

Mongrel Media
Presents

Cutie and the Boxer

A film by Zachary Heinzerling
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SUNDANCE
Film Festival

Distribution



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High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>

THE FILM

This candid New York love story explores the chaotic 40-year marriage of renowned “boxing” painter Ushio Shinohara and his wife, Noriko. Anxious to shed her role of assistant to her overbearing husband, Noriko seeks an identity of her own.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

A reflection on love, sacrifice, and the creative spirit, this candid New York story explores the chaotic 40-year marriage of renowned “boxing” painter Ushio Shinohara and his artist wife, Noriko. As a rowdy, confrontational young artist in Tokyo, Ushio seemed destined for fame, but met with little commercial success after he moved to New York City in 1969, seeking international recognition. When 19-year-old Noriko moved to New York to study art, she fell in love with Ushio—abandoning her education to become the wife and assistant to an unruly, alcoholic husband. Over the course of their marriage, the roles have shifted. Now 80, Ushio struggles to establish his artistic legacy, while Noriko is at last being recognized for her own art—a series of drawings entitled “Cutie,” depicting her challenging past with Ushio. Spanning four decades, the film is a moving portrait of a couple wrestling with the eternal themes of sacrifice, disappointment and aging, against a background of lives dedicated to art.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Cutie and the Boxer is an intimate, observational documentary chronicling the unique love story between Ushio and Noriko Shinohara, married Japanese artists living in New York. Bound by years of quiet resentment, disappointments and missed professional opportunities, they are locked in a hard, dependent love.

The film begins in Brooklyn, where the couple struggles to manage their creeping poverty. Examining each artist’s complicated history, the film reveals the roots of their relationship. Ushio Shinohara achieved notoriety in postwar Japan for his avant-garde “boxing” paintings, and in 1969 set out for New York City in search of international recognition. Three years later, at age 19, Noriko left Japan to study art in New York and was instantly captivated by the middle-aged Ushio. She abandoned her education and her wealthy family’s support to become the wife of an unruly, alcoholic husband and, a year later, mother of their only son, Alex.

Their 40-year marriage has left Ushio and Noriko in distinct spaces. At 80, Ushio continues to obsessively pursue the painting and sculpture he crafted half a century ago. Coming off a recent, poorly received show in which he sold no work, he’s become increasingly desperate to establish his legacy in the final years of his life. Meanwhile, Noriko, 59, their son fully grown and husband now sober, is at last coming into her own. With a renewed passion for art, she throws herself into illustration with her “Cutie” series, which viscerally and humorously depicts her challenging past with Ushio. Through “Cutie”, she channels the unpleasant aspects of her life into a body of paintings and drawings steeped in a colorful explosion of woman power, sensuality, and fantasy that acts as a counterbalance to the reality of Ushio. The film leads to a

joint exhibition offered to both artists, providing Noriko with a long-awaited opportunity to show her new work to the public. The two work—together and apart—to prepare for the installation.

Through present-day vérité scenes, archival footage and animated sequences of Noriko's drawings, the documentary brings us to understand that the stark differences in the Shinoharas' art and personalities are the basis for a deep and challenging symbiosis, one rooted in a vital creative spirit.

At its core, *Cutie and the Boxer* is a film that reveals painful universal truths about the life of the artist and how the creative process intersects with reality, identity and marriage.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This film started about five years ago, when I first met Ushio and Noriko Shinohara. My friend and producer Patrick Burns invited me to their loft in Brooklyn and I brought along my video camera. Patrick had shown me a few portraits he took of the striking couple and from those photos alone I knew something special was there; something that became clear immediately upon meeting them in person. Ushio is 80 years old, but has the energy and hunger for life of someone a tenth his age. Noriko exudes a calming grace and sly wit, perfectly complimenting Ushio's raucous nature. They live in a space that acts as a shrine to their storied existence: floors coated with years of old paint, drawings stacked on top of paintings on top of books, photos tacked to the walls hinting at past fame. I was immediately engrossed in their colorful world, where the lines between art and life were completely blurred.

