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## Featured Doc Maker



**Melody Gilbert**

Arguably one of the most fearless filmmakers in contemporary documentary cinema is Melody Gilbert.

Evidence of that came with her quirky 2002 doc "Married at the Mall," which profiles a group of folks from various locales who have traveled to the world's largest shopping mall in order to get married at "Chapel of Love." The film is great fun to watch and filled with the sort of folks that bring to mind the work of filmmakers like Errol Morris. Gilbert would follow-up "Married at the Mall" with one of the more bizarre and unsettling docs ever committed to celluloid, 2003's "Whole."

"Whole," explores a small sub-culture of physically healthy, seemingly ordinary folks who are literally obsessed with the idea of becoming an amputee. Though it's a harrowing ride, "Whole" is thoroughly fascinating and joins the ranks of films like "The Bridge" or Kirby Dick's "Sick" that are just too good to turn away from and will haunt you long after you've watched them.

To properly make a documentary of any kind, it requires an emotional commitment of the highest order from the filmmaker and an ethical promise between subject and filmmaker to tell the story but to never, ever, exploit or sensationalize. Gilbert walks this tight rope beautifully with "Whole" and applies an equally sure-handed touch to the crafting of her 2005 follow-up "A Life Without Pain."

"A Life Without Pain" not unlike "Whole" is nearly impossible to turn off and deals with an equally unusual subject. In the film, Gilbert profiles three children who can quite literally feel no pain, a genetic defect so rare that it only afflicts around 100 people in the world. By making the ever-vigilant parents of these children a part of the story as well, Gilbert crafts a film that's as much about the hardships the children face as it is the life-altering commitment and unconditional love the parents face each day. Like "Whole," in the wrong hands "A Life Without Pain" could have been a much lesser documentary, but Gilbert goes the distance, crafting a film that is as moving as it is difficult to forget.

It's no surprise that Gilbert's most recent film, 2007's "Urban Explorers," is yet another walk on the wild side for doc fans. Gilbert turns her cameras on a group of individuals who are self-professed enthusiasts of the exercise that involves the subterranean exploration of everything from abandoned caverns and tourist attractions to France's famous forbidden catacombs. Like the folks she so deftly profiles in her other films, the "urban explorers" who have names like Max Action and Katwoman, are absolutely fascinating characters.

Gilbert takes great pains to not only explore the mindset of these urban adventurers and get a little insight to why they do what they do but also to fearlessly follow them on “missions” to abandoned hospitals and long-forgotten tourist attractions like the “House of the Future” in Orlando. Once again Gilbert is able to get to the heart of the matter and provide a window into the sense of wonder and curiosity that drives these “explorers,” making them out to be fearless trailblazers instead of half-crazy trespassers.

Like her other films, “Urban Explorers” is very much a feast for the eyes as well as a look into a sub-culture we otherwise wouldn’t have known about. Melody’s films have played numerous festivals and more info about each of them is available at Melody’s website [HERE](#) and on the “Urban Explorers” Myspace page [HERE](#).

C.D.

