

# COMING OF AGE

A CROWD-PLEASING FESTIVAL MARKS ITS NEW PLACE IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

There's no doubt that the TriBeCa Film Festival has had something of a Willy Wonka effect on its community. Each spring, it temporarily transforms the neighborhood into a giant playground where movies come to life—blankets and lawn chairs lined the Hudson for a lavish luau when the animated comedy *Surf's Up* screened, and thousands joined in a zombie dance disco to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. There's also the basketball shooting contests and football theme

park set up for movies premiering on TriBeCa/ESPN Sports Day. Since it was launched from the ashes of 9/11—in just 120 days—more than two million visitors have flocked to the festival, and it has screened over 1,100 films from more than 80 countries. It has also generated more than \$530 million in economic activity for lower Manhattan.

The purpose of most film festivals, however, is not just to screen movies but to sell films to distributors and reach the broadest of audiences. With this in mind, Jane Rosenthal (GAL '77), who co-founded TriBeCa with

Robert De Niro (HON '96), her film partner of more than 20 years, is retooling the festival to be both a neighborhood carnival and a serious cinematic contender. In 2007, she created a year-round industry department to put those who acquire films directly in touch with the artists who make them. That same year, 34 films that premiered at TriBeCa were acquired for distribution—almost double the number from the previous year. Documentaries have found the most success, with *Taxi to the Dark Side* taking home the 2008 Oscar and *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*



EACH SPRING, TRIBECA TAKES OVER THE STREETS OUTSIDE THE FESTIVAL'S FILM SCREENINGS WITH (COUNTERCLOCKWISE) PERFORMERS, GAMES, AND A DRIVE-IN ON THE HUDSON.

landing on the short list this year after both premiered at TriBeCa. “Our birth was about what we could do for our community, so that will always be our roots,” Rosenthal says. But the festival is making its name by striking an unusual balance among the fun, art, and business of film.

Seven years old, TriBeCa is still the new guy amidst a sea of well-established film festivals: Cannes began back in 1946, the New York Film Festival is approaching its 50th run, and even the hip indie-fest Sundance started out as the United States Film Festival in 1978, before Robert Redford transformed it years later. The media was quick to compare TriBeCa to these predecessors and early on criticized it for being too broad and lacking a clear enough identity. “We had so much focus on us and everybody was looking at us and saying, ‘What are you going to be? What are you going to be?’” says Rosenthal, adding that it took years before Sundance established itself with the 1989 screening of *sex, lies, and videotape*.

Right away, though, TriBeCa

was able to separate itself from its uptown neighbor. The New York Film Festival, which *The New York Times* has described as “elitist,” selects just 28 features each year with no competitive categories or prizes. In contrast, TriBeCa recognizes outstanding films with an array of awards for features, shorts, and documentaries, and a handful of prizes for films made in or about New York.

For viewers, the NYFF feels like a private Upper West Side cocktail soiree to TriBeCa’s raucous downtown block party, where the box office hit *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* premiered alongside the chick-flick *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, just blocks from the Oscar-nominated Norwegian film *Elling* during the inaugural festival. “It’s New York and there’s not just one type of filmgoer here,” director of programming David Kwok explains. “You have your cinephiles, but you also have the recreational filmgoer, so our hope is to be able to cross those audiences.”

“The key is to have as many voices as you can and especially voices that are not often explored

or exposed,” adds Sharon Badal (TSOA ’80, GAL ’92), who programs short films for the festival in addition to her role as associate teacher at the Tisch School of the Arts. Those voices come from all over the world, in foreign films that would otherwise have a difficult time reaching U.S. audiences, but also from the festival’s own backyard with community-based cinema like those discovered through the TriBeCa All Access program, which connects filmmakers from underrepresented groups with industry professionals.

As they’ve found their equilibrium over the years, Rosenthal says, the festival has refocused its program by cutting down the number of features it screens to 85 from as many as 174 in 2006. Many critics took note of the change, as Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* wrote last year, “A sign of the festival’s confidence is its willingness to shrink. No longer does it project the panicky sense of an event grabbing too many things offered to it in a mad scramble to demonstrate its size and importance.”

