

# THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS



## Donigan Cumming's videos

**Film Comment**

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by Nicole Armour

Donigan Cumming's uncomfortably intimate videos probe the ambiguous space between compassion and exploitation, where a documentary's subject can become an actor, and where a Director can stumble into an abyss of his own design.

It's fitting that the title of Donigan Cumming's new video, *My Dinner with Weegee* (01), refers to the unflinching New York photographer and chronicler of the down-and-out. But if the comparison suggests that Cumming's work is easily classifiable, after you've watched a few minutes of one of his videos it becomes clear that his project sits just outside the borders of art as we know it. In one sense his photographs, installations, and videos do fit into the tradition of social documentation advanced by artists like Walker Evans and Diane Arbus -- portraying marginalized figures like the elderly, drug-addicted, sick, and socially assisted poor -- but Cumming's work is also something else. It stands at the point where the histories of theater, sound recording, art therapy, popular cinema and song, film theory, family albums, and home videos converge. In fact, it crosses so many boundaries and genres and is so unlike anything else it occupies its own category altogether.



*My Dinner with Weegee* opens with an unsteady handheld shot of a shaky hand groping for a bottle of beer that stands beside a bed. Cumming's calm, encouraging voice is heard offscreen guiding the hand's search. Soon we meet Marty, the video's elderly subject, who describes life with his wife in Forties New York and, specifically, several evenings spent with Weegee. All the while, the camera tightly frames his face, cropping it slightly and establishing a feeling of both intimacy and claustrophobia that's a hallmark of Cumming's videos. Marty delivers his monologue animatedly, recalling a visit to New York's Bowery with Weegee, where he encountered broken-down alcoholics and aging ex-Follies girls drunkenly performing for a similarly worn-out audience. In the following sequence, as a familiar soap opera theme plays behind their conversation, Marty tells Cumming about the terrible state of his health and the effects of his constant drinking. In slow motion his trembling hand struggles to pick up coins from the bottom of a drawer. It is as if he has become one of the decrepit Bowery drunks and Cumming the director of the over-the-hill dancers' pathetic burlesque.

Cumming's camera moves as though it's an extension of his eyes -- when not held closely on someone's face, it jerks abruptly from side to side, imparting the sense of seeing something private and real. His footage usually looks as though it's been gathered impulsively, so much so that its form feels loose. But Cumming's handling of the material is far from casual. In *My Dinner with Weegee*, he shoots a cadaverous Marty as he sleeps; records his failed attempt to have him admitted to the hospital; and fixes the camera on his expressionless face as he interviews him about his involvement in the peace movement. We watch with difficulty as Marty struggles to cross the room to use the toilet, and find ourselves hoping that Cumming is a constant in his life.

But Cumming's persistent presence in *My Dinner with Weegee* -- a presence he enjoys in all of his tapes -- becomes a source of odd tension. From behind the camera he directs Marty to sing, converses with him, and occasionally turns the camera on himself to deliver monologues with an actor's drama and exaggerated intonation. These tactics undermine the reality of what we're being shown, forcing us to question Cumming's relationship with his subjects. Is he a compassionate friend or a manipulative puppetmaster staging an elaborate fiction with a group of unwitting pawns? This recurrent doubt surfaces in the sequence in which a filthy Marty drinks beer on the couch while Cumming callously interrogates him, determined to uncover the facts behind the depletion of a case of beer Marty will only admit to having partially consumed. Cumming's harassment is relentless, but the delivery of his attack is oddly overstated -- a performance intended to antagonize the audience, to manipulate both its pity for Marty's depressing circumstances and disdain for his lack of resolve. Cumming's offscreen remarks also underline his videos' premeditation: he courts accusations of exploitation in order to emphasize the impossibility of objectivity. By creating a hybrid of reality and fiction, he reexamines the very nature of social documentary itself: its ethical concerns as well as its reliance on narrative devices.

Now 54 years old, Cumming was born in Danville, Virginia, and relocated to Canada in 1970. He was drawn to photography because of its apparent link to objective reality. It was in 1982, while working on a project entitled "Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography," that he began gathering many of the people with whom he now collaborates on his videos. According to Cumming, his ensemble participate for many different reasons. While some simply enjoy performing, others are motivated by the opportunity to express something about themselves to the world -- anger, spirituality, non-conformism. All are paid and required to sign a contract. Yet none of Cumming's videos explain the nature of his relationship to his subjects or how he came to know them, and his tight framing of their faces when they directly address the camera ensures that there's never an opportunity for context to bleed through. But while he invites his video stock company to reveal their thoughts, their bodies, and their histories, their privacy remains intact. In the case of one of Cumming's favorite photographic models, the octogenarian Nettie Harris (the subject of "Pretty Ribbons," his 1993 exhibit), they met once a week over a ten-year period. She often appears in various states of undress amidst her personal belongings in these portraits, but there's a trust and respect, and a sense of collaboration stemming from Nettie's desire to make a statement about growing old. Her death prompted Cumming's first video, *A Prayer for Nettie* (95), which includes footage he shot with Nettie when she was alive, intercut with conversations with a number of other elderly players. Essentially the video is a series of long takes in which participants move around their apartments, say prayers for

