

Program note for **Ross McElwee** retrospective  
January 24-25, 1998  
Series: *Ross McElwee: Man with a Movie Camera*

**Saturday, January 24**

2:00 p.m.

**BACKYARD**

1976-1984, 39 mins. 16mm.

3:00 p.m.

**SHERMAN'S MARCH**

1986, 155 mins. 16mm.

**Sunday, January 25**

2:00 p.m.

INTRODUCED BY ROSS McELWEE

**TIME INDEFINITE**

1993, 117 mins. 35mm.

4:30 p.m.

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ROSS McELWEE

**SIX O'CLOCK NEWS**

1996, 102 mins. 35mm.

*All films were photographed, recorded, narrated, edited, and produced by Ross McElwee.  
Film prints provided by First Run Features.*

**By David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film & Video:**

"Can you live your life and film it?" is just one of the many questions raised by Ross McElwee's provocative first-person documentaries. During the past twenty years, this deceptively understated filmmaker has reinvented the documentary form by making himself—and his camera—characters in his movies. On one level, *Backyard*, *Sherman's March*, *Time Indefinite*, and *Six O'Clock News* comprise an evolving autobiographical epic that takes us from McElwee's attempt to understand his upbringing, to his quixotic search for a girlfriend, to his experiences with marriage, birth, and death, to his attempts to make sense of the tragic and random events that unfold nightly on the TV news.

Yet as private as their subject matter may seem, McElwee's films never feel like home movies. He is not as interested in turning the camera on himself as he is in using it as a means to explore his place in the world. The camera becomes a tool allowing him entry into people's lives. (In *Sherman's March*, he literally uses the camera to start conversations with women he is interested in dating). On a basic level, the camera is the ultimate conversation piece. At once mechanical and intimate, it encourages people to open up to him while maintaining a necessary layer of distance that keeps them comfortable, and affords him artistic perspective. Although his friend and mentor Charleen Swansea urges him at one point, "Put down your camera! This is not art! This is life!" McElwee understands that his films are both art *and* life.

This fine balance—the tension between looking inward and observing the world, between capturing reality and creating a movie, is the fine line that McElwee walks so deftly in his trademark voice-over narration. In a deadpan, seemingly laid-back style that masks the deftness of their construction, McElwee's voiceovers and his on-camera monologues enable him to comment on—and get some distance from—his extremely intimate subjects. "In making a film you have to be an outsider," he

once said, “in Joyce’s image of the artist as somebody who pares his nails and observes the world.” While his narration is confessional in tone, but is also speculative and philosophical, constantly asking questions and trying to put things in perspective.

Although McElwee’s ostensible subject is his own life, his movies take the form of picaresque journeys—they are road movies that chronicle his serendipitous encounters with all sorts of strange and memorable people. *Backyard* is about his oedipal struggle with his father, a successful Southern doctor, but it is also about the hierarchies of race and class in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina. *Sherman’s March* is about his search for a girlfriend, but it is also a devastatingly funny portrait of the new South. *Time Indefinite* is about his marriage, and the death of his father, but its scope expands to become a wide-ranging meditation on spirituality and mortality. And *Six O’Clock News*, McElwee’s most intricate and resonant film to date, demonstrates that there is not much of a boundary between personal and public life, and that it is not so easy to tell just what is real, and what is false.

Ultimately, McElwee’s quest is the irresistible and at times futile attempt to find meaning and order in his life and in the events that unfold around him. All of his metaphysical speculation is rooted in the concrete, in the day-to-day reality that passes fleetingly in front of his camera. McElwee shoots his documentaries with no clear-cut idea of where they are taking him. He has an uncanny knack to be in the right place at the right time, to capture unpredictable events that are invariably stranger than fiction. His films rely on the unexpected and the uncontrollable, and on McElwee’s brilliant ability to make some sense out of them with his camera, tape recorder, and editing machine.

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