What hasn’t changed is the fo-

cus on its community audience. This year’s festival kicks off with the world premiere of Woody Allen’s *Whatever Works*, which marks his cinematic return to New York after shooting his last four films abroad. And there are still special neighborhood events like the TriBeCa Drive-In outdoor screenings and the Family Festival Street Fair, where costumed characters and performers roam along rows of tents offering local food, arts and crafts, puppet and magic shows, and face painting. “[Here] you don’t have to just be an industry insider to have access to the world of the film festival,” Rosenthal says. “Anybody can come.” And this won’t change because while TriBeCa is finding its place, it hasn’t lost the spirit of why it came into being. Rosenthal explains: “As there were steel workers and firefighters and police who did their jobs, as filmmakers, the only thing we knew how to do was to put on a show.” ■

*The 2009 TriBeCa Film Festival runs from April 22-May 3. For the full lineup, visit [www.tribecafilm.com/festival](http://www.tribecafilm.com/festival).*



LEFT: MICHAEL JACKSON'S *THRILLER* COMES TO LIFE WITH A ZOMBIE DANCE DISCO. RIGHT: FESTIVAL CO-FOUNDERS ROBERT DE NIRO (RIGHT) AND JANE ROSENTHAL, WHO HAS PRODUCED MANY OF THE ACTOR'S FILMS, INCLUDING *MEET THE PARENTS*.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL

# A House Reunited

**A NEW FILM FOLLOWS THE MOVE OF A SOUTHERN PLANTATION—AND RECKONS WITH ITS COMPLICATED PAST**

by Kathryn Robertson / CAS '09

In 2004, historian Robert Hinton received a nervous voicemail from one Godfrey Cheshire, a filmmaker and critic based in New York City. In a lilting North Carolinian accent, Cheshire, who is white, explained that he had seen Hinton's recent letter to the editor in *The New York Times Book Review*, in which he talked about growing up black in Raleigh. He was working on a project related to a plantation near there called Midway. Could they talk?

Hinton knew Midway Plantation; he'd long suspected his grandfather had been born a slave there around 1860 and been given the surname of its owners, the Hintons. Intrigued, he invited Cheshire to his office in NYU's Africana Studies department, and quickly realized that he was sitting before the descendant of his grandfather's former owner. He wanted to dislike him but instead found himself gladly pulled into Cheshire's new film about the relocation of the 160-year-old plantation house. Cheshire's cousin, the current owner, had decided that the best way to preserve the

home, which was now lapped by a new highway and suburban subdivisions, was to hoist the 280-ton building onto wheels and slowly roll it to a new, nearby resting place. Cheshire knew that he could not tell the home's full story without discussing slavery. He needed Hinton's help, both as a scholar and as someone intimately connected to Midway.

The resulting documentary, *Moving Midway*, presents a region full of complexity, emotion, and quirk as it follows the home's physical move and contemplates the mythology surrounding these icons of the Old South and the living legacy of slavery. (During the project, filmmakers discovered another branch of black Hintons who, because of a liaison between an owner and a plantation cook, are not only descendants of Midway's former slaves but also blood relations of Cheshire and his kin.) On balance too is the South's hunger for both modernization, in the form of strip malls and interstates, and its antebellum past. *The New York Times*' A.O. Scott wrote that the film "takes up the agonies and ironies of Southern history

with remarkable empathy, wit, and learning," and *New York* magazine named it runner-up for best documentary film of 2008.

Central to the film is the tension between the perspectives of Cheshire, the writer, director, and co-producer, and Hinton, chief historian and associate producer. For Cheshire, and many of his relatives, the film was an opportunity to indulge in nostalgia, to revel in seven generations of family lore about ghosts and outsize characters. Though the house was built in 1848, it stood on land granted to the family by the English crown in 1739. "As a kid, it was fun for me to go out there on the weekends," he remembers. "The place had an old and magical feeling."

The project linked Hinton with a past not so easily retraced. "I was walking on floors that my great grandmother had swept," he explains. "I slept in a bed she had probably made a thousand times, and I ate at a table where she had served the white folks, and so, while it wasn't an ideal situation, it felt like I was reconnecting."

The big house, the land once filled with tobacco fields, and the

graveyard where Hinton's relatives were buried were testaments to what they endured. "My people built the house, and I wanted it to be preserved as proof of their labor and their skill," he says. "As long as it exists, no one can say that they weren't enslaved."

LEFT: TO ESCAPE SUBURBAN SPRAWL, MIDWAY PLANTATION WAS TRUCKED TO QUIETER PASTURES. RIGHT: HISTORIAN ROBERT HINTON (LEFT) AND FILMMAKER GODFREY CHESHIRE CONSIDER THE MOVE'S MEANING.

In a final scene, Cheshire's cousin hosts an uncommon and unlikely family reunion at Midway, now located three miles north of the original site on a spread of 46 acres. "I would like to think there'll be further contacts between the two branches of the family and maybe even some shared reunions in the future," Cheshire says. "I feel a strong kinship, literally, through our shared interest in family history."

