, for example, is a collaboration with the



PHOTOGRAPH: CAROLE CONDÉ AND KARL BEVERIDGE

Set in downtown Toronto during the G20 economic summit in 2010, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's work called "Liberty Lost (G20, Toronto)" is based on Eugene Delacroix's painting "Liberty Guiding the People," painted during the 1830 uprising in Paris.

members from start to finish. They workshop with frontline workers to understand their stories; use them as models in their piece and, finally, show the finished work in a union space. Director Roz Owen explains: "If they're involved with a union, they'll have a show of their work there and you'll see it at the same time in a gallery. They're driven by their core belief in that kind of fairness."

But it isn't just their respectful attitude to others that sets their work apart politically; it is also the content. Documentary filmmaker Ali Kazimi explains in the film: "Not only are they committed to the idea of social justice and the values of collective organizing, but they are also committed to an inclusive vision of the world around them. They take the Western canon and reimagine it radically by including a wide range of people of various cultural and racial backgrounds and they do so in a way that is non-stereotypical and non-clichéd." For example, their work "The Plague," about the financial crisis, links the world's current economic woes with early financial crises, such as the South Sea Bubble in the 1700s, and shows how that crisis affected people in the colonies most of all.

The film is directed by another couple: Roz Owen (director/producer) and Jim Miller (editor/producer). There is a strong temptation when writing about *Portrait of Resistance* to focus mainly on the work of Condé and Beveridge because it is so beautiful and powerful. But the way Owen and Miller have brought all the many strands of these two creative arts

works because it reflects the playfulness and joy in the original photographs.

However, these techniques, which makes Owen and Miller's film so unique and successful, were not a part of the original plan for the film. "The intention was to follow some works that they were doing," says Owen. "But they work so quickly and it took us so long to

"As an artist you have. . . certain responsibilities towards the communities you live in, to give them voice, rather than self-expression and, you know, being 'an artistic genius.'"

KARL BEVERIDGE

workers' lives and work together is masterful. The film, like Condé and Beveridge's art, is brimming with life. The producers have purposely mirrored some of the artists' trademark styles, interviewing the couple in front of a green screen filled in with images from their exhibits. Another technique they use is re-staging famous works by Condé and Beveridge. In these scenes, one of the subjects comes to life and begins to discuss the piece. This technique really

raise the money that, by the time we were ready, they had finished the work we had been proposing to shoot. So we had to re-jig it." Adds Owen's partner Jim Miller: "It forced us to imagine the film in a different way." The result of this practical challenge was the use of the green screen and the recreations. "One of the things I always wondered with their work was, 'What would people say if they stepped out of it?'" says Owen. "Carole and Karl would write



what people had said in interviews in captions below the work, and I just thought, as a filmmaker, that the images looked like film stills."

A documentary stands and falls on its organization and this is another area where *Portrait of Resistance* excels. Owen and Miller show the audience information about Condé and Beveridge in a logical order, each scene building on the next. Each segment flows into one another figuratively and even literally. In one part there's an eloquent transition from Condé and Beveridge's work on water to another segment where the sound of lapping waves seeps into the gallery space, and then the images cut to Condé and Beveridge photographing the Nanticoke Generating Station on the shore of Lake Erie.

Another key element in the success of the film is the music. The songs from artists like Billy Bragg and Afro Celt Sound System are just as culturally and stylistically diverse as the work of Condé and Beveridge. Indeed, one major soundtrack contributor, Oreka TX — a pair of Basque musicians who play a traditional Basque instrument called the *txalaparta* — mirrors Condé and Beveridge's work perfectly. Says Owen: "Oreka TX travel around the world and work with different people that were nomadic, and they made music together. So, they would go through India, Mongolia, and they went to the Sami people in Scandinavia." The music

in the film, then, is a rich collaboration of cultures. However, Oreka TX's methods are even more like Condé and Beveridge's as, says Owen, "they get those musicians to collaborate on this instrument, which is like a xylophone, and they have to figure out how to play together." Miller clarifies: "It is two people playing one instrument." This sort of richly diverse musical collaboration echoes the way that Condé and Beveridge collaborate, both with each other, and with other artists, activists, and workers. The work of Condé and Beveridge is all about community and cooperation.

Portrait of Resistance will be equally appealing to those who already know Condé and Beveridge's work and those who are coming to it for the first time. Owen and Miller provide a succinct overview of the couple's work, but also provide fascinating behind-the-scenes material. For example, one segment shows the mock-ups Condé and Beveridge create, with each of them in the poses their models will then take on. Owen explains: "Carole and Karl's work is very smart and it's very in-depth, and that's why we put those little pieces in, with the mock ups; it shows how carefully they set things up. Every single detail is discussed." As well, Owen and Miller are fortunate to have a pair of artists who are very willing to discuss their art and its meanings. "The thing is," says Owen, "because they are collab-

orating all the time together, the fact is, they are talking out loud. Where, as an individual artist you're just in your head, they have to sort of speak it out." Says Miller: "It made them great subjects for us."

Portrait of Resistance is very much a film about solidarity and the importance of community. But it is also an absorbing portrait of two incredibly talented artists. Foremost, it is an absolute joy to watch. It is inspirational to artists and activists alike.

Rachel E. Beattie is a member of United Steelworkers Local 1998 working in an audio-visual archive. Equally passionate about film and social justice, she is **Our Times'** regular film reviewer.

Portrait of Resistance: The Art and Activism of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge is available through V-Tape (distribution@vtape.org). Roz Owen and Jim Miller have also launched a satirical website called Right Biter: www.rightbiter.ca. You can also visit Condé and Beveridge's website at: <http://www.web.net/~condebev/>.

Portrait of Resistance will be screening on Friday, February 24 at 5 p.m. at Toronto's Bell Lightbox theatre. There will be a panel discussion with three directors from 1:30-3 p.m. also on February 24, including Roz Owen.

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