



TATE FILM

CHICK STRAND: SOFT FICTIONS

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Friday 13–Sunday 15 November 2015

CHICK STRAND: SOFT FICTIONS
13 – 15 November 2015
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
£5 / £4 per screening

Chick Strand is a major West Coast filmmaker whose pioneering work bridges experimental film, ethnography and feminism. Strand (1931–2009) was instrumental in the counter-culture film scenes of San Francisco in the 1960s and a central figure in Los Angeles where she crafted her unique body of work from her remarkable series of films made in Mexico to her central masterpiece *Soft Fiction* 1979. *Soft Fiction* explores the complexities of lived experience and desire through portraits of five women who relay intimate stories of sexuality and survival direct to the camera and is one of the defining works of the 1970s. The work is a central to what Strand has called her 'ethnographies of women'; virtuoso melding of filmic languages that draws on the surrealist origins of anthropology to interrogate desire, visual pleasure and sexual politics.

The season, featuring many recently restored prints, spans Strands entire body of work from early lyrical films made in San Francisco where together with Bruce Baillie she co-founded the screening, and later distribution, collective Canyon Cinema. Central to Strands work and life was her fascination with Mexico where she spent most summers filming and collecting women's stories of ecstasy, betrayal and endurance. Blending politics with cultural investigation her films south of the US border ranged from her subversive depiction of Catholic missionaries in Venezuela in *Mosori Monika* 1970, tender studies of labour and craft in Mexico in *Fake Fruit Factory* 1986 to her last film *Señora con Flores/Woman with Flowers* 1995/2011 a work of radical compassion.

Alongside her celebrated observational work Strand created many remarkable collage works mixing film of friends and family with found footage from cartoons to war films to create powerful self-reflective works from the autobiographical *Elasticity* 1976 to the political *Loose Ends* 1979. Presented alongside Strands films will a selection of rare works by contemporaries Chris Langdon and Penelope Spheeris who also provocatively explored sexuality, subjectivity and the limits of documentary. Many of these works have recently been rediscovered and together with Chick Strands influential works, these films propose new ways of thinking about collective activity, women's film practice and the rich legacies of West Coast filmmaking.

– George Clark

Presented in collaboration with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.

'No close-ups please,' they say. 'It is not the normal way of seeing.' But it is normal for an infant to be close to the face of the mother, normal for a lover to be close to the body of the beloved, normal to face a friend eye-to-eye a foot away and talk intimately and normal for that person to see only the face of the friend and not this or her own face. 'No fragments of movement,' they say. But it is normal for a child sitting beside women grinding corn to see only their hand movements, normal to catch fragments of the costume of the person dancing next to you out of the corner of your eye, normal to see only the flank of a cow when you are milking her. Maybe it is normal for the anthropologist to be so far removed, but not for the people living in the culture. – Chick Strand 'Notes on Ethnographic Film by a Film Artist', *Wide Angle*, Spring 1978, p44–51

Chick Strand *Soft Fiction* 1979, film still

CHICK STRAND: SOFT FICTION Friday 13 November, 19.00–21.30

'Film is simply another language for me. Here are some more of my 'languages,' anthropology, matehood, motherhood, teacher/mentor, painter, gardener, collage maker, cabinet maker, reader, motorist, novice house repair person, seamstress, dog trainer, traveler, music buff, and believer. I believe in science, in quantum mechanics, J.S. Bach and all of his twenty five children, the cave paintings, that Lucy is the mother of us all, Charles Darwin, Billie, Ella and Hildegard.' - Chick Strand, 'An Interview with Chick Strand (May 1997),' Irina Leimbacher, *Discourse*, Winter/Spring 1998, p140

Chick Strand's masterpiece *Soft Fiction* 1979 is a remarkable work of collective representation. Each of the women in the film collaborated with Strand to build the films rich and complex picture of female subjectivity blending poetic

documentary with lyrical abstraction. It's rare and open depiction of female sensuality was controversial when first shown but *Soft Fiction* is now celebrated as one of the defining films of the 1970s. The screening will be the European premiere of the new restored 16mm print from the Academy Film Archive. Shown together with *Elasticity* 1976, Strand's most autobiographical film created from footage from her life in San Francisco and Los Angeles featuring friends and lovers, a complex reflection on Strands past and future. Richly editing together a range of material from archival footage including sequence with Amelia Earhart to a range of audio samples the film is a beatnik self-portrait, as one voice states in the film 'ecstasy is knowing exactly who you are and still not caring.'

Followed by a discussion with film curator Jemma Desai, artist Rehana Zaman and artist XXXXXX chaired by writer and editor Sophie Mayer organised in collaboration with Electra and LUX.

Chick Strand *Elasticity* 1976, film still.

ELASTICITY

Chick Strand, USA 1976, 16mm, colour and black & white, sound, 25 min

Strand's commitment to understanding extends to self-understanding. In *Elasticity* [...] she turns from biography to autobiography. An old woman, a figure for Strand, climbs a hill. Her silver medallion flashes in the sun. This flash is later identified with a projector beam. It is a symbol for cinema, i.e., cinema conceived of primarily as memory. A life, represented by stock footage and shots of friends, rushes by. An Oriental friend, for instance, seems to evoke Hollywood images of China. Different modes of being a person are imagistically explored – amnesia (not knowing who you are and wanting to), euphoria (not knowing but not caring) and ecstasy (knowing but not caring). Into this welter of personal association, the idea of the future intrudes. Suddenly, the whole reverie reverses itself, each previous shot is reduced to a single frame until we return to the old woman. Here, Strand seems to be invoking the idea of the extended moment, that privileged second Cocteau charted between the toppling and crashing of a chimney. Cinematic time becomes identified with psychological time and montage with memory. – Noël Carroll, 'Sympathetic