Both he and Hinton consider the film just the first words of a longer, more difficult conversation, which they plan to continue, perhaps in a book, about Midway and the reconciliation between the family's black and white branches. "I want to encourage people—black and white—to talk about slavery," Hinton says. "Because neither want to, and we can't make sense out of racism unless we talk about slavery." ■

# A REAL HOME FOR ART

by Megan Doll/GSAS '08

Not known for its art scene, the Upper West Side is nevertheless where Susan Eley (STEINHARDT '91) decided to open her eponymous art gallery in 2006—in the town house where she lives. “I wanted more of a home environment, something more intimate,” Eley says of the salon-style setting, where the former professional ballet dancer acts as an articulate yet approachable Virgil, guiding visitors through the often intimidating world of contemporary art. “I wanted to be a gallerist who could really offer service, so everybody who walks in here gets me full-on.”



Averaging five to six exhibitions a year, Eley's gallery offers an eclectic stable of early- to mid-career artists, from North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Her mission also includes facilitating in-depth discussions about the art being displayed. A 2007 show, for example, which was titled “Europe Redrawn” and exhibited the photography of Jay Hochheiser, also featured a talk from critic Stephen Perloff, the founder and editor of *The Photo Review*. “The average person tends to stay in a gallery for half an hour, 45 minutes,” Eley says. “I really want people to come in and stay and have a cup of coffee and ask questions.” ■



SUSAN ELEY'S UPPER WEST SIDE GALLERY OFFERS FIVE TO SIX CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS EACH YEAR.

PHOTOS: TOP © MARIA PASSAROTTI; BOTTOM COURTESY SUSAN ELEY FINE ART

# CREDITS

## NYU STARS LIGHT UP RED CARPETS AND THE SILVER SCREEN



PHOTO COURTESY WARNER BROS. PICTURES

**ALEC BALDWIN** (TSOA '94) took home Best Actor statues from the Emmy, Golden Globe, and Screen Actors Guild awards for his role as the overbearing network exec Jack Donaghy on NBC's *30 Rock*... Set decorator **VICTOR J. ZOLFO** (TSOA '85) won Best Achievement in Art Direction at the Academy Awards for his work on *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*... For her film *The Betrayal (Nerakhoon)*, nominated for Best Documentary at both the Oscars and Film Independent's Spirit Awards, **ELLEN KURAS** (GAL '88, '90) followed a refugee family from Laos for 23 years... Writer-turned-director **CHARLIE KAUFMAN** (TSOA '80) was honored with the Robert Altman Award for *Synecdoche, New York* at the Spirit Awards, where he also picked up Best First Feature... **ETHAN REIFF** (TSOA '86) and **CYRUS VORIS** (TSOA '85) co-wrote last summer's *Kung Fu Panda*, which earned an Oscar nod for Best Animated Feature, as well as Ridley Scott's upcoming *Robin Hood*, starring Russell Crowe... Director **TOM HOOPER** (TSOA '94) scored an Emmy nomination for the HBO miniseries *John Adams* and next turns to the big screen with an adaptation of the John Steinbeck best-seller *East of Eden*... Writer **BRUCE JOEL RUBIN** (WSC '65), best known for the 1990 film

*Ghost*, penned the screenplay for *The Time Traveler's Wife*, starring Rachel McAdams and Eric Bana... **BILLY CRUDUP** (TSOA '94) brought graphic novel superhero Dr. Manhattan to life in last month's *Watchmen* and will be back in theaters this July alongside Johnny Depp and Christian Bale in Michael Mann's *Public Enemies*... Fellow alumni **CHANCE KELLY** (WSC '90) and **JOHN LAVELLE** (TSOA '04) can be seen in this summer's remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123*, which features Denzel Washington as an NYC subway dispatcher caught up in a hostage situation... *Red Tails*, which George Lucas has been developing since 1989 and details the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African-American pilots who flew in World War II, will finally be written by **JOHN RIDLEY** (GAL '87)... **GLEN WHITMAN** (GSAS '00) puts the science in sci-fi thriller *Fringe*, working behind the scenes to provide research and plausibility to the new Fox show... Former *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* cast member **TED ALLEN** (GSAS '90) is the host of two new shows on the Food Network: *Chopped* and *Food Detectives*... **NICK SPANGLER** (TSOA '07) returned to the off-Broadway show *The Fantasticks* after winning the \$1 million prize on CBS's *The Amazing Race*.—Renée Alfuso

# GRAFFITI INNOVATION

JAMES POWDERLY WALKS THE LINE BETWEEN INVENTOR AND “ANTIGOVERNMENT ZEALOT”

by Kolby Yarnell



PHOTOS © GRAFFITI RESEARCH LAB

JAMES POWDERLY OUTFITS GRAFFITI ARTISTS WITH PLAYFUL OPEN SOURCE TECHNOLOGY, SUCH AS L.A.S.E.R. TAG, WHICH USES A LASER POINTER AND PROJECTOR.

