



No Subject Too Small

with

Heather Clary McAdams

by Kishino Takagishi

This point in August is a busy season for Heather McAdams and Chris Ligon. The multi-hyphenate artists are gearing up for not only the third presentation of *Chris and Heather's 16mm Big Screen Blowout* at Chicago's Music Box Theater, but also their annual, and almost always sold out, *Country Calendar Show* at FitzGerald's Nightclub in Berwyn.

We sat in her living room. Me, on her couch with a lap full of cookies and Heather, in front of a mantle piece lined with bobble-heads, figurines, and one large portrait of who I thought was her father, but was actually the late actor and singer Robert Mitchum.

Heather hails from the end of a cul de sac in Arlington, Virginia that had all the makings of a nice childhood; a little bridge, a creek, and plenty of woods to roam in. She and her family moved to the west suburbs of Annandale just as the first signs of the metropolis “fingers from D.C.” were getting farther into the suburbs. In Annandale, there were four kinds of model houses, a swimming pool, and sidewalks. “**Sidewalks are like little roads for kids on bicycles,**” she told me.

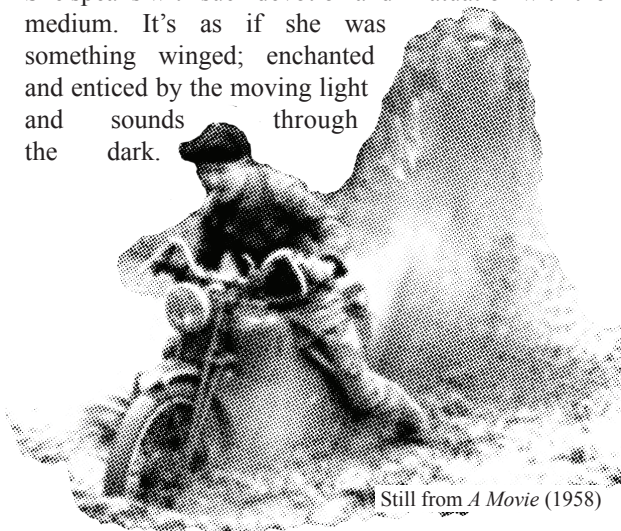
They spent their summers in one of her favorite places in the world, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. She'd swim in the eastern shores and walk the boardwalk. She even caught the tail end of the 60's trends and “tried to be a hippie” one summer—or, in other words, “**stay up all night doing LSD and pan money from tourists.**” As she recalled, “**it was pretty cushy.**”

Heather's parents always supported art. Her father worked for the government, but relished in making home movies and letting Heather and her sisters, who also went on to become artists, play with all sorts of projectors and cameras. “**He didn't really treat us like, ‘Oh, you can't operate that because you're a girl,’**” she said. To this day, there's never been a time when she hasn't owned a projector.

She recalls having worked in the graphics department at the Pentagon as a summer employee in 1972. She hadn't planned on working there for long but her father, who worked for the Department of Defense, wanted his daughters to be financially secure, so they all got jobs within the government. Her sister Barbara worked at the Jefferson Memorial and her other sister Linda worked at the house where Abraham Lincoln died. “**I was pasting up bombs!**” Heather told me. “**I was like, Oh my God! Even if I was making a decent salary, I felt bad about it, but no amount of money meant as much to me as making art.**”

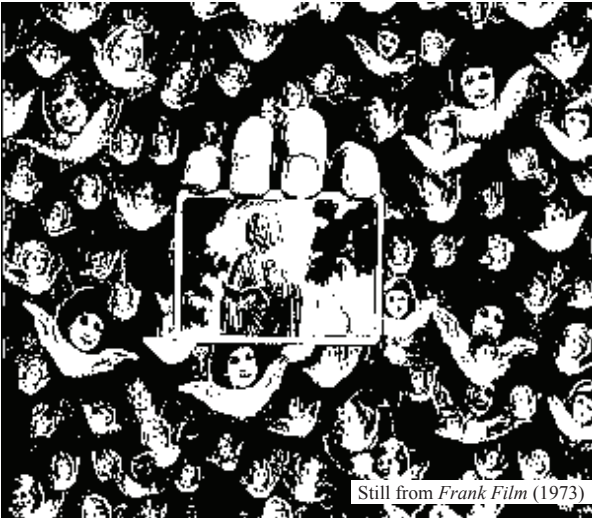
She later followed in her sister's footsteps and attended art school at Virginia Commonwealth University in '72, majoring in painting and printmaking, but also picked up a keen interest in collecting films. At the time, she'd taken a class from a commercial filmmaker specializing in aerial views. Through traveling festivals like the Ann Arbor Film Festival, she saw works from notable 60's experimental filmmakers like Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, Frank Mouris's *Frank Film* and George Kuchar's *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, which served as early sources of inspiration. “**A Movie influenced me a lot just because I felt there were no rules anymore,**” she said. “**I love the idea of showing this found footage just putting this tragic music while these guys on bicycles are trying to pedal through the mud. I mean, just realized the power that film was to tell your secret visions or to tackle giant things or tiny things. There were no rules. No subject too small.**” She'd additionally worked at a film lab cleaning machines and edging numbers, which allow picture and sound to be matched up in post-production, while briefly living in D.C. around the same time.