Cinema', *Soho Weekly News*, 23 February 1978
This film is autobiographical in the sense that its elements stand for things that have been important in my life. The 'Amnesia/ White Light' section represents those things in the past that have almost retreated from memory. The hopeful girl on the traveling bars, the talk about the crumbs of three marriages ... A confused part in my life ... thoughts of youthful suicide ... Lots of lovers, their faces receding from memory like the far-away universes escaping so their light reaches us millions of years in their past. This is where I pack for the quest for 'finding' myself. The 'Euphoria/Dreams of Meditation' section is the quest ... the journey in search of knowledge. Amelia Earhart represents the traveler. Many paths are started ... oriental philosophies, strange cults, organdie magic, fast living. The beatnik house represents a resting place and the end of restless search. The end of the sequence is the acceptance of self, and also indicated is a discovery that a human in our society must stand alone and unaided, naked, raw, strong, independent, and still able to cry. The 'Ecstasy/Memories of the Future' section is a confrontation with the idea of death and accepting it ... The last scene indicates hope and optimism for the future.
–Chick Strand, 'An Introduction to the films of Chick Strand', *Discourse*, Winter/Spring 1998, p132-3

SOFT FICTION

Chick Strand, USA 1979, 16mm, black & white, sound, 54 min

Featuring Karen Ameno, Melissa Lou Beal, Joanna Demetrakis, Cathy Freeman, Simone Gad, Amy Halpern, Beverle Houston, Cynthia Mac Adams, Victoria Mudd and Hedy Sontag. Preserved by the Academy Film Archive with funding provided by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and The Film Foundation

It is a film about women who win. It is not about women who were victims or who had survived. It is about women who win [...] What I mean by winning is that they don't become victims, and they don't become survivors. They carry on. They take the responsibility for having had the experience and carrying it off and dealing with it and carrying on and becoming more potent, more powerful, more of themselves. - Chick Strand, 'An Interview with Chick Strand,' Kate Haug, *Wide Angle*, January 1998, p144

Chick Strand's *Soft Fiction* is a personal documentary that brilliantly portrays the survival power of female sensuality. It combines the documentary approach with a sensuous lyrical expressionism. Strand focuses her camera on people talking about their own experience, capturing subtle nuances in facial expressions and gestures that are rarely seen in cinema. The title *Soft Fiction* works on several levels. It evokes the soft line between truth and fiction that characterizes Strand's own approach to documentary, and suggests the idea of softcore fiction, which is appropriate to the film's erotic content and style. It's rare to find an erotic film with a female perspective dominating both the narrative discourse and the visual and audio rhythms with which the film is structured. Strand continues to celebrate in her brilliant, innovative personal documentaries her theme, the reaffirmation of the tough resilience of

the human spirit. - Marsha Kinder, *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1980 pp50-57 TBC

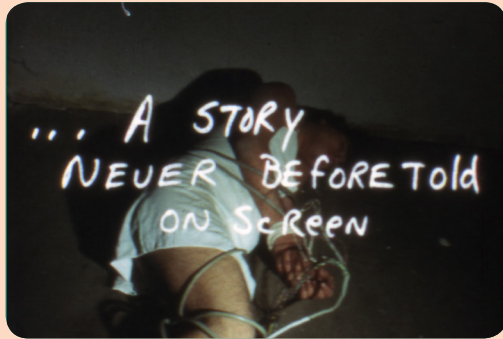
[In] Strand's newest film *Soft Fiction* – a magisterial work destined to become a classic [...] she allows several women to tell their own stories. The stories are diverse - one woman recounts an extremely sensual experience in an art museum, another tells of a sexual encounter with several cowboys, another of her life as a junkie, another of her childhood experiences with the Nazis. The selection appears arbitrary, though it's remarkable how many of the accounts revolve around extinction of one kind or another. But this strengthens the film; for rather than presenting a heavily theorized abstract analysis, the film allows the specifics of the actual female experience to speak itself. In this respect, the film is a consciousness-raising or consciousness-sharing and could be contrasted with Kate Millett's far more doctrinaire *Three Lives*. *Soft Fiction* is an extremely personal film, as if by an ironic reversal of terms it existed as a fiction 'softened' into a documentary. As always in Strand's films, the photography is exquisitely lyrical, as if beauty were itself the location of a value system alternative to that of the male-dominant society in which these women have been obliged to live. This beauty is reciprocated by a fictional frame around the stories. - David James, 'Light and Lost Bells: The Films of Chick Strand', *Journal Southern California Art Magazine* Summer 1981, p55-56

Programme duration: 79 min

Prints courtesy of the Academy Film Archive

Opposite page, top and bottom: Chick Strand *Soft Fiction* 1979, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive
Opposite page, middle: Chick Strand *Soft Fiction* 1979, film still.





Chris Langdon Trailer for *Bondage Boy* 1973, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

**HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD:
STRAND, LANGDON AND SPHEERIS**
Saturday 14 November, 16.00–18.00

I like a lot of movement. I like to make my own special effects. I like to put the viewer in a position they would never be in: really close in, for a length of time, like they're flitting around the feet of the dancers. – Chick Strand in Kate Haug, 'An Interview with Chick Strand,' *Wide Angle*, January 1998, p133

This selection of rare and unique works explores film making in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Chick Strand made her key works from her home in Tujunga, a remote canyon in the foothills San Gabriel Mountains. Similar to contemporaries Chris Langdon and Penelope Spheeris, Strand created a singular style of filmmaking blending elements of fiction, documentary and performance. These works many rediscovered in recent years provocatively look at questions of sexuality, gender and identity. Strand's *Cartoon le Mousse* 1979 is one of her richest films, a playful and subversive montage of found footage while her sensual *Fever Dream* 1979 is a hypnotic sexual fantasy.

Chris Langdon (now known as Inga Uwais) whom Thom Andersen called 'the most important unknown filmmaker in the history of the Los Angeles avant-garde,' created an outstanding body of over thirty 16mm and 35mm works



Chick Strand *Cartoon le Mousse* 1979, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

between 1971–1976 following studies at CalArts. The diptych *Bondage Boy* 1973 and *Bondage Girl* 1973 are irreverent deconstructions of B-movies that explore gender roles at the same time as operating as a critique of structuralism.

Penelope Spheeris, who made the celebrated *Decline of Western Civilisation* 1979–97 trilogy on the Los Angeles punk scene, was a fellow student of Strand's at UCLA where she created her remarkable portraits of the life and relationships of the transgender Jimmy / Jennifer. Her films *I Don't Know* 1970 and *Hats Off to Hollywood* 1972 balance documentary and fiction providing insight into the sexual relationships and politics in the city in the early 1970s.

