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Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then

By RONNIE SCHEIB

Rendered in flickering, herky-jerky stop-motion, Brent Green's handmade tribute to folk craftsmanship yields a visual approximation of the magical thinking behind much primitive art. Experimental helmer's first feature recounts the true story of Leonard Wood, builder of a bizarre house whose myriad architectural oddities were superstitiously designed to heal his terminally ill wife, Mary. Close in feeling, if not always execution, to Guy Maddin's evocations of bygone celluloid fables, the film, and the impact of its imagery, are somewhat compromised by Green's redundant voiceover narration. "Gravity," which opened May 7 at Gotham's IFC Center, figures to pull indiephiles into its erratic orbit.

No sooner does Green entrust actors Michael McGinley and Donna K. to embody the spousal unit at the center of his narrative than he sets out to systematically denaturalize them, giving their movements a jumpy, fantastical quality through an animation technique once known as "pixelation," whereby live-action is physically manipulated and repositioned on a frame-by-frame basis. This style, given wide exposure by Peter Gabriel's 1980 "Sledgehammer," harks back to Georges Melies and the birth of cinema.

Green's evident attempt to use a primal film language incorporates long stretches of distressed film leader, post-dubbed dialogue with sporadic synch and silent movie-type intertitles, and chapter headings that are obviously human-generated, sloppily scrawled in white paint over black or, in one case, peed in snow.

Notable passages of stop-motion animation include a surrealistic "meet cute," where Leonard's and Mary's cars crash, sending him flying straight through Mary's windshield into the passenger seat, whereupon the newly formed couple zooms off. A stop-motion sequence of Mary tumbling off a ladder symbolically represents her downfall from cancer, and activates Leonard's errant clumps of nails as he constructs the crazy building he believes will miraculously cure her.

In his backyard, Green painstakingly reconstructs the house Wood built, filming it to stress its dollhouse aspects (the film's woodworking motif extending back to the birdhouses Mary built in her odd profession of harvester and seller of bird eggs). Green shows McGinley's Wood hacking out the dwelling's irregular walls, hammering its 23-foot latticework tower, hauling up a cutout glowing moon and stars suspended by wires. At pic's climax, when Donna K.'s Mary is dying, the house opens into a cross-section cutaway, unfolding to expose her bedridden figure.

Certain phantasmagorical shots possess the power of religious icons: Wood surrounds the head of his dead wife with a metallic halo of light bulbs in a desperate attempt to resuscitate her. Mobiles of metallic angels hover overhead and, in the film's most strikingly beautiful image, Mary in a luminous white dress floats beside the house's tower, her legs improbably elongated into gigantic stilts.

As Mary grows increasingly sick, Green's own disembodied musings, in sympathy with Wood's plight, result in paroxysms of religious speculation which, poorly thesped in the filmmaker's quavery voice, detract from the magic realism.