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Spotlight on little films, big issues

By Heidi Benson, Chronicle Staff Writer

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In 1990 -- a technological ice age ago -- Sadie Benning gained international fame for making a film in her childhood bedroom with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera.

Benning called her exploration of gender identity "If Every Girl Had a Diary," and when asked why she never shot outdoors, she replied, "The cord won't reach that far."

Well, now it does.

Today, thanks to streaming-video Internet sites such as Google Video and YouTube, filmmakers armed with wireless digital camcorders have an instant audience for their work.

Their short-form films adapt well to mobile technologies that are changing the way we consume media.

To celebrate the best of them, the Sixth Annual Media That Matters Film Festival comes to town this week with two screenings of the 16 winning films at the Roxie Film Center in San Francisco.

"The eight-minute form allows for some very artistic expression to happen," says Enrico Cullen of Arts Engine, the New York nonprofit that curates the festival

For this West Coast premiere, Arts Engine has partnered with Bay Area Video Coalition, a resource for local filmmakers for 30 years.

The jury includes Cressida Leyshon, deputy fiction editor of the New Yorker, and Sara Bernstein, director of documentary programming for HBO, plus students, activists,

filmmakers and authors Steven Johnson ("Everything Bad Is Good for You") and Frances Moore Lappe ("Diet for a Small Planet").

What do they look for? High-quality storytelling, use of technology and social content.

"The films that come out through Media That Matters communicate politics through personal story," Cullen says.

Like Benning's Pixelvision 1990 breakthrough, this year's winners investigate the territory where the personal meets the political, covering topics from gay marriage to racial injustice.

This year's jury award winner, "Slip of the Tongue," based on a slam poem by Berkeley poet Adriel Luis, is a prime example.

The film, made by Karen Lum, 17, who will be a senior next year at Skyline High in Oakland, explores gender, politics and race.

The premise is simple. A young man and a girl (played by Lum) are alone at a bus stop. She reacts powerfully to his slip of the tongue, when he asks, "What is your ethnic makeup?" She shoots him a scorching glare, then launches into an impassioned rhyme: "My ethnic makeup? I don't have any. And that s -- my sisters wear on their faces? That's not makeup. That's make-believe."

Lum, who made her first film while she was in eighth grade, created "Slip of the Tongue" in an after-school video program called the Factory, part of the Oakland nonprofit Youth Sounds.

"I thought of all the spoken-word poems I knew, and this one had a perfect story line," Lum says. "I would love to make films that deeply affect people" as much as Luis' poem, which addresses the pressure women feel to conform to a manufactured ideal of beauty.

Lum says that when she was younger, she wanted to be white.

"I felt if I wasn't Asian, I'd be more beautiful or smarter or more charismatic or charming. But eventually, I learned that ethnicity has nothing to do with those things," Lum says.

She's at work on a new short film about racism, based on an incident in her grandfather's life. Years ago, someone wrote "Chinaman" on her grandfather's front door. He painted over the word, and never spoke of it.

"I don't want to be just an artist who emphasizes the aesthetic side of the arts," Lum says. "Why not have a message and try to change the world?"

To view all the films in the Media That Matters Film Festival, go to www.mediathatmattersfest.org.

Media That Matters Film Festival: 7 and 9 tonight. Roxie Film Center, 3117 16th St., San Francisco. (415) 558-2170.
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