With introduction by Mark Toscano, film preservationist at the Academy Film Archive

CARTOON LE MOUSSE
Chick Strand, USA 1979, 16mm, black & white,
sound, 15 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

A reenactment of defective facsimiles and counterfeits—*Cartoon le Mousse*

Chick Strand is a prolific and prodigiously gifted film artist who seems to break new ground with each new work. Her recent 'found footage' works such as *Cartoon le Mousse*, are

extraordinarily beautiful, moving, visionary pieces that push this genre into previously unexplored territory. If poetry is the art of making evocative connections between otherwise dissimilar phenomena, then Chick Strand is a great poet, for these films transcend their material to create a surreal and sublime universe beyond reason. – Gene Youngblood, *Canyon Cinema Catalog* 5, 1982, p256

BONDAGE BOY
Chris Langdon, USA 1973, 16mm, colour,
sound, 5 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive

A quiet evening at home with a little twine... – Chris Langdon

Bondage Boy serves up sequential visions of a young man in a white slip, lashed to pillars and banisters, while 'These Boots Are Made for Walkin' blares. But the vision isn't played as camp sensationalism. You might detect a parody of so-called structural films such as Andy Warhol's *Empire*, generally abstract, anti-narratives that emphasized formal qualities. – Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times, 25 January 2010

BONDAGE GIRL (AKA IMMACULATE GATE)
Chris Langdon, USA 1973, 16mm, colour,
sound, 5 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive

Drugs are bad – Chris Langdon

She was one of the best students and most respected by her peers for her films. She shot and helped edit two of my films. They would not have been doable without her help and guidance. – John Baldessari, 'Now, You Can Do Anything: The Films of Chris Langdon', REDCAT, programme notes, 2010, p1



Chris Langdon *Bondage Girl (aka Immaculate Gate)*, 1973, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

FEVER DREAM
Chick Strand, 1979, 16mm, black & white,
sound, 7 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

It's a hot fever dream. It has been shown at the Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals. I kept saying, 'I'm not gay. I'm not a lesbian, does that matter?' And they said, 'No,' which I thought was nice. They said something about, 'Well it's got a lesbian's viewpoint and aesthetic.' I thought, 'What the fuck does that mean? Gimme a break, what does that mean?' It's different. I mean you are making me blush at my own sexuality. I thought, I always had fantasies about women, and so do most women I know, even though they've never done it with a women... and it's not that I wouldn't ever, it's just that I have not. [...] So I thought, 'Oh, okay, we'll get them in the ivy and give them some baby oil and get the skin all shiny.' I'm standing there saying 'Girls, you're turning me on!'... Film, film, film... so it was sort of nice. – Chick Strand, 'An Interview With Chick Strand', Kate Haug, *Wide Angle*, January 1998, p131



Penelope Spheeris *I Don't Know* 1970, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

I DON'T KNOW

Penelope Spheeris, USA 1970, 16mm, black & white, sound, 20 min

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive

The concept for *I Don't Know* came from my observation that there were coming to be more and more gay people. I thought it would be perfect if a gay man and a gay woman could get together, if the man could find in the woman the things that turn him on sexually, and vice versa. *I Don't Know* is essentially a love story between a man who thinks he's a woman and a woman who thinks she's a man. (These two do not know who they are, or at any rate have no wish to be who they are.) - Penelope Spheeris 'An Interview with Penelope Spheeris' by Fritzi Rogers, *Everywoman*, May 1972, p20



Penelope Spheeris *Hats off to Hollywood* 1972, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD

Penelope Spheeris, USA 1972, 16mm, colour, sound, 22 min

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive

Hats Off to Hollywood is about a relationship between a male homosexual and a transsexual. [...] Here are two very dear people who are very fucked up, whom I feel a great deal of compassion and love for, and a lot of hate and disgust sometimes. All these feelings have to be good makings for a movie. What I tried to do was translate my knowledge of them as individuals, as my friends, into film to show how these people exist, what their lives are like [...] Their lives are incredibly comical at times, and incredibly tragic. Somehow the tragedy always wins out. The film is funny and you laugh yourself sick sometimes; but then you stop and say, 'Wait a minute. This isn't funny, this is horrible.' What I think I'm doing is making a sociological statement about a certain group of people in a certain time [...] It's the kind of topic that doesn't really get any attention from scholars and historians until it's over. - Penelope Spheeris 'An Interview with Penelope Spheeris' by Fritzi Rogers, *Everywoman*, May 1972, p20

Programme duration: 74 min

Prints courtesy of the Academy Film Archive



Chick Strand *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers* 1995-2011, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

CHICK STRAND: WOMAN WITH FLOWERS Saturday 14 November, 19.00-21.00

Ethnographic films can and should be works of art, symphonies about the fabric of a people, celebrations of the tenacity and uniqueness of the human spirit - Chick Strand 'Notes on Ethnographic Film by a Film Artist' *Wide Angle*, Spring 1978, p51

Strand's most celebrated body of work are her remarkable films made south of the US border tracing cultural and family histories and reflecting on the legacy of colonialism and patriarchal society. Her early film *Mosori Monika* 1970 made while studying anthropology at UCLA balances the experiences of missionaries and native Warao women in the Orinoco Delta region of Venezuela. Strand's last film *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers* 1995/2011 is a portrait of a flower seller she met while spending time in San Miguel de Allende, in central Mexico. Although

Strand had completed picture and sound editing prior to her death, the final post-production work was only completed posthumously in 2011. Strand has referred to her work as 'ethnographies of women,' and these films each explore in distinct ways the lives, struggles and desires of women from the feminist parable *Mujer de Milfuegos / Woman of a Thousand Fires* 1976 that draws on the surrealist routes of ethnography to her compassionate study of the neglected wives and lovers of the street musician Anselmo Aguascalientes in *Anselmo and the Women* 1986.

