

Visual Recall

Visiting Israeli filmmakers serve up 'Memory' at MICA.

Laura Laing

Special to the Jewish Times

Dan Geva and Michael Moore couldn't be more different, but they do work in the same medium — the documentary. While Mr. Moore has become a household name, Mr. Geva is still relatively unknown, largely because his work is more artistic and because he is from Israel.

"There is a wave of incredible cinema coming from Israel that has not made it to the U.S.," he said. "But we are hopeful."

Last night, Feb. 18, Baltimoreans had a chance to see what most in the United States have not. Mr. Geva's film "Description of a Memory" was shown at the Maryland Institute College of Art as part of "Contemporary Israeli Films: Curated by Dan and Noit Geva."

The best part? Mr. Geva and his wife and creative partner, Noit, were on hand to introduce the film and answer questions after the screening. It was all part of the Spring 2010 Schusterman Visiting Artist program. MICA's video and film arts department and Johns Hopkins University's media studies program are hosting the Gevas, who are also teaching two classes.

"We're always looking for ways to bring in visiting artists," said Patrick Wright, chair of the video and film arts department at MICA. "It's a way to bring in new voices."

The Gevas are do-it-yourself filmmakers who take on all aspects of film development — production, writing, filming, editing and directing. With more than 20 documentaries under their belts, the couple live and breathe the medium.

Dan Geva can get downright philosophical about it.

"You cannot understand the 20th

century without trying to understand documentaries," he said. "It is the most influential medium of our time, because we do experience the world through images. It is, for me, living my own time."

Even though documentaries are much more mainstream these days, Mr. Geva noted that his films are more artistic and stylized. But that doesn't mean they're inaccessible to the typical viewer.

"People can enjoy Bach without understanding music," Mr. Geva said. "We have this intuitive ability to understand the visual medium. There's something so immediate about the visual that it blocks how deep it is. That's when and where documentary comes into play."

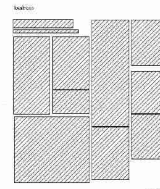
"Description of a Memory" revisits the seminal documentary, "Description of a Struggle," by French filmmaker Chris Marker, the father of personal essay film. Mr. Geva received permission from Mr. Marker to use images from his 1960 film, which examines Israel when it was only a dozen years old.

"I decided to follow his path and speak to him and to myself and to the world in that form," Mr. Geva said. "My film looks to the people who were eternalized in the images" of Mr. Marker's film.

Mr. Geva's metaphor is childhood friendship, starting with his own now-strained relationship with a boy from his youth, who moved to Gaza and became a Zionist.

"This relationship was emblematic of Israel," Mr. Geva said. "It was always torn from within before it was torn from the outside. Jews have to face inner struggles first."

He also traces the path of some of Mr. Marker's subjects, discovering what happened to them since the original film was shot. But Mr.



Geva said his film isn't about the people themselves.

"I was looking for the images, not the people," he said. "I'm examining minor details, because really when you think of it, our world consists of minor details."

"Descriptions of a Memory" won the Camera-Stylo Grand Prize at the Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montreal, among other awards. Earlier this month, Mr. Geva screened two other documentaries: "The Beetle" by Yishai Orian and "No. 17" by David Ofek.

"I said, 'Bring us films that we haven't already seen,'" Mr. Wright said. His department is a small but critical one.

"A lot of students take our courses from other departments," Mr. Wright said. "There's a mix of things that we teach — storytelling, non-fiction and video in the gallery. All of the faculty have [the Gevas] coming to their classes at some point."

Locally, the Joseph and Harvey Meyerhoff Family Charitable Funds are helping finance the Gevas' visit. "We are delighted to bring a filmmaker of Dan Geva's quality to Baltimore," said Terry M. Rubenstein, executive vice president of the foundation.

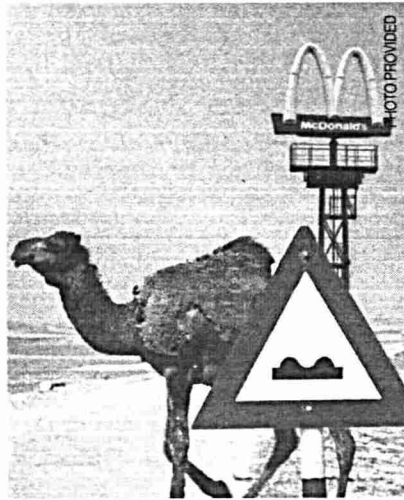
In addition, Mr. Geva said he is expecting to benefit from his time

here. "As a documentarian, the U.S. is a land of great heritage," he said. "It's like dropping a kid in a toy shop."

Teaching also provides inspiration. "I enjoy seeing people having new windows opened in their brains," Mr. Geva said. "I do see teaching as a life mission. I carry that notion that I can make a difference."

The teaching experience is a two-way street. "We're not here to see films," Mr. Geva said. "We're here to observe them and be critical of them and analyze them. We humans interpret." □

Laura Laing is a local free-lance writer.



A scene from "Description of a Memory."



PHOTO PROVIDED

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