Ushio was very forthcoming about his story. He spoke about his early years as a rebellious, Mohawk-sporting artist, tearing up the post-war Tokyo creative scene with his action painting and street performances. He told me about his move to New York, where he was a star of the Japanese expat artist community in Soho, gallivanting with the likes of Warhol and Rauschenberg and living the quintessential underground artist's life. He was understandably less eager to talk about the years following his initial fame, or his struggle to gain any sort of commercial success and, more importantly, to be noticed in the competitive New York art world. He has turned this struggle into fodder for his work. The spirit of this youthful troublemaker remains undimmed, as he constantly creates new work for his public and himself, always fighting to stay relevant. He is among the last of a dying breed of the 1960s and '70s artists that many artists of my generation seek to emulate: this pure, romantic ideal of the "struggling artist" catnapping on the streets of downtown New York, brush and canvas in hand, living for their work. With every breath he insists on his relevance, at once defiant and yet devastatingly aware of his scant legacy.

Noriko's story is a bit more complicated and took longer to develop. She was reluctant at first to dive back into her past with Ushio in a serious way, choosing instead to joke what a terrible husband Ushio was and is, most of the time in front of Ushio. At first she was timid and unsure of me and my team's intentions. But as time progressed, and we became more comfortable with one another, the layers of her complex story began to unfold before the camera. I soon began to sense that Noriko's story would drive the narrative arc of the film. She only recently had established her own studio space away from Ushio and begun to deal with their turbulent past through a series of drawings and paintings. And only more recently had she become comfortable enough with her own art to present it to the public. I began filming during a period of re-birth for Noriko. After years of playing back seat to her attention-grabbing husband, she desperately wanted someone to tell her side of the story.

The struggles that Ushio and Noriko have gone through, though intensely personal, are universal. I saw their story as one that would not only appeal to art-lovers, but also wider audiences who could relate to Ushio and Noriko's lives. Career disappointments, gender roles, marriage, aging—are all issues we encounter in adulthood. The focus of the film was never their art specifically, but rather their relationship and the bond that has kept them together through their own individual highs and lows for the last forty years.

I set out to make a film that was unlike any of the artist documentaries I had seen before. I did not want this to be a biography of the artists' lives and work, but rather a story that unfolds in a dramatic way—more akin to a narrative film. I wanted it to look and sound like a narrative film as well; to fully immerse the audience in the Shinoharas' odd world. The textured cinematography and sound design are meant to embody the purposeful way in which they live, and brings the dynamism of their work and lives to the screen. The music, composed by the prolific saxophonist Yasuaki Shimizu, plays off of the more imaginative and whimsical side of the Shinoharas' life and art, but also hints at the pain and sadness that lies beneath their playful nature. I took an observational approach, inviting the audience to watch the Shinohara's everyday lives.

I've always loved Japanese Neo-realist cinema— Ozu's family portraits like *Tokyo Story*, and more recently the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda, specifically *Still Walking*. They are films of such intense inner turmoil and drama, but presented in a very honest and unsentimental manner. The tension exists beneath the surface, and arises in moments that are more powerful because of the quiet anticipation that precedes them. Ushio and Noriko hold a lot of their pain within. They joke about their past marital problems, Ushio's alcoholism, Noriko's suffering, or their son's troubled upbringing—but there is a lot of seriousness behind those jokes. In making the film I was trying to find the best way to explore that pain in a way that was honest and not exploitative.

One way this pain is explored in the film is through the animation of Noriko's artwork. When I first saw her “Cutie” series, consisting of comic style paintings and drawings depicting her difficult past with her husband, my first reaction was to laugh. They are exaggerated to the point of comedy, yet the truths they reveal are deeply sad. Noriko has created an alter-ego in Cutie, who suffers at the fate of her insensitive, drunken husband Bullie. (“Bullie” plays on “bull” or ushi in Japanese, referring to Ushio.) She constructs a world where she can both explore her pain and fight back against its source. I felt the best way to represent Noriko's “Cutie” story, and heighten this mix of reality and fantasy, was through animation. As the stories from her art play out in dream-like sequences, the audience is transported into Noriko's mind. Viewers simultaneously gain a deeper understanding of both Noriko's past, and the method she uses to cope with it.