MOSORI MONIKA

Chick Strand, USA 1970, 16mm, colour, sound, 20 min

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

I've always liked documentary photography. Maybe it's because of my era or something. So going down to Venezuela, it just seemed natural for me to be out there with my camera and figuring out how to proceed, and I just sort of made it up as I went. What to film and how to put it together and all that stuff, and so once I got into that I did sort of the same thing with my other work. And I think as I commented, that's the only film that I felt that I went into as objective as I could be, and that my approach was deliberately anthropological. [...] [O]f course it's about three women, me, the nun, and the old Indian woman, and certainly we've got to admit, it's absolutely impossible to slice yourself away from your own culture. But I'm not making any judgements, I'm not saying that the Catholics are terrible for going there, I'm not saying that the nun should be murdered or anything like that. It exists and that's what it is. That's what I filmed. - Chick Strand, 'An Interview with Chick Strand: Irina Leimbacher', *Discourse*, Winter/Spring 1998, p144-145

In *Mosori Monika* Strand tells a story which poetically spans two generations and two opposite cultures, as the Spanish Franciscan nuns 'civilize' the Warao Indians of the Orinoco River Delta, Venezuela. The displacement and replacement of Warao by Western European customs is gradually and gently revealed. Strand's camera always seems to show just the essentials of exposition in a fluid, subtle manner which neither over-invests the authority of master shots nor loses the intimacy of details into meaningless action. - Anthony Reveaux, 'Chick Strand: Experimental filmmaker' Los Angeles International Film Exposition, programme notes, 1977



Chick Strand *Anselmo and the Women*, 1986, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

ANSELMO AND THE WOMEN

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1986 16mm, colour, sound, 35 min

Continuing the life of Anselmo, a Mexican street musician, and his life-long struggle to make a good life for his children. This film focuses on his relationship with his wife Adela and his mistress, Cruz, and theirs with him. In a society where traditional gender roles are separate and sharply defined, the number of children defines male identity and keeps the women at home and dependent. Poverty makes daily survival a desperate struggle. Both men and women must cooperate, the men to provide food and shelter and the women to raise and care for the large family. However, the cooperation is often superficial, with very little communication in terms of inner emotional needs. Relationships become economic in essence in which both men and women perceive themselves living in an emotional desert. The film is about lives in conflict from three points of view as told by the people involved be there —Chick Strand, 'Seeing In Between', Pacific Film Archives, programme notes, 1994, p4

MUJER DE MILFUEGOS / WOMAN OF A THOUSAND FIRES

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1976, 16mm, colour, sound, 15 min

While living in Mexico the summer before last, I knew a young American woman who lost herself in despair...deep and troubled. Her eyes moved me...intensely empty. I began to make a film about her...but I couldn't intrude on her escape so when I met a beautiful Mexican poetess and formed a relationship with her, I realized that the film was about all three of us and perhaps symbolized everyone who, like the Great Blondino, is a tightrope walker on the razor's edge. The film deals with the idea that love and a consequent enduring relationship can form a stranglehold on personal, intellectual and creative freedom. - Chick Strand, 'Cineprobe: An Evening With Chick Strand', Museum of Modern Art Department of Film, programme notes, 18 October 1976

Mujer De Milfuegos offers an excellent example of Strand's penchant for using distancing irony as Bunuel did, to structure poetic images, rendering them absurd, surreal, and ultimately grotesque. The film traces the eerie, solitary daily rituals of a woman dressed in black who wanders through a Mexican landscape that is part ruined castle and part barren desert. - Maria Pramaggiore, *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks* Robin Blaetz (ed), Duke University Press, 2007, p205

SEÑORA CON FLORES / WOMAN WITH FLOWERS

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1995/2011, 16mm, colour, sound, 15 min

[Strand's] brand of documentary maintains an intense closeness to its subjects, photographically and psychologically, as in *Señora con flores*, shot in 1995 on one of Strand's several summerlong sojourns to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The camera follows a woman

over the course of day that she spends playing with her children next to a river. Simultaneously, she chronicles her long marriage to a brutal alcoholic in a narration that runs over the footage. The composite of her personal story and glimpses of her quotidian joys creates a truthful portrait of her life. Of all the moods that Strand strikes in her films - some of which depict the more buoyant likes of synchronized swimmers, golden retrievers, and lovers tumbling outdoors to Aretha Franklin - the most palpable one is caused by the quiet that suddenly discloses itself after the credits roll. In *Señora con flores*, there is no decisive end to the woman's tale, no epiphany or tragedy. She seems at terms with her life, and in the silence after the film ends, the audience is left with an imperfect sense of peace, which, as Strand's diligent lyricism conveys, is always, on some level, present. - Kevin McGarry, 'Last Strand' *Artforum*, 23 September 2011

While it's the flower lady that comes and knocks on your door and asks if you want some flowers. It's the story about her life. It reminds me very much of Bunuel's *Land Without Bread* 1932 where one thing happens and something else happens that's worse and blah, blah, blah. So it's about her. - Chick Strand, 'An Interview With Chick Strand' Kate Haug, *Wide Angle*, January 1998, p135

Programme duration: 85 min

Prints courtesy of the Academy Film Archive



Chick Strand *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers* 1995-2011, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive



Chick Strand *Angel Blue Sweet Wings* 1967, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

CHICK STRAND: ARTIFICIAL PARADISE SUNDAY 15 NOV, 16.00–18.00

To me Mexico is surrealism... just being there. It's a different culture, it's beautiful, it's just incredible to be there – Chick Strand, 'Chick Strand at the Cinematheque', *Cinema News*, March, 1980

Paradise is a central and elusive subject of Chick Strand's work motivating her investigations of other cultures from her travels in Mexico to her interest in psychedelia. These films blend Strand's fascinating with abstraction from her lyrical early beat films such as *Angel Blue Sweet Wings* 1967 and the psychedelic *Waterfall* 1967 made with help from fellow filmmaker Pat O'Neill to her remarkable film *Fake Fruit Factory* 1986 that shows the women's labour behind exotic talismans of paper mache fruits. Sensuality and desire are

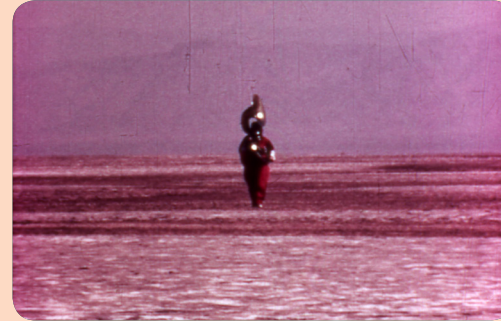
ever present in Strand's work from her carnal depiction of bullfighting and teenage masculinity in *Guacamole* 1976 to her hypnotic tribute to innocence and beauty *Artificial Paradise* 1986.