Nettie, and express their hope that she's found peace in death -- even though many of them had never even met her. At one point, Cumming stands over Nettie as she lies nude on top of a large calendar, a rich tableau that calls to mind the relationship between time, mortality, and the moving image. In another scene a man chants Nettie's name over and over again, as if to will her back to life. Laced with dark humor, the video is punctuated by confrontational shots of elderly flesh, including Nettie's, a man's naked stomach, and a sick woman with microphones attached to her oxygen tubes. More than any other tape, *A Prayer for Nettle* represents Cumming's interest in death, something he considers to be, above all else, democratic. As he observes in *My Dinner with Weegee*, "Time improves nothing. Decline, fracture, and loss mark everyone's passage."

Cumming films roughly a dozen people during the course of *A Prayer for Nettle*, alternately coaching their speech and describing the circumstances of Nettie's death to them. It becomes increasingly obvious that the tape's purpose is not so much to provide this assortment of individuals with the opportunity to express their feelings about her, as to allow Cumming to present his own. He literally puts his own words into his elderly subjects' mouths, in order to speak through them, thus giving the tape's investigation of death a new dimension. The elderly, the poor, and the sick are part of an elaborate mechanism through which Cumming conveys his own thoughts about what it means to be human, and this circuitous route always leads him back to himself.



This approach is most evident in *My Dinner with Weegee* and *Erratic Angel* (98). The latter, with its reduced directorial intervention, is closer to conventional documentary than his other videos. It presents the abridged life story of Colin Kane, a middle-aged man from a middle-class background who, after years of alcohol and drug use, confronts the difficulties of staying sober. He is physically and financially depleted and at the mercy of health officials who treat him like a criminal. Colin is a recurring figure in Cumming's videos, including *My Dinner with Weegee*, but unlike most of his performers, he's articulate and opinionated about the course his life has taken. He approaches *Erratic Angel* as though it's both art therapy and an opportunity to get things off his chest. Cumming simply lets his camera run, encouraging Colin to say whatever comes to mind, and the result conveys a spirit of collaboration that has been less evident since *A Prayer for Nettle*. This air of partnership derives perhaps from the resemblance between the lives of Colin and Cumming. They are nearly the same age and come from similar backgrounds, and many of their experiences are comparable -- until the radically different turns in their lives. While *Erratic Angel* places Colin centerstage, depicting his life with more definition than any of Cumming's previous performers, the tape also implicitly tells the story of what the director could have been and, for whatever reason, is not.

Cumming's work acknowledges a common tendency to manipulate experience in the telling, to create fictions and new identities through embellishments. He embraces this impulse, often scoring his performers' exaggerated monologues with melodramatic popular music, rendering them closer to fancy than truth. Despite his videos' heavy subject matter, he shows an uncanny ability to find the romance and tragedy in his subjects' lives and to provide the viewer with the means to identify with them. As he walks down a hallway at the beginning of *After Brenda* (97), a tape he refers to as a love story, Pierre, his subject, turns and asks him whether or not he wants "the whole thing" -- including "the pain." Cumming says he does. It's revealed that Brenda, Pierre's ex-girlfriend, brought charges against him and that he's just been released from prison. The specifics of their relationship are grim, and the blame lies largely with Pierre, whose obsession with Brenda is ruining his life. But he's also conscious of the camera and plays to it, weeping and pleading his case. Pierre acts as a character in his own story, interpreting events in ways that enable him to cope -- and somehow, that makes him sympathetic. Cumming's videos present a hostile world whose inhabitants are fragile (and in some cases, on their last legs), and sometimes we don't quite know who they are. But to the extent that we all fall in love, mourn our losses, and fear death, these people are shockingly familiar. And Cumming doesn't deny life's lighter moments, either: the relief that humor can bring, the warmth of companionship, and the freedom of role-playing -- the feeling that we can step outside of ourselves for a while. Near the end of *After Brenda*, Pierre asks Cumming to "show the human tragedy, but please also show the love." And that, in essence, is what Donigan Cumming does.

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