

*ROBBIE LAND:
PHOTOGRAPHER*

Interview by ALLAN MCCOLLUM
and JADE DELLINGER

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AM: When did you get your first camera?

RL: I was at a thrift store once, and a friend found an old Super 8 camera, so he said, "Here Robbie, you can have this," so I bought it for three bucks and started shooting and since then I've got a whole bunch of cameras and a whole bunch of film and have been shooting.

AM: How old were you?

RL: Thrift store...high school...16 or 17, that was actually about 15 years ago.

AM Did you study photography and film in school?

RL: I came to USF to study filmmaking because I figured I needed a background. It's kind of weird when you are studying filmmaking because you do it yourself, you go out and shoot it yourself. I am thinking about going back and getting a masters so I can teach or something like that.

AM: I was wondering if you had more interest in still photography or film? So when you did this job for us, was it like scientific photography and technical photography?

RL: Yes, but it was more interesting.

AM: So you've learned a lot on this job.

RL: Yeah, I liked using an IC Camera.

AM: Have you ever used that 500 frame-per-second camera for any of your personal projects?

RL: I remember, I shot a baseball picture once, I shot a picture of this ball for this guy.

AM: What's the name of the office you work for?

RL: I work with Information Technology at USF, doing editing, and shooting, video or whatever. I took this job so I could edit my own video. Before, I was working with the USF Engineering Department, where I was photographing and filming a lot of technical stuff. I also worked at WUSF TV with Chris Rish.

AM: How did you get involved with this project?



Robbie Land

RL: I think through WUSF TV and Chris Rish. MOSI wanted the lightning strike shot with a high-speed camera.

AM: Are you working on any personal projects right now?

RL: Actually I've got a number of projects. I am working on a lot of experimental films. The main thing that I am working on, that has been put on the back burner, is a recollection of Florida. A theme park recollection, which is a recollection of my childhood in Florida, going to vacationland throughout Florida. I am going back and reshooting a lot of these parks as they are now. Some are rundown but still kind of going. I am shooting with a Super 8 camera and then reshooting, and putting it on 16mm.

AM: Are you doing this as an autobiography of some kind?

RL: As I am cooking it and tasting it, I am trying to figure out which way I am going to go with it. Actually the more I think about it I don't want it to be that way, we'll see...

AM: Is there sound?

RL: There's all types of sound, I've got a lot of sound off of old records and stuff. I also have a few interviews. I got interviews with gunslingers from Floridaland, down in Sarasota. Floridaland...it lasted 4 or 5 years. It was a theme park about Florida's theme parks. I am thinking about titling this film *Floridaland* because this film is about Florida theme parks as well. I picked up other good interviews, like with this guy...up the road...about two hours east of here, this guy owns this taxidermy place, it's a museum, he's got a lot of odd creatures in there. He'll give you the whole tour of his museum, so I filmed and recorded that as well as after going through he gave me an interview. He was a real slow talking country guy.

AM: So your projects are all sort of regional, geographical, a history of the region?

RL: Growing up like I did, in Jacksonville, I was exposed to a lot of Baptist churches. so I shot a lot in 16... I played gospel recordings as the sound.

AM: Since you've actually made films as a way of exploring innovative technical ways to approach a problem. What you did for this project is right in line with what you normally do. We shot the film in 16mm at the International Lightning Research Facility, then we blew it up to 35mm, and now we are going to have that digitized, and turned into prints.

RL: Right

AM: Have you ever worked with an artist before in any capacity in producing some element of a project? As artist I mean like in this case, another artist, an older artist, an out of town artist (Laughter) an old guy. (Laughter)

RL: No, I don't think I ever have.

AM: Describe what exactly you did on the fulgurite project, so we can hear the way you think about it.

RL: I went into it to help Chris Rish out, shooting the BETA video, and bringing the high speed camera in. I can't really count how many days or weeks or months I was out there, I was going to be out there a week, two weeks at the maximum, but after the first week, thinking okay, it's going to be two weeks, but from then it became a big blob of time. Even after I moved back to Jacksonville, I still kept in touch with the team at Camp Blanding. Maybe in early September, I called, all of the sudden there was a big storm system, I went out there. I stuck around for the storm and I gave it two hours and then much longer, but of course the storm never came, so I picked up the stuff and left.

AM: Did you actually see some triggered lightning?

RL: No I never did.

AM: So you didn't see any rockets fire?

RL: No, ...while I was out there we never got that close. One night when we were out there, it might have been that night that you and Jade came in late. The guy let you in...and then we got really close and we thought something was going to happen.

AM: Had you ever thought about attempting to film lightning?

RL: I probably had in the past because I have cameras that quick frame ever second, two seconds, minute whatever, so I do a lot of night photography and so I played around with catching storms coming in, moving across, and storms are cool. A romantic thing. So I have been attracted to the science of storms.