ANGEL BLUE SWEET WINGS

Chick Strand, USA 1967, Super8 blow up to 16mm, colour 4 mins

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

Her film *Angel Blue Sweet Wings* was unlike anything anyone had seen, and she seemed to bring with her a little breeze of freedom, possibility, and gentle rebellion – Pat O'Neill 'Chick Strand 1931-2009: A Memoir by Pat O'Neill', *Millennium Film Journal*, Winter 2009 p88



Chick Strand *Anselmo* 1967, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

ANSELMO

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1967, 16mm, colour, sound, 4 mins

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

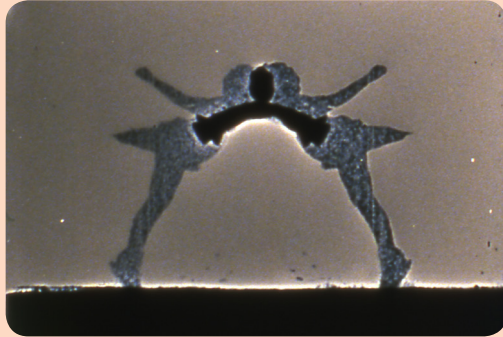
One evening ten years ago when I was living in a town in Central Mexico, I was standing on the street looking in the window of a store that sold TV's, There was an American rock and roll show on one of the sets. There were several Mexicans watching too. One of them, a very short man with a ragged Mariachi jacket excused himself and asked me if I liked music. I said yes, and he asked if he could bring his sons to my house to play for me. He did and that began a long friendship. When I left Mexico that year I asked him what his biggest wish was, something that I could possibly bring him from the U.S the next time. He answered immediately, 'a double E flat tuba' for his street band. [...] [A]fter a year, a kind man at an instrument store found a huge wrap-around brass tuba for 100 bucks. I used part of my latest student loan to buy it and arranged to meet Anselmo in Mexicali 1500 miles from his home. He was so excited he arrived in Mexicali a week early. I had to smuggle the tuba into Mexico. When other Mexicans saw that he was getting a tuba they called him Maestro. My husband Neon Park and I gave him his tuba in the desert. This film is about that giving... a celebration of a wish that came true. – Chick Strand, 'Cineprobe: An Evening With Chick Strand', Museum of Modern Art NY, programme notes, 18 October 1976

GUACAMOLE

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1976, 16mm, colour, sound, 10 min

This is a film about the loss of innocence. As children we are innocent in the sense that we are not born with values, morals and ethics. As we develop we are taught by our culture that which is ideal and in our society what is ideal is based on a humanistic philosophy. In order to survive psychologically, we learn to accept that it is impossible to maintain this ideal humanistic behaviour in our own lives and thoughts. In a sense our innocence is lost when we learn the values and then lost again when we struggle within ourselves to achieve a life based on the values we learned, and when we fail, we feel guilt and sadness. A true survivor accepts this, and the manifestations of it in other humans, with dignity and grace. – Chick Strand, 'Cineprobe: An Evening With Chick Strand', Museum of Modern Art NY, programme notes, 18 October 1976

Throughout the five Mexican films, Strand shows a fascination with the primitive, occultly mysterious aspects of Spanish-American life. The point of view is Rousseauist, sometimes tritely so, but the overall effect of the five films is one of photogenic power and evocative flavor. [...] The best sequence in the program is also in the best film, *Guacamole*. The scene, an eerie, hypnotic one, takes place in a corrido, between a matador and his bull. It is here that the two sides of Spanish-American culture are represented and paired off: the showy Europeanized opulence of the matador versus the primitive power of the bull. And it is here [...] that the five films crystallize, the drama reveals itself, the conflict resolves itself, and Mexico bleeds. – Jace Gaffrey, 'Off the Beaten Tracks with Chick Strand' *Village Voice*, 27 December 1976, p47



Chick Strand *Waterfall* 1967, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

WATERFALL

Chick Strand, USA 1967, 16mm, black & white, sound, 3 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

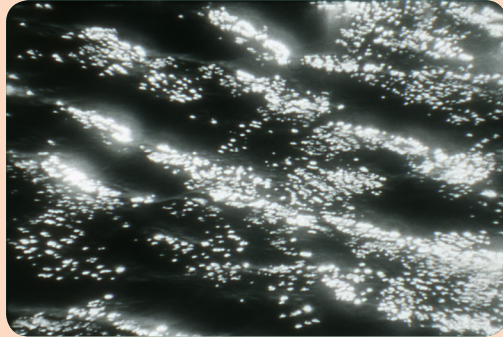
Optically printed, hand developed and solarized, *Waterfall* incorporates far-flung stock footage in a flowing, floating, and gliding ode to water. The sound is Japanese koto music - Chick Strand, 'Films For, By, and About Women', Kaye Sullivan, 1980, p354

In her search to fulfill a growing need for more control over imagery, she found an ally in Pat O'Neill at UCLA who was exploring the potential creative applications of the optical printer. She used that device in the making of *Waterfall* 1967 which included clips from the 'By a Waterfall' sequence of Busby Berkeley's *Footlight Parade* 1933. Her photographic experience in developing and solarization combined to yield a gliding and cascading ode to water. - 'Chick Strand' Pacific Film Archive, p2

LOOSE ENDS

Chick Strand, 1979, 16mm, black & white, sound, 25 min

Loose Ends is a collage film about the process of internalizing the information that bombards us through a combination of personal experience and media in all forms. Speeding through



Chick Strand *Kristallnacht* 1979, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

our senses in ever-increasing numbers and complicated mixtures of fantasy, dream and reality from both outside and in, these fragmented images of life, sometimes shared by all, sometimes isolated and obscure, but with a common thread, lead us to a state of psychological entropy tending toward a uniform inertness... an insensitive uninvolvement in the human condition and our own humanity. - Chick Strand, 'An Interview with Chick Strand: Irina Leimbacher', *Discourse*, Winter/Spring 1998, p133

KRISTALLNACHT

Chick Strand, 1979, 16mm, black & white, sound, 7 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