Heather's endearing love and fascination for the “forgotten field” of film and projection is captivating. She speaks with such devotion and infatuation with the medium. It's as if she was something winged; enchanted and enticed by the moving light and sounds through the dark.



Still from *A Movie* (1958)

She is a stickler for technique, especially lining up sound and picture exactly, or “sync-sound.” Heather and Chris, her husband/collaborator, are the kind of people that find themselves watching classic movies and counting if a scene is three or seven frames off. Armed with splicers and rewinds in her basement,



Still from *Frank Film* (1973)

Heather loves to edit. This is a result of her particular affinity for cutting, pasting, and rearrangement of all kinds. She employs words like “**action**” and “**entertainment**” to describe what she does, which is plainly clear watching her fast-paced, absurd, and zany films. That combination of those two things—sound and picture—are basically “**endless to anyone who understands and wants to make films,**” she said. “**It's so much fun because on the Steenbeck,**” she added, referring to a kind of film editing flatbed console, “**you can just shift the soundtrack and picture a bit and suddenly you have a brand new film, I mean it's just crazy what hasn't been explored.**”

Heather exemplifies the fading notion that mastering, and even some ways respecting, the rules allows you to break them in new and unusual ways. “**Anyone can make 16mm films if they just learn the couple of rules that have nothing to do with imagination,**” she said, “**Like the sprockets having to go through the projector perfectly—the little claw has to go through the perforations 24 times in every second. You cannot have ripped [perforations]. You can't have shrunken film so don't store your films on the radiator. So, you can't break those rules, but they aren't the kind of rules that have to do with art-making.**”

Elsewhere in their basement, Heather points out one of her and Chris's 10 Pageant movie projectors. “**It's our life-blood,**” she said of the machine. “**It's the most important thing in the world.**” Like many 16mm enthusiasts, she mourns the scale and physicality that is lost in the current state of moving image work. She explains that the heads of the people in the films are supposed to be *bigger* than those in the audience. As a result, she's distributed almost all of her work solely on film. “**I just thought if I don't put anything on DVD they'll**

have to project it,” she explained. “**I don't know who I thought *they* were.**”

At the same time, she admits that looking at the end product with advances in DVD projection, it's hard to tell the difference or if it even really matters. Nevertheless, it matters a *great* deal to her. “**Projecting films is what I love, and that's what I learn, and that's what I want to keep alive,**” she said.

Heather stands among artists who've struggled to continue their film work against forces that seem to come up with new inventive ways to make every step for them more difficult. The print stock that allowed Heather to create films without having to spend more time and money creating an inner-negative was discontinued and the price of development and lab work continually increased. What was once a visit to a film lab with a six-pack and \$20 will run you something like \$3,000 today.



The price was high and the world was moving away from the tactileness of mechanical machinery into a touchless digital world. “**I've seen so many projectors at flea markets that just have the films all ripped up or going backwards through the projector—it's usually a porno film,**” she said, laughing. “**I think that's one of the reasons film died. I think people just got fed up with it. People have to be patient, do it right and take care of it.**”

She did what she could to counter the costs by utilizing her own collection of vintage advertisements and other found prints in order to extend her films. Her basement is full of her collected footage, some expired. “**You could make a salad dressing with this expired film that smells like vinegar,**” she joked. This eventually became a staple in her work. “**I'm not very good at knowing where my pancreas is,**” she admitted, “**but boy, do I know every piece of film I own.**”

Meanwhile, Chris is in their office, bidding on an eBay lot of 42 16mm cigarette commercials that he eventually came out victorious for the price of \$19.99. “**We need adult entertainment,**” she said.

I ask if they find themselves in the middle of bidding wars often.

