

FLORIAN HABICHT - Filmmaker

After the critical success of *Kaikohe Demolition*, a rousing depiction of demolition derby enthusiasts in small town New Zealand, filmmaker Florian Habicht found himself in a quandary. “For quite some time, people have been asking me whether I’m going to make a sequel to it. And I did seriously consider it a few years ago,” he divulges. However the film’s colourful characters were more than just that; they were real people whom Habicht came to feel protective of during the course of filming. “There were more stories to tell, some intense ones, but after talking about it with them, we felt like it would be invading their privacy and family life,” he explains.

Changing tack, inspiration coming in the form of Habicht’s mother who brought the ‘Lion Red Snapper Classic’ to his attention – the world’s biggest snapper fishing contest, held every year on 90 Mile Beach in New Zealand’s Far North. “I immediately felt that the beach could become the main character of a film, that fish, talking about life after death, and musical numbers could co-exist in a documentary.” Habicht’s whimsical vision became *Land of the Long White Cloud*, his new feature-length documentary set for imminent release.

Habicht, with a group of seven close associates, rose to the challenge – to shoot an entire film in five days. Their editor, Peter O’Donoghue, assembled the material as it was shot. “With Peter cutting, we could see stories taking shape. It felt like we were fishing too, for characters and footage,” observes Habicht, “If someone gave a great interview, we would say, ‘Hey, do you want to be in a musical number?’”

It’s clear that Habicht enjoys working outside the perimeters of what he terms “the conventional film industry”. He gleefully calls to mind the reactions of the fishing contest organisers to his unorthodox approach: “We confused them, I think. We seemed to be having too much of a good time to be a professional crew!”

The filming process proved to be all-consuming. “Every morning we’d get up at 5am and drive in the dark up to the beach,” recalls Habicht. “The fishing would begin at sunset. Like the anglers, we also had to endure the storm that hit the area during the contest.” Their cameras were on hand to catch everything, like the largest snapper in the entire 25 years of the contest being reeled in as a result of the storm, which brought in some elusive deep-sea fish.

Habicht moved to New Zealand at the age of eight, with his parents from Berlin. Despite being born on foreign soil, his cinematic forays have almost exclusively been concerned with New Zealanders and their unique mentality, born of their undeniable remove from the greater world. “I guess so. I've always been attracted to people's idiosyncrasies. It's part of my cinematic language. Maybe I do notice 'Kiwi' things more, coming from Berlin. Being an outsider of sorts does give you a different kind of perspective.”

“Having said that, I don't really feel like an outsider,” Habicht says, pondering the question of his personal identity further. “My family loved moving here. I remember on my first day of school, a boy named Manu offered to be my bodyguard.” Habicht's special talent for charming most everyone he meets has evidently been intact since the very beginning.

His father, Frank Habicht, a renowned photojournalist was instrumental in first getting Habicht behind a camera. “He taught me photography, and how to use the tiny darkroom at Kerikeri High School.” Later, inevitably, art school beckoned. During his time at Elam, he found himself drawn to an experimental department that combined video, film, performance and sound. From the start he thought outside the square: “I surprised people with strange, oddball, often sexual stories.”

His penchant for guerilla filmmaking has not left him. “I've always owned a small digital video camera, so there is never any excuse not to start a project immediately.” Tellingly, he reveals that he started shooting Kaikohe and his previous feature, *Rubbings From a Live Man*, before they had even received funding. “Planning something for too long can actually kill some of the magic – that's why I'm still drawn to making things on lower budgets, to have that freedom and spontaneity.”

Habicht is currently residing in New York as the inaugural recipient of the Harriet Friedlander residency. There's a new feature script in the works and another installment in what will become his 'Northland Trilogy'. The making of *Land of The Long White Cloud* may well have been a prescient move, as Habicht recounts: “The Far North newspapers have reported that the organisers have mysteriously disappeared due to financial problems, so there is no contest happening this year.” Almost like something out of a movie – best catch the film while you can!

Interview Rebekah Davies