The political component of this work, which would otherwise be present only by implication, is hinted at the end by the dedication to Ann Frank, but also by the title: *Kristallnacht* is the name of a Jewish festival commemorating one of the worst nights of terror in Nazi Germany. The profound rupture between the meditative beauty of the film and this event becomes then, a sign of the psychic disintegration we all suffer, a measure of the distance we all have to go to find our 'ancient souls.' The light of Chick Strand's films begins to show us a way. - David James, 'Light and Lost Bells: The Films of Chick Strand', *Journal Southern California Art Magazine* Summer 1981, p58



Chick Strand *Fake Fruit Factory* 1986, film still

FAKE FRUIT FACTORY

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1986, 16mm, colour, sound, 22 min

In the town where I spend my time in Mexico, I had an American friend, a man who was a painter. He has married a Mexican woman and had three children with her. [...] For years he tried to think of schemes which would make him money so he wouldn't have to be a yo-yo... He started making papier mache fruit and vegetables to sell to local tourist stores. They became very popular, and before he could think twice, the whole operation grew to the extent that he had to rent a factory, and hire people to make unpainted pieces in their homes... Well, after about three years he started getting rich. He'd have shoe boxes full of money....What does an artist know about money? This guy, not ever having made more money than he needed to eat on, really didn't know what to do. Actually he had made a paradise for himself... really nice beautiful women to work with everyday, lots of deals to make, business to do, people to see, supplies to buy, things to sell... but he got bored with the whole thing. This is a film about the women who worked for him. - Chick Strand, 'New Films by Chick Strand', San Francisco Cinematheque, programme notes, 4 June 1987, p11

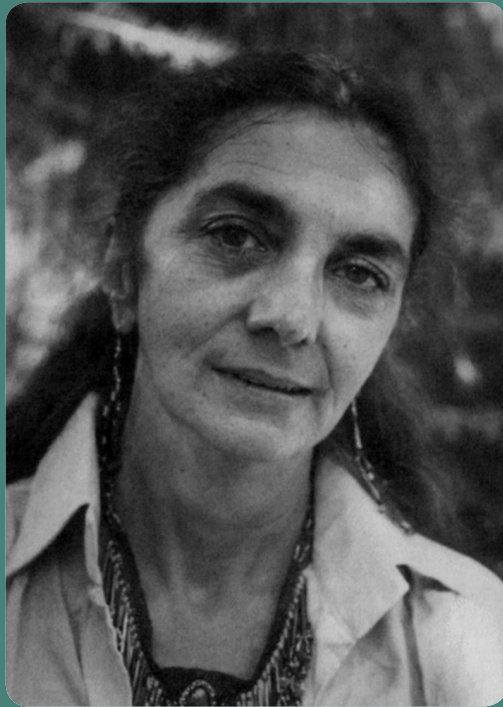
ARTIFICIAL PARADISE

Chick Strand, USA/Mexico 1986, 16mm, colour, sound, 12 min
Preserved by the Academy Film Archive and the Pacific Film Archive

This is about those wonderful experiences that we sometimes have when we love a person secretly and the delightful cozy warm feelings we have about the romance of it all... they are mysterious and magical and we end up being quite relieved that we can love without the need or desire to act upon it... I met Berna one day when I was looking at a ranch near my Mexican town... He was a really beautiful Indian guy about 18 years old. It didn't click until I sat down with the landlord on the steps and watched this kid work... what movement! What art! Well, why not, I thought and went over and asked Berna if he'd do it. He said sure... it will be a big adventure to make a film [...] He fell in love with my friend, and I loved watching it because I knew that he, like I, had this wonderful secret and I wanted very much for him to have it. Of course, my friend knew it without him saying so. You can tell how he feels when he looks at her in the film, because she is in it, too. So, we took him to listen to live jazz and we all got drunk and giggled...

...It was he who made the costumes and makeup for the dance scene in the film... Actually he was the one with the ideas about how the film should look, not me. Anyway, we had grand adventures and tender hearts. We have been friends ever since. He still, after all these years secretly loves my friend... but now like my feeling for him, and his for me, the feelings have become so deep inside that we are family... and this is a film to celebrate that. - Chick Strand, 'New Films by Chick Strand', San Francisco Cinematheque, programme notes, 4 June 1987, p12

Programme duration: 90 min
Prints courtesy of the Academy Film Archive



Chick Strand, 1986. Photo by Neon Park.

EVERYTHING'S ETHNOGRAPHIC CHICK STRAND INTERVIEWED BY MARK WEBBER

I was fortunate to be able to visit Chick Strand at her home in Tujunga, on the outskirts of Los Angeles, on 15 March 2008. The following excerpts are from a long interview we recorded for 'Critical Mass: An Oral History of Avant-Garde Film, The New American Cinema and Beyond' a research project supported by the British Academy that will eventually result in a book. - Mark Webber, October 2015

Chick Strand: I had a Degree in Anthropology and I was going to San Francisco State University to get my MFA and then my PhD and I thought, 'Oh man, I'm 30 fucking years old and now I've got two kids ... I don't want to listen to these old farts ever again!' So I came down to Los Angeles to go to film school at UCLA. UCLA is where I met Pat O'Neill, he was a student in the Art Department and I was in the Film Department, but we came together over photography because

I thought that if I took photography then I'd learn more about film – the physics of it, how you do it, how you can manipulate it. We were down in the dark rooms with a wonderful teacher there called Robert Heineken, he was pretty well known, who somehow had got a 16mm contact printer. Pat O'Neill was the only one using it, and he showed me what he knew and then I was using it. It was quite wonderful. We had to develop our films in regular trays and stuff like that. I was pretty good. Pretty hard to keep our butts out of the soup there but it was really rather fun.

Mark Webber: And so was this how you made *Kulu Se Mama* and those early abstract films?

Chick Strand: It was. *Kulu Se Mama* was an independent course that I did using special effects, my first attempt really. I was interested first of all in photography and Bob Heineken turned us onto solarisation. There was a photographer named Edmund Teske who was really involved in that. I think maybe Pat had made 7362 1967 by then and maybe we talked about it. So I was pretty much playing with solarisation and was sort of entranced by the natural colour that came out. Rather than putting colour in I was really entranced by these bronzes and coppers. I found out too that if you made the soup thick, just sort of let it sit there and gel, then you could get these marvellous greens and I thought, 'Oh, that's what I want to do,' ... but then I got into the ethnographic thing and got sent to Venezuela, to the jungles of the Orinoco. So what was a girl to do but just do an ethnographic film?