The experience of making this film was life-altering. I spent countless nights, at times living at the Shinoharas' loft for days, listening to their stories and recording their lives. With other projects going on along the way, I continued this film based on my vast fascination with and affection for the Shinoharas, and the belief that this story would touch others. I enjoyed the most formative period in my short filmmaking career learning through the example Ushio and Noriko set—unbridled passion and energy towards their work, and a risk-at-all-cost mentality.

Noriko and Ushio's lives are defined by intense highs and lows, and their miseries are often shared more readily than their joys. Their relationship is extremely complicated. They describe it as a mutual dependence, void of any romance—purely a creative partnership. One of the biggest challenges in this film was to shed light on the love they undoubtedly have for one another, even if they rarely express it directly. I hope that audiences will recognize themselves

in Ushio and Noriko's story, and consider their own relationships after watching. Ultimately, my goal is to absorb the audience in the raw spirit and beauty that emanates from my subjects, to open a door onto the creative and very private world where the rhythms of the Shinoharas' lives play out.

- Zachary Heinzerling

USHIO SHINOHARA (with excerpts from Alexandra Munroe's essay in catalogue from the exhibit "Making a Home," at New York's Japan Society)

Affectionately known to the Japanese art community by the nickname "Gyu-chan," Ushio Shinohara was born in Tokyo in 1932. His artist parents instilled in him a love for Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin. Like others of his generation who were raised during Japan's wartime years, Shinohara developed a deep fascination for the culture that so spectacularly defeated his world. He experienced what his contemporary, the photographer Tomatsu Shomei, called the Americanization of Occupied and postwar Japan—jazz culture, Hollywood bravado, comic book dramas, and an utter disregard of social convention. In 1952, Shinohara entered the prestigious Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where he majored in oil painting. Disappointed by the school's conventional curriculum, he left before graduation. It was the artist and critic Okamoto Taro's radical call to overthrow beauty for the power of the "repulsive" art championed by his influential 1954 book *Today's Art*, that served as Shinohara's creative catalyst. From that moment on, he was committed to the revolutionary "path of the avant-garde."

Shinohara emerged as a central figure in the annual Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, participating from 1955 until 1963. This anti-salon forum for young artists became *the* staging ground for Japan's postwar avant-garde and was the stimulus for Shinohara's early antics—including his sculpture of found objects that gained critical recognition as "junk art." In 1960, he was a founding member—along with Yomiuri Independent artists Akasegawa Genpei, Shusaku Arakawa and Yoshimura Masanobu—of the group Neo Dada Organizers, whose exhibitionist Happenings thrust improvised performance and junk-art assemblage towards the center of Japanese avant-garde expression. His fame as the quintessential art rebel was secured in 1961, when he performed a "Boxing Painting" that was reported in the weekly *Moinichi Graph*, with text by the novelist Oe Kenzaburo. Dipping his cloth-bound fists in *sumi* ink, he punched his way across an expanse of paper, creating a mural of black drips and splashes that gave literal meaning to the term "action painting." In 1964, Shinohara again made history when he exhibited a copy of Robert Rauschenberg's 1958 *Coca-Cola Plan*, and called it "imitation art."

The John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund was instrumental in advancing contemporary Japanese art by supporting young artists in their dream to travel and work in New York for extended periods of time. Shinohara, who came in 1969, never returned home. He loved the city's luscious filth, its anything-goes spirit, its ethnically mixed multitudes. He loved being an eternal tourist, snapping away at whatever enthralled him, expressing the speed and sensuality of American culture in whatever medium he could afford, including cardboard found on the street. He constantly reinvented the art he loved: American comics, Neo-Dada and the spirit of Vincent van Gogh.

Since making New York City his home, Ushio Shinohara's work has been exhibited internationally, and his boxing painting performances have been staged in museums and galleries all over the world. They include the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; Hara Museum of Contemporary Art; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York; the Japan Society, New York; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Leo Castelli Gallery, New York; Galerie Oko, Berlin; The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Seoul, among others.