Like many artists, James Powderly (TSOA '02) is in touch with his inner adolescent. In a project called “Train Bombing in Europe,” he helped organize dozens of people in Linz, Austria, one evening to surround a city train and hurl magnets at it, terrifying both passengers and conductors. Attached to these magnets were colorful LED lights, a Powderly invention called the “throwie,” which transformed the train into a moving Christmas tree. Some

passengers justifiably took the incident for a terrorist attack. Powderly called it a “prank” and believes a little fear is good: “I think that’s a useful place to put someone in.”

Yet Powderly isn’t so eager to explore the usefulness of any fear he experienced while in police custody in China last summer, after being arrested for “upsetting the public order” during the 2008 Summer Olympics. Powderly spoke about the episode in December at an Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts event titled “DIY Law-Breaking & Mis-

chief-Making: A Conversation about Rogue Artists, Pranksters, and Other Trouble-Makers.” In keeping with the night’s theme, Powderly strolled in 15 minutes late and noted that he is not, and never has been, a graffiti artist, the label most often applied to him. In fact, his work is far geekier: He writes computer code, rigs fire extinguishers to spray house paint on hard-to-reach surfaces, and fashions lasers that can project words onto buildings from far away. He’s a graffiti inventor, as it were, ushering the outlaw

urban artist into the 21st century. After graduating from Tisch School of the Arts’ Interactive Telecommunications Program in 2002, Powderly took a job at Honeybee Robotics. The company worked on contracts for NASA and the military, but with the start of the Iraq war, Powderly felt conflicted. “It was really hard to do good things for bad people,” he says. “There are so many auxiliary uses for a technology.” This tough lesson has been deeply entrenched in his work ever since. Whether it’s benign, like a

magnet, or benevolent, like a fire extinguisher, what Powderly seems to be demonstrating with his “research” is that technologies have no fixed application.

In 2005, he was awarded a residency at the Chelsea-based art and technology center Eyebeam, where he met and collaborated with Evan Roth. During this residency, they founded the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), dedicated to outfitting graffiti artists with technologies for urban communication. They adhere strictly to an open source, anticapitalist philosophy. All of their ideas, from codes to paint guns to throwies, are up for grabs, and GRL relies on art galleries and donations for funding. On the GRL Web site, under the videos that document each project, is a link to instructions on how to do it yourself.

“Only in the art world can you work without slavish dependence on copyright,” says Powderly, who described his work as “neutral,” yet

moments later called himself an “antigovernment zealot.” So long as you aren’t in marketing or advertising—and especially if you’re a little bit of a villain—GRL will help you with your high-tech art project.

That goal took him to Beijing last August, to work with the organization Students for a Free Tibet. He admits that he flew there

questioning before the U.S. State Department arranged his release. He appreciates the irony that being American in China is both what led to his arrest and what got him out of jail much sooner than his cell mates. In hindsight, he said what he regrets most—more than the interrogations, the money lost (they charged him for his deportation

killed my ass,” he says, adding that at the moment he’s planning to create 3-D models of the cell he was in. Powderly will be traveling for a number of projects this year while also producing the film *GRL: The Complete First Season 2*.

The lab’s policy of turning down commercial work has become financially more problematic for Powderly and Roth, so they plan to do more projects with FAT Lab, the Free Art and Technology space where GRL is located, including “assisted technology for disabled people—with a graffiti twist.” Powderly is trying to make the public domain a more playful, anarchic place—at least to a point. “I might be a model, but not a role model,” he says. “If everyone was doing what we are, it would be really hard to get attention.” ■

What Powderly seems to be demonstrating with his “research” is that technologies have no fixed application.

without knowing much about the region’s troubled history, but he was willing to help the group create a laser stencil to project the words “Free Tibet” in Tiananmen Square. The Chinese police, however, had been monitoring his cell phone calls and text messages, and Powderly spent five days in jail, enduring sleep deprivation and harsh

ticket), and the fate of those who were also arrested—was his failure in the role of wily mischief-maker. “I probably wouldn’t wear a kaffiyeh and sleeveless shirt again if I were trying to go incognito,” he says.

Going forward, Powderly is hoping to throw a little fear back at the Chinese government. “They are going to wish that they



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