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# WI Film Fest Day 3: Shorts Friday at Cinematheque explore power of place, memories

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In the 18-minute short "Thru," reality and memory tick side by side in a jumpy flow. Courtesy of Christopher J. Ewing

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The Wisconsin Film Festival has "summarily rejected" Christopher Ewing's and Jacob Strunk's films for

years, as Strunk put it.

This year they finally got in: Ewing's "Thru" and Strunk's "This Is the Place" screened as part of a series of five shorts Friday night at the Cinematheque. Both filmmakers have local connections (Ewing graduated from UW-Madison, Strunk grew up in Oconomowoc) and live in Los Angeles doing film-related work and making shorts on the side.

They stood up for a notch-above Q & A with the audience afterward that went beyond the usual "How much did it cost?" When someone asked Ewing and Strunk if they ever get jealous of their peers, Strunk half-joked, "My life is a cocktail of bitterness and shame."

It was a well-curated program. A theme of isolation and of place, whether it be a physical location or a state of mind that a person returns to like a home, threaded through each of the five films.

Australian-made "**Hawker**" follows a salesman on the road, where neon lights are the brightest colors of his dingy life and a walk into the forest is the only place that sets his imagination free. The film sustains a randomness that's hard to follow but, in the end, leaves a lingering feeling of desolation.

Ewing's 18-minute "**Thru**" (trailer) is about two displaced Midwestern souls who connect over art and the memories that haunt them. It brilliantly captures the jumpy human thought process with nimble editing and effects. Reality and brittle jabs of mental images collide and occasionally flow along side each other, dream-like. A few scenes in the film come off too cute and self-conscious, plucking us out of the dream (nightmare?). More character development would give these scenes context, and the story as a whole would in fact work well fleshed out into a full-length movie.

The title of the next film, the bleak "**Alberta, Detroit**," comes from the deadbeat protagonist's daughter, Alberta, and the location, Detroit. Alberta might as well be a location like the city of Detroit -- both are presented mainly as figments of the father's memory, a place he returns to for a strange solace. Directors John Wilberding and Shawn Grice give the sad story a nauseous edge with dizzy-making edits and jarring transitions.

Strunk's "**This Is the Place**" was a breath of comic relief in the program -- and that's saying something since the main character of "Place" is a deaf-mute (maybe) who murders strangers and harvests their organs. Strunk said afterward that he set out to make an iconic villain who's likable, and he's succeeded. The film goes about its business with a wry smirk and fresh sophistication.

Dustin Grella's stop-motion animation "**Prayers for Peace**" packs a lot of power in its eight minutes as he narrates a story about his brother Devin, a soldier who died in Iraq. Delicate and jittery, Grella's drawings convey the fragility of memories -- where do they exist? How do you retrieve them? The film ends with audio Devin recorded on his computer right before an "improvised explosive device" killed

him. The unintended poignancy of his final words is overwhelming.

Posted in Reviews, Wis\_film\_festival on *Saturday, April 17, 2010 2:00 pm* Updated: 2:14 pm.

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