NORIKO SHINOHARA *(with excerpts from Eric C. Shiner's essay in catalogue from the exhibit "Making a Home," at New York's Japan Society and Reiko Tomeii's essay in the catalogue from the exhibit "Love is a Roarr" at the HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea)*

Born in 1953 in Takaoka City and raised in rural Japan, Noriko Shinohara left to study art in New York in 1972 at the age of 19. After six months at the Art Students League, Noriko had an encounter that would in many ways change her life forever: she met and fell in love with her future husband, renowned artist Ushio Shinohara (who was 21 years her senior). In fact, her newfound love was her undoing in terms of her student years. On a 3-day-long sojourn with Ushio, Noriko missed class, and the powers-that-be revoked her student visa. Her solution was to move in with Ushio, have a son (Alex, who would grow up to be an artist), and become lifelong business partner, babysitter, and muse of her wild and crazy partner.

Over the decades, she eventually learned to create her own sanctuary—her “queendom”—to which the uninvited intruder, her husband included, is banned from entry. In her own realm of art, she chose to channel the unpleasant aspects of her life into a body of paintings, drawings and prints steeped in a colorful explosion of woman power, sensuality, and fantasy that acts as a counterbalance to the reality of Ushio. Noriko shares many interests in art history with Ushio, ranging from Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* to Renaissance painting, but their interpretations are completely different: if Ushio specializes in bravado, Noriko works meticulously and intimately in diverse pictorial media, from pen and ink to pastel to print- and book-making.

Her breakthrough came with the invention of Cutie, a cartoon-like alter ego of her tortured married self. The name derived from the casual greeting, “Hi, Cutie,” she received one day from a young man on the street. The personality has had a liberating effect. Cutie gives her confidence as well as freedom—a freedom to mix reality and fantasy to live another, though more or less equally torturous, life with a male antagonist Bullie without resigning to silence and frustration.

She and her husband Ushio live in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn, where they have been since 1986.

FILMMAKERS

Zachary Heinzerling (Director/Cinematographer) is a director and cinematographer based in Brooklyn, New York. He was the recipient of the Directing Award at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival for his feature film debut *Cutie and the Boxer*. He has worked on several feature-length films for HBO, including three Emmy Award-winning documentaries as a field producer and camera operator. Zachary participated in the 2011 Berlinale Talent Campus. He also was selected as one of 25 filmmakers for the Film Society of Lincoln Center and IFP's Emerging Visions Program during the 2011 New York Film Festival. His films have received grants from Cinereach, Tribeca Film Institute, San Francisco Film Society, and the Jerome Foundation. Other cinematography credits include the forthcoming feature documentary *Town Hall* for PBS.

Lydia Dean Pilcher (Producer) has produced over 30 feature films, most recently the upcoming release of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, based on the acclaimed novel by Mohsin Hamid, directed by Mira Nair, starring Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson, Liev Schrieber and Kiefer Sutherland. She is presently in post-production on the feature films *The Sisterhood of Night* and *The Lunchbox*, and is headed to production this year with *Fela - Music is the Weapon* with director Steve McQueen. Lydia's other producing credits include HBO Films's *You Don't Know Jack*, with Al Pacino, directed by Barry Levinson; *The Darjeeling Limited*, directed by Wes Anderson; and now ten films directed by Mira Nair including *The Namesake*, based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. She is the founder and president of Cine Mosaic, a production company based in New York.

Patrick Burns (Producer) is a journalist and photographer based in New York. He began studying Japanese art and culture while living in Japan, where he became conversant in the language. As a reporter in the New York bureau of the Tokyo Shimbun newspaper, he covered political and cultural events in the U.S. and Latin America. Patrick's writing and photographs have appeared in several online and print publications such as the Huffington Post, the Guardian and National Geographic.