AM: How was this project different than other previous assignments?

RL: There was a lot of waiting, hanging around, waiting for the action, something to happen.

AM: Have they been incorporated into larger works that you've done?

RL: Small projects just to play with, experiment with. . . I worked with meteorologists. As far as this project goes, it was an interesting mix of art and science. A lot of cool stuff comes together.

AM: Did you know anything about fulgurites before this?

RL: Vaguely, probably I've watched the Discovery Channel. They were actually out at Camp Blanding and showed the excavation of natural fulgurites. I think that's the only contact I've ever had with fulgurites.

JD: What was it like for you working with Allan and getting to know him? Were you familiar with him before the project?*

*Jade Dellinger

RL: I was not familiar with his name. Actually, getting to work with Allan and understand his ideas was good, so was working with the electrical engineers.

JD: Do you feel that you learned a lot about their process, their way of working?

RL: I remember watching the Discovery Channel and thinking, wow that's pretty cool! and then all of the sudden, I am out there with the same guys that were on the program.

JD: Did it seem like the art project was kind of a natural extension of the scientific method that was going on? I was surprised at how everything worked out, functioned naturally. It was sort of amazing how the artist and the scientists were speaking the same language.

RL: Yeah, going out, I thought we might get in their way, or how will they act when they are trying to do their work and we are trying to do our work...

JD: And we are in a tiny little trailer.

RL: Yeah, and trying to avoid lightning. It did seem to work out, it's the way a family is, it's not just engineers, artists and documentation guys, it all fused together.

JD: In a way it seemed to me that everyone had an influence, role or voice in the thing. It was about figuring out any minor thing, they might consult you because you are there, or with Allan. Everyone provided their own expertise.

RL: That last night I was out there, this guy was really interested in putting a small Super8 camera on the rocket. He was actually interested in that more than anything else that night. I had come across a small camera and thought of it myself. It was a thing to work out, we all had an interest.

JD: What did you think about how the lightning facility was set up in terms of its ability to document photographically? They had all those boxes set up around projects. They would set video and still cameras in the boxes... they had this pneumatic system so they could trigger.

RL: The first day they thought it would work with our cameras, but our cameras didn't have the input it would take to trigger.

JD: I remember early on, when we were talking to Martin Uman and he said to you that you could certainly use one of those little houses to set up your equipment.

RL: I knew that it definitely wouldn't work with a high speed camera which was my main concern. After the first week I set up as many cameras as possible. I think at one time I had 16mm normal, and then a high speed 16mm camera and then a regular 35mm still camera. The placement of the rocket and the placement of the trailer didn't seem to work too well. I tried to figure out the focal range of long camera shots, I wanted a wider camera angle to cover hitting the bucket. I think one time I left for a few days and set it to telephoto. My thoughts were more of the lightning bolt, that's why I put it on wide angle.

JD: You had some discussions about that with Allan too. I think that was part of his interest, to have some sense of the lightning.

RL: The one strike that we had, it was good, because we could really see what the bolt is doing. . . burning off towards the end.

JD: What was the experiment that was going on simultaneously with the Japanese? I recall it was hard to talk to them, they were doing something about measurements on the column of lightning, they were using some super high tech camera.

RL: Were they in the front trailer?

JD: Yeah, they were in the front trailer. I don't remember if you talked to them.

RL: Yeah, somebody told me about that, actually it was a weird camera. It was a film camera without a shutter or something. I don't know how they actually used it...It was a high speed camera.

JD: One of the most exciting things about the process was being a part of all the research that was going on. We were the second experiment to be able to launch a rocket. We influenced the scientists to develop their own experiments to make fulgurites. Last question, does this experiment have any sort of personal meaning for you?

RL: I really don't know.

JD: Through this project did you learn anything about Allan or Allan's work in general? I guess you were involved in a particular segment of the process in that your documentation was part of the first phase, the production of the fulgurite.

RL: I finally see that his work is interesting. Usually you see the art without the artist, but I haven't seen the completed project. It's kind of exciting because it seems like a good idea. I was able to meet the artist, see the process and finally I'll attend the opening and I'll see the product, it makes it quite interesting. I will always be happy that I was involved, even though I sat there for four months. I don't regret it.

JD: Do your friends ask your advice about lightning? Or, do you find yourself giving advice, it's funny I have had that experience.

RL: Actually I find myself seeing lightning in the distance, and I'll hear Mike's voice saying, "It'll strike ten miles from the storm." Like the other day, I was on campus, I saw lightning about 50 miles away and I heard that voice and thought, I better be more cautious, I actually am more cautious because of my experience at Camp Blanding.

THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY
TAMPA, FLORIDA