I went to Venezuela with the idea in mind that *Mosori Monika* was going to be an ethnographic film, using that methodology more or less. I never believed that an ethnographic film would ever take the place of the written word, but that it would sort of introduce people who'd watch the films and then studied the culture to actual seeing the people move around, you know? I was so sick of the black and white photographs

of guys with spears and all that stuff ... But you cannot be objective, totally objective, I couldn't help myself juxtaposing what was actually being said by an Indian woman – translated – over a picture, over an image ...

Even though I shoot documentary style, it isn't, because I don't set out to do that and I don't weigh it out in any certain way. Although I'm so nosey – 'Tell me about your life?' – but I couldn't understand this Warao Indian woman I was filming one bit. There was a guy who spoke Spanish and English that was part of the trio of us that went down to Venezuela, totally paid for by UCLA, then he had a translator that spoke Spanish and the Indian language, and then there was the Indian woman. I said, 'Tell me about your life,' and then he left her talking for about 20 minutes. I'd say, 'Jorge, is she telling about the life?' and he asked and the guy says, 'Yeah, yeah!' I had no idea what she was talking about, no idea at all, but we translated it immediately so I could somehow get some images that went along with it. Of course it's a lie because if she's talking about when she was young you can't really show it, you have to be symbolic about it in a way. Margaret Mead hated it. The Flaherty Seminar was going on and she was still alive, and it was just at that time when I was seeing ethnographic films a lot. That was very interesting because one of the things that sort of influenced me to be a little more humane about what I was doing, a little more digging in, was her film called *Trance and Dance in Bali* 1952, where the guys are flaying themselves. You never got the feeling of what it was like to be one of those guys, never, it was just like going to the zoo ... It was absolutely wonderful that these people went out there with cameras and filmed all this stuff and tried to preserve the cultures, at least on paper and then film, it was really remarkable. In a sense, that film and many others like *Nanook of the North* influenced me with ethnography and all my work. Then I went to Mexico and I was so entranced with the colour and the feeling we got there, and how mysterious it was, like true-life surrealism.



Chick Strand. *Mosori Monika* 1970 film still.

You'd go into a church and they've got Jesus in a glass case, bleeding all over, and on the walls they've got relics that are supposed to be the skin of saints or something like that. Or you sit in your patio and down the street you hear the donkey braying and ducks quacking and then you go out the door and up the street there's some guy playing a flute and drum. It's crazy and it really is wonderful. Mexico to me was a very magic place.

Mark Webber: *Artificial Paradise* is one of your Mexican films.

Chick Strand: For some complicated reason, I met this young man who was a groom at a horse ranch outside of town and I really fell in love with him, like when you get crushes on people but you never follow through or anything. It was just this young guy, couldn't speak English, totally uneducated, so I taught him how to drive a car and how to read. He was quite beautiful to me. I thought that every movement was sort of his art, and the way he saw things and the poetry he'd write, the songs he'd sing. Not only that but he was completely captivated, not by me so much as just the adventures we could have together. 'Come on ...', in my lousy Spanish, 'I want to film you in the lake because of these pink flowers here.' So we'd go in the water and then I realised, 'God, it's smelly, it's probably where the sewer came out' but he didn't say anything. He had this big crush on my friend Lee and I just had to make a romantic film about it, it had to be

about Sappho thinking of men instead of women. That's the way it was really, 'the boy across the river whose skin is like peaches but I cannot swim'. Of course in the end she swims – have your cake and eat it too! I really love movement close in. We never see it because we're never that close. Instead of special effects and all that stuff, I could just use the camera itself, and move with the camera and let everything unfold. That's what *Artificial Paradise* is about, aside from this romance that wasn't a romance. I always thought of films as poems, they're poetic, but anyway that's old-fashioned!

Mark Webber: At a certain point you were making the Mexican films and found footage films like *Loose Ends* in parallel. What was your interest in making collage films?

Chick Strand: The footage was available, and certainly after Bruce Conner's example I thought, 'Oh, that's a possibility.' I used to make cut-out collages with stuff from magazines, but when I saw *A Movie* 1958, that really blew me away. While I was teaching I somehow got my hands on a whole bunch of old black and white footage from the educational department, and maybe I stole a little bit of footage from *Dream of Wild Horses* 1960 and stuff like that, and I just did it. The thing that I love about found footage is you have to make something out of nothing in a sense. You have all these disparate pieces that can be connected or re-connected or woven and re-woven and you make the choices and it becomes a very personal thing. The secretary of my department, her father had all this stuff that showed his children during the war. And there were educational films in the Occidental College Library which I just absconded with, I mean they didn't want them anymore, it was quite wonderful. Then of course there was the L.A. Public Library and, you know, I just would have dupes made. I had a student whose father owned a big special effects place. I could take my black and white footage there and he would wet

gate print it and make a master so that a lot of the scratches would be gone. I can't believe I did that, but I'd do it again! When I started, I'd shoot my own stuff but still I sort of see it as a collage because I don't know what I'm shooting, I had no idea, and most the time I don't have control over the people because they give me a present of themselves. "Give me the gift of yourself, tell me your life story!"

Mark Webber: Could you tell me about the making of *Soft Fiction*?