Sierra Pettengill (Producer) has worked on many documentary films, including as Associate Producer on the Peabody Award-winning *Triangle Fire* and the Emmy-nominated *Walt Whitman* for PBS. She was also the Associate Producer of HBO's *Wartorn: 1861 – 2010*. She is currently directing *Town Hall*, a co-production with ITVS, and is the Archival Producer on Matt Wolf's *Teenage*.

Kiki Miyake (Executive Producer) is the founder and president of Little Magic Films, an independent film company that stands at the cross roads of East and West, developing and arranging international co-productions. She is currently producing *Angry Little God*, a psychological thriller directed by Daniel Stamm (*The Last Exorcism*). Now in post-production, the film will be distributed by Dimension. Later in 2013, Kiki is scheduled to start production on *Adele's Secret*, the remarkable true story of Maria Altman's struggle to reclaim five famous Gustav Klimt paintings, stolen from her family by the Nazis. Earlier in her career, Kiki spearheaded acquisitions for the Japanese distributor Amuse Pictures, later Toshiba Entertainment. Pre-buying films still in the script stage, she succeeded at acquiring over 50 titles, including the Academy Award and Palme d'Or winners *The Pianist*, *Memento*, *Pulp*

Fiction, Once and *Finding Neverland*, as well as major commercial blockbusters such as *Resident Evil*. Kiki's previous production credits include Jonas Akerland's *Spun*, Julien Temple's *Vigo*, David Byrne's *Ile Aiye*, and *The Magnum Eye*, a series of 18 video diaries directed by Magnum Photo Agency's renowned photo-journalists.

David Teague (Editor) is a film editor whose work includes Oscar-winning, Oscar-nominated, and Emmy-nominated documentaries. He edited Cynthia Wade's 2008 Academy Award-winning short documentary *Freeheld*. He also edited Jennifer Redfearn's *Sun Come Up*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2010. David edited and was a cinematographer on two other documentaries for Cynthia Wade: *Mondays at Racine* and *Born Sweet* (Sundance 2010). He recently completed the feature documentary *The Iran Job*, which had its world premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival, and he directed and edited his own award-winning documentary, *Intifada NYC*, which is currently playing festivals and broadcast outlets internationally. His documentary directing work also includes *Our House*, co-directed with Greg King, which premiered at Hot Docs 2010 and is playing currently on the Documentary Channel.

Yasuaki Shimizu (Composer) is a composer, saxophonist and producer whose musical explorations range from classical to free improvisation. Renowned for his groundbreaking interpretations of J.S.Bach, Shimizu also collaborates on video, multimedia and dance projects, and scores music for television, commercials and film. His career took off in the 1970s as his saxophone playing gained notice. Since 1981 he has composed, produced or arranged for artists as diverse as jazz vocalist Helen Merrill, composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, and DJ Towa Tei. In 1983 he launched the project Yasuaki Shimizu & Saxophonettes, which has since become the focus of his recording activities. From 1985 through 1991 he based himself in Paris and London, recording three albums with a host of international artists. His acclaimed Bach recordings—Cello Suites 1.2.3 (1996) and Cello Suites 4.5.6 (1999)—marked the first-ever rendition for tenor saxophone of the Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello, and in 1997 he released the Japan Record Award-winning album *Bach Box*. In 2006 he relaunched the Saxophonettes as a saxophone quintet. Their latest album, *Pentatonica* (2007), is a collection of profoundly original compositions based on the pentatonic scale. In February 2010, Shimizu reaffirmed his passion for Bach by premiering in Tokyo the world's first saxophone/double bass arrangement of Bach's Goldberg Variations.

CREDITS

**Ex-Lion Tamer Presents
A Cine Mosaic Production**

Director and Producer	Zachary Heinzerling
Producers	Lydia Dean Pilcher, Patrick Burns, Sierra Pettengill
Executive Producer	Kiki Miyake
Co-Producers	Mark Steele, Ezra Edelman, Caroline Waterlow
Editor	David Teague
Composer	Yasuaki Shimizu
Cinematography	Zachary Heinzerling
Additional Editors	Andy Grieve, Akiko Iwakawa
Sound Design	Mark Phillips
Visual Effects	Art Jail

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