“**Lots of times in the last four seconds it just pops up way high, but you know it's worth it to give it a shot anyway against whoever these [big] collectors are,**” she said.

“**People all over the world, really,**” said Chris.

“**Probably some weird places, even,**” I said.

“**Could be,**” Chris replied.

“**Who knows,**” she said. “**It could be you!**”

“**You never know who's watching cigarette commercials in the middle of the night,**” Chris said.

Heather then placed what seemed like a brick of a photo album in front of me. Inside were pages upon pages of vintage collectable cards that she'd assembled over the past 30 years. They, of course, had been thoroughly organized into categories, some whole albums dedicated to cats, horses, ads, jokers, spade aces and antique wide cards. At one point she had even been the vice president of the Chicago Playing Card Club, which started in the 1950's. “**People go nuts on Ebay trying to win these cards,**” she said, “**especially women in Australia where collecting is super popular.**”



The collection extends well beyond the pages of the photo albums. Cards were finding their way into various drawers and corners of their house and it's one of a handful of collections they'd had at their place. She's read books on *decluttering*, but they never stick because collecting *clutter* is “my profession,” she said. “**If I threw things out like the books tell you, I wouldn't be able to pay for my life, you know?**”

Heather then opens up the ottoman, which her feet had been propped up on, to reveal a stash of a dozen costume wigs.

In 1997, Heather and Chris decided to share their finds with the rest of the city by opening *Chris and Heather's Record Roundup and Collectibles* in Ravenswood. There they sold everything and anything of unique nature from games, toys, books, postcards, Heather's art, oddities like sculptures of used gum, and of course tons of records. They periodically hosted shows



featuring film screenings and live music performed in the storefront windows. Heather says it was a ball, albeit a short-lived one as the rent raised every year until they closed their doors and moved to Delaware in 2001

“Were you there everyday?” I asked.

“I wasn’t, he was. Which is probably why we don’t have a store anymore. I think there were too many days where we made \$15,” she replied.

It becomes apparent to me that society’s certain relationship to collecting “things” has been scorched by the fires of this present era of over-consumption.

Chris and Heather don’t buy just anything. They’re picky and that’s important to understand. Although they have a lot of “stuff,” I was never once under the impression that there wasn’t thought behind any of it, even the deer figurines that she’d claimed to not have any thought behind buying whatsoever. A collection is an extension of the self that requires more discipline and thorough introspection than most people understand. Over time, the art of collecting continues to wane due to a general lack of decisiveness and singular identity. As a result, I believe that what you decide to *not* buy is just as, if not more important than, what you *do* end up taking home.

Around the time of *The Roundup*, Heather had started to create her now infamous, and what I believe should be a Chicago must-have-in-your-home-item, *L’il Country Calendar*. The hand-drawn calendar mostly features small portraits of her favorite celebrities (including Heather’s family) on their corresponding birthdays, but also includes quotes, holidays, and full moons. Every page is brimming with Heather’s unparalleled wit.



With the help of an idea from Kelly Kessler of the Chicago alt-country band The Texas Rubies and Katie Tuten, co-owner of the Hideout, the last 30 years of her calendar would coincide with a country music showcase. The event is a culmination of musicians composed of friends and family alike. Over the years they’d expanded their lineup by finding players around the city—accordion players in coffee shops and country singers from streetfests—all to come to pay tribute to the legends featured in the calendar.

Heather shows me illustrations of Al Green smiling and tells me she’s trying to figure out how she can make Frank Sinatra more “Halloween-y” for the October page, pointing to a small witch and moon next to his head. Similar to her film editing process, these drawings will eventually be scanned, shrunk, rearranged, and glued onto her calendar.

Heather doesn’t “fancy herself a cartoonist,” but her funny pen and ink drawings had first caught the attention of an alternative paper during her aforementioned stint in D.C. when she was commissioned to do an illustration for an article titled *Punk Goes Under the Microscope*.

“I remember at the time, I didn’t even know what punk was,” she said.

When she first came to the Midwest for a short time to attend school at the Art Institute of Chicago for film, she decided to also take a crack at submitting her drawings to the *Chicago Reader*. The then alt-weekly accepted her work and in return she’d further cement her legacy as a well-earned adopted Chicagoan and an additional 80 bucks a pop.

Chris and Heather both work out of their house. Her work is scattered about rooms and leaned up against the walls. Because she doesn’t have a studio, she prefers to draw while watching T.V. in her bed, only not underneath the covers. Their basement is full of instruments and is where Chris composes and records his music. “I don’t want a dining room. I don’t eat in the dining room. I want a studio but there has to be a dining room,” Heather said, “I guess so it looks like a normal house. You want to have a house that’s not a complete trash hole with stuff everywhere like when you were in college.”