Chick Strand: I had a friend named Beverley Houston who, with Marsha Kinder, wrote books about films and were film historians at USC. We'd all been to an art show down on Wiltshire Boulevard and as we were leaving, we were sort of lingering on the staircase with our hands on the banister, just sort of gossiping, and Beverley told me this story about the time she went to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. She said there was a piece that was a banister, a three dimensional banister ... I don't know who it was by, I don't think it was George Segal, it was by somebody else. She was stoned at the Norton Simon Museum, and she began to wonder what it would be like to be that banister and have people touch you. Then she moved on to the David statue and also wondered what it would be like to be that and feel everything, rather than be the person that feels. It was such a bizarre story to me that I thought, 'I gotta put this in a film,' so I filmed her telling the story with a borrowed a lipsync camera. For a while my friends would say, 'What you working on Chick?' And I'd tell them, and they'd say, 'I have a story, I have a story...' There was a story about the girl and her grandfather ... she would never say 'abused', but she was molested, I guess, by her grandfather. In the film, she finally says that he was 'teaching' her, in a way. It was before all this crazy stuff over here, like the guy who's 18 and screws a 16-year-old girlfriend and gets put in prison as a sex offender, but it's really not right that the

grandfather did that. She was my student and I would make my students write journals. I'd say, "You can lie. If you don't want to tell me, you can lie." Anyway, she wrote this story in her journal and I asked her if she would repeat the story, and not only that but would she come naked? Could I film her in a kitchen naked making breakfast while the story's going on?

With the rest of them it was the same kind of thing ... There was the woman who fucked all the cowboys. None of that went over in the 1970s at all! People in the audience would say, 'How could you do that, how could you make guys think we want to fuck all the cowboys?' And I said, 'And how many erotic daydreams do you have about guys fucking you?' It was sort of over the top at the time but now it's pretty ordinary I suppose. I'm talking about honesty or whether these stories are real.

There's another woman that talks about a heroin addiction and the guy she was going with was just a killer, meaning he was so good looking ... only a lot of people took it that meant he was a serial killer. I don't know to this day whether that was real or not. I don't want to know, because that's part of what film is, you know, you get what is given and that's the interesting thing.

Mark Webber: What kind of reactions would you get from people at the time?

Chick Strand: Well, nobody said too much about the grandfather story because that was really intimate. I guess she had accepted it. The whole idea of the film, finally when I got to those stories, was that these women are not victims. They can say, 'Fuck you!' at the end of their experience, which is, I think, the goal. They've not been victimised, they go beyond it in a way. But the audiences didn't like the screwing of the cowboys, and not only that but going to the horse stall, which was better than the dorm room, and blowing this other guy! You know, in our wildest dreams we'd love to do it once or twice, this anonymous orgy kind of thing, I



Chick Strand *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers* 1995–2011, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

suppose. She didn't want to be shown in the film, so I found this other woman to read it. She'd never seen it before I gave it to her to read on camera. So she's commenting about it, 'Oh, she's saying this ... of course, blah, blah, blah.' Feminist ladies didn't like that much at all. They didn't say much about the heroin addiction either. I mean, Johanna's so sure of herself, you know? 'And I quit and I never did it again.' But by then she'd had these two young teenage boys ... so we've always left it at that. And nobody said much about Hedy Sontag, who was Susan Sontag's cousin, and who was the little girl in Poland sitting on the Nazi's lap.

Mark Webber: What was the male response to the film?

Chick Strand: After I shot it I would say I wanted to make one about men, which I did want to do for a long time, but I never did. I would get some interesting stories, like from a Vietnam Veteran, another one of my students, who just described bodies being turned inside out ... this close to death, close to craziness experience. Another was going to be Pat O'Neill, who had a near death experience when he had an aneurysm. Then there's the young beautiful guys that are sort of wild that I wanted to use for the musical interludes, an idea I got from Mexican films – only five minutes of story and then there's a song. Why not? But I never did do it.

SCREENING SCHEDULE

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium

CHICK STRAND: SOFT FICTION FRIDAY 13 NOV, 19.00–21.30

Chick Strand *Elasticity*,
USA 1976, 25 min

Chick Strand *Soft Fiction*,
USA 1979, 54 min

Followed by discussion chaired by Sophie Mayer
with Jemma Desai, Rehana Zaman and XXX

HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD: STRAND, LANGDON AND SPHEERIS SATURDAY 14 NOV, 16.00–18.00

Chick Strand *Cartoon Le Mousse*,
USA 1979, 15 min

Chris Langdon *Bondage Boy*,
USA 1973, 5 min

Chris Langdon *Bondage Girl (aka Immaculate Gate)*,
USA 1973, 5 min

Chick Strand *Fever Dream*,
USA, 1979, 7 min

Penelope Spheeris *I Don't Know*,
USA 1970, 20 min

Penelope Spheeris *Hats Off to Hollywood*,
USA 1972, 22 min

With introduction by Mark Toscano, film
preservationist at the Academy Film Archive

CHICK STRAND: WOMAN WITH FLOWERS SATURDAY 14 NOV, 19.00–21.00

Chick Strand *Mosori Monika*,
USA 1970, 20 min

Chick Strand *Anselmo and the Women*,
USA/Mexico 1986, 35 min

Chick Strand *Mujer de Milfuegos / Woman of
a Thousand Fires*,
USA/Mexico 1976, 15 min

Chick Strand *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers*,
USA/Mexico 1995/2011, 15 min

CHICK STRAND: ARTIFICIAL PARADISE SUNDAY 15 NOV, 16.00–18.00

Chick Strand *Angel Blue Sweet Wings*,
USA 1967, 4 min

Chick Strand *Anselmo*,
USA/Mexico 1967, 4 min

Chick Strand *Guacamole*,
USA/Mexico 1976, 10 min

Chick Strand *Waterfall*,
USA 1967, 3 min

Chick Strand *Loose Ends*,
USA, 1979, 25 min

Chick Strand *Kristallnacht*,
USA, 1979, 7 min

Chick Strand *Fake Fruit Factory*,
USA/Mexico 1986, 22 min

Chick Strand *Artificial Paradise*,
USA/Mexico 1986, 12 min

All prints courtesy of the Academy Film Archive

Inside front and back cover spread: Chick Strand *Señora con Flores / Woman with Flowers*
1995-2011, film still. Courtesy of Academy Film Archive

CHICK STRAND: SOFT FICTIONS 13–15 November 2015 Tate Modern

Curated by George Clark, Tate Modern

Presented in collaboration with the Academy of
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Manton, Maria Montero Sierra (Tate Modern).
Mark Webber; Inga Uwais; Rahana Zaman.

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A person wearing a horizontally striped shirt is seen from the chest up, looking out of a window. The view outside the window shows a lush garden with various plants and flowers. The scene is captured in a soft, slightly desaturated color palette.

tate.org.uk/film

Thoughts, comments, reviews?

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