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# Meet Micro-Budget Filmmaking's Most Exciting Cinematographer

Calum Marsh July 17, 2013



Broadly speaking, micro-budget indie films don't exactly have a reputation for high-quality cinematography, and if anything the smallest films are lauded in spite of how they look, not because of it. Independent productions rarely have the luxury of hiring an experienced DP, and with the advent of affordable, passably "high-end" digital cameras, amateur directors often assume they don't need one, even though the results usually look, at best, like hyper-glossy TV commercials for cleaning products or Sunny D. The American independent cinema, in other words, is starved for technical competence—so much so that even nominally professional-looking features ought to be applauded for clearing the low bar—and even if we're occasionally

treated to an aesthetic powerhouse like “Computer Chess”, those rarities are decidedly the exception rather than the rule.

But if you have been paying attention to the New York indie scene of late, where some of the most exciting films have been emerging in what feels like a kind of post-mumblecore new wave, you may have noticed a recurring credit: Sean Price Williams, who has quickly proven himself to be one of most exciting cinematographers working today. Williams first came to prominence with his eye-catching work on the documentary “Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo”, which artfully augmented its talking head interview footage with expressive panoramas of the Japanese skyline, and Ronnie Bronstein’s comedy “Frownland”, which distinguished itself from 2007’s mumblecore glut by being one of the few films of its kind to be shot on film. His work on Alex Ross Perry’s debut feature “Impolex”, which he also shot on 16mm, cemented his reputation in certain circles as uncommonly thoughtful and skilled.

Since then, Williams has kept incredibly busy, working at so brisk a pace that he has managed to complete nearly two dozen shorts and features since 2011 alone. And as the filmmakers with whom he regularly works begin to find acclaim and more mainstream opportunities, it seems likely that he will soon find a himself attached to bigger and more widely seen productions—like perhaps the new HBO series he just wrapped up with Perry, one of his most reliable collaborators. In any case, Williams is clearly a talent to watch, and as an introduction to his style we’ve put together a short list of some of his most essential work to date.

## **Five Great-Looking Films Shot by Sean Price Williams**

**“The Color Wheel” (dir. Alex Ross Perry, 2012)**

[The Color Wheel Trailer](#)

Alex Ross Perry’s “The Color Wheel” is one of the most original and important American films of the last decade, and its grainy, high-contrast black-and-white cinematography is central to its appeal. Perry had intended to shoot the film in color and expressed an interest in shooting digitally, in order to better prepare the improvisations and comic riffs he’d planned between himself and co-star Carlen Altman.

It was Williams who insisted that the film be shot in 16mm and in monochrome—the two fought over creative choices often, according to interviews—and this proved a decision which

fundamentally changed not just the look of the picture, but its overall character too. The climax of the film, a staggering ten-minute long take held largely in intimate close up, owes perhaps as much to Williams' camerawork as it does to Perry's conviction in the strength of the idea. Whether because they gel well or because they have the tenacity to fight, Williams and Perry are clearly ideal collaborators.

**“Kuichisan” (dir. Maiko Endo, 2013)**



Maiko Endo's "Kuichisan" is, by design, a difficult film to classify, but despite its apparent impenetrability as a work of (non-)narrative fiction it is nevertheless exceptionally beautiful to behold. Working again in 16mm—though this time using a combination of color and black-and-white, equally striking—Williams traveled with Endo to the small town of Koza, in Okinawa, Japan, to soak in much of the local flavor.

What results brushes only briefly against fiction, as in the gradually crystallizing stories of a young American tourist, played by Eleonore Hendricks, and a mysterious child who resembles a miniature monk. But in general the film is a delight to simply absorb for its aesthetic flair: "Kuichisan" features some of Williams' best work, and even without guidance through the narrative the experience is plainly mesmerizing.

**“Lydia Hoffman Lydia Hoffman” (dir. Dustin Guy Defa, 2013)**



Dustin Guy Defa has an unusual sensibility for a director of micro-budget films: though his style tends toward the kind of ascetic naturalism for which mumblecore is best known, his scripts (or improvisations, it isn't always clear which it is) have a writerly quality that makes them feel a bit too determined. His last feature, “Bad Fever”, veered dangerously close to sitcom territory, mostly redeemed by a stellar turn by Kentucky Audler.

“Lydia Hoffman Lydia Hoffman”, his new short film—which played to much acclaim at the recent BAMcinemaFest in New York—doesn't so much reconfigure Defa's approach as it does find an aesthetic better-suited to it, which Williams is happy to provide: here Defa's almost doc-like naturalism is exchanged for a more airily impressionistic take on the same, with Williams shooting the (typically) whimsical scenario as if it were a hazy daydream. The result, as you might expect, looks sublime, and this becomes the rare case of a film so elevated by its style that it transforms a good short into a genuinely great one.

## **“The Black Balloon” (dir. Benny and Josh Safdie, 2012)**

### [The Black Balloon Trailer](#)

The Safdie brothers, on the other hand, are in need of help from nobody, having long-since established a style and sensibility inextricable from their work. All Williams can do, lending his talents to this recent twenty-minute short, is deliver the best work possible, and he is glad to oblige—indeed, “The Black Balloon” might be the best summation of Williams’s short career to date.

He captures balloons floating through the sky with as much affection and nuance as the faces of the people the balloon finds wandering the streets, staying with several fleetingly as if passing through a number of self-contained films (“The Black Balloon” somehow seems to pass by more fully realized characters and snippets of completely lived-in stories across its 20-minute running time than most features can muster in 120.) What of the most intriguing things about this film is that it isn’t actually film at all: though it looks remarkably like 16mm, this was in fact shot digitally, and it’s a credit to Williams that he is capable of emulating the look of film so effectively.

## **“Somebody Up There Likes Me” (dir. Bob Byington, 2013)**

### [Somebody Up There Likes Me Trailer](#)

Bob Byington’s “Somebody Up There Likes Me” is rather abrasive for a quirky indie comedy, but Williams lends the proceedings a lushness and vigor that greatly compensates for the dryness of the humor and the severity of the tone. These are the kinds of projects on which Williams will no doubt make his name, and even if they do not afford him the same opportunities for experimentation that Japanese fiction-doc hybrids and verite shorts do, it’s heartening to know that even his most routine engagements are made to shine.

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