In the way that they both occupy this space, it’s palpable that they are both dedicated admirers and supporters of one another’s craft. So much so that it was even written into their vows. “He’ll lay me down on the bed, put the headphones on my ears and I’ll get to listen. I’m the very first person that hears all these songs,” she said. She praises Chris’s musical gifts: “It’s just phenomenal to me. And I’m not just saying that because he’s my husband. I just think that there’s nobody that writes like him.”

There’s no doubt that Heather and Chris’s life is full and rich. It’s my opinion that maybe it’s because none of it came very easily. They have struggled and have worked tirelessly to be able to have that fun that everybody sees at the end of the night. Many of their efforts to cultivate spaces for the people of Chicago to enjoy fascinating art and music have been stifled by the fact



that this city’s establishments are in a constant state of disappearing and reappearing. “All they [Chicago media] do is take pictures of the friggin’ Chicago Theater and the El trains,” Heather protests. “Take pictures of the abandoned buildings on State Street ... or storefront windows with those god-awful LED lights around them and tell them the truth!” She describes an image from one of her first memories in Chicago: seeing the Roosevelt Theater being demolished in 1980. The historic movie palace’s screen had been half torn down and flapping in the wind. “I didn’t realize this is a trend that is all over the country,” she said

Heather is a part of a league of people with a similar conundrum: Living conventionally does not interest her, but living unconventionally doesn’t always necessarily sustain her. She tells me about the sacrifices she’d made over the years in order to continue making art like not having nice clothes, or traveling, or being a very good cook. “But it was worth it because I just can’t help myself,” she said. “I knew I was an artist from the second I was born. It’s kind of like something that’s hard to teach. It’s inherent in you. It’s just a curiosity of ‘what can I make?’ and ‘how can I figure this out?’” She adds, “Then you get some nice accolades and some nice stuff that’s meaning ful; maybe you get published or maybe somebody comes up and says ‘I love your work,’ or maybe you sell a piece, or maybe you just feel real good about what you did. And that, to me, is what I find valuable and most satisfying.”

In this way, I’ve learned from Heather that what truly sustains you is completely dependent on the things we choose to give value. She was never in it for the money. Her and Chris’s goals were always first and foremost centered around a pure dedication to preserving the things they love and sharing a piece of that rich life with the people around them. They are able to do it by being future-oriented people who are always looking forward and moving on despite any obstacles.

It wasn’t until later that I realized that in a way, my generation’s own frustrations with being an artist are

what had brought me to Heather’s doorstep. The constant struggle between the certainty that one could do nothing else and the external forces and systems keep you from it. What I sought out unconsciously was even just a shadow of a hint of a pearl of wisdom from someone I believe to exemplify something I admire most in people: true personal liberation.

But Heather would not bring me the answer to these questions or a blueprint to which I’d live my life, something she emphasized. She talks about her “Debbie Downer” side, ominously looming over most people, concerning money and the direction the world is turning. “I felt freer a while back actually,” Heather admits. She sympathizes with young people today dealing with the cost of getting by. “People talk about the price of eggs... Screw the eggs. What about the price of a fucking apartment to rent?”

This is not to say that Heather has zero advice for artists. After some time to think about our discussion, she emailed me a small list which will be listed below.

I
LOVE THE PROCESS AND HAVE FUN DOING IT

II
DO IT FOR YOURSELF FIRST AND FOREMOST

III
BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU DO SO MUCH THAT NOTHING CAN KEEP YOU FROM DOING IT

IV
WORK WITH YOUR LIMITATIONS

She led me to her zinnia-filled backyard where my bike was parked and handed me a ziplock bag of some cherry tomatoes she’d grown. They were eventually crushed in my bag by my camera.

After spending time with Heather you can’t help but admire the small, funny parts of life. For example, the cute, baby pink paper my overdue gas bill came in on, or the kid I rode past who had rusty, whistling gears and a hockey helmet. It’s like tapping into a frequency that once you see it, it keeps you endlessly curious and full of gratitude.

At the end of the day, the lesson that I’d taken to most was the one that she'd made clear to me by way of being. I understand that everyday, we are all presented with *choices* experienced both externally and internally. With that, it is my own right to choose to deny the death of care, notice the world surrounding you, and have the willingness to participate in real, honest work. What is required is a reorientation of thought, and that is a tool that can be exercised by anyone.