



*"When I shoot a film,  
the tension between narrative  
and abstraction is crucial.  
Because I've learned about  
cinema through films  
by painters. Through their  
way of reworking film and not  
adhering to the traditional  
cinematic rules that govern it.  
It's never mattered to me what  
the industry tells you to do or  
not do – and this continues  
to be my concern nowadays."*  
Gus Van Sant

# GUS VAN SANT

Gus Van Sant is the first exhibition to be dedicated to the American film director, contemporary artist, photographer and painter. Gus Van Sant is a bold and paradoxical director. He works both as an independent director and in mainstream more traditional Hollywood productions. Among his successful movies, *Good Will Hunting* and *Milk*, produced by Hollywood movie Studios, acclaimed by the public and winners of several prestigious awards (Best Actor in a supporting role for Robin Williams and Best Actor for Sean Penn, respectively).

Gus Van Sant is a modern heir to the Beat Generation and of its political and provocative values. He worked in several underground projects with writer William S. Burroughs. Van Sant is by definition the director of youth caught in the turmoil of their passion for life. he shows his passion for arrogant and seducing bodies. As a photographer, in his Polaroid images of the 80/90's we recognize young modern-day movie stars (Joaquin Phoenix, Keanu Reeves, Nicole Kidman, Matt Damon, Uma Thurman, Ben Affleck) and in his photos collages; as a painter in his large size stylized watercolors and in his videos as well.

The exhibition dives into Gus Van Sant's variable artistic universe. It presents his plastic art works, his movies, as well as his original collaborations with other artists, such as William Eggleston, Bruce Weber, M Blash or David Bowie.

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**AT THE END OF THE VISIT THE CARDS MUST BE RETURNED  
TO THE PERSONNEL IN THE HALL OR AT THE INDICATED STAND.  
VISITORS ARE REMINDED THAT THE AREA IS UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE.**

The exhibit shows his direct relationship with perception, his unique sense of space, where dreamlike images and reality meet: the infinite desert in *Gerry*, the high school labyrinth in *Elephant* and the orthogonal grid pattern of Portland streets in *Mala Noche* and the curves of the disreputable skate park in *Paranoid Park*.

*(from the introduction by Matthieu Orléan, curator)*

## CINEPARK

Gus Van Sant's filmmaking is the mirror of America's postmodern era . He is an important independent director and promoter of artistic freedom, although he does not proclaim a manifesto. In his sixteen feature films he stimulates astonishment and disorientation, due to their complex narrative structure and unusual rhythm. His films often represent a male inclination, violence and desire, melancholy and humour are never portrayed as opposites.

Van Sant's films are all different one from the other. For this reason we must rethink what it means to be an *auteur* of cinema. He continuously starts over again, with each film starting a new cinematic dream. Sometimes he works in the Hollywood Studios, where hierarchy and industrial rules protect his craftsmanship. At other times, he works with unconditional freedom: ardently self-produced experimental films, culminating in his 21st century "Death Tetralogy" (*Gerry*, *Elephant*, *Last Days*, *Paranoid Park*, capped in 2011 by *Restless*) . In these film experiments he redefines American spaces. Desert, high school, forest, and skate park become poetical and disturbing at the same time.

Van Sant is tuned on the events and the life of his country, the USA. He highlights the America of outcasts, of mass media invasion and of ecology in danger; He also shows the America that invented an irreverent and 'on the road' way of being in the world. His films show elements related to dreamscapes and psychedelicism, while conveying a deeply human aspect of contemporary cinema. Gus Van Sant is an ever-evolving artist.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Gus Van Sant bought his first camera when he was sixteen. But it was not until 1975 that he began to focus on photography , the starting point of his artistic career. During the mid 80s he is in Portland preparing to shoot his first feature films *Mala Noche* and then *Drugstore Cowboy*. Van Sant using Polaroid spontaneously immortalizes places and especially people who inspired him. He photographs hundreds of actors, actresses, writers and anonymous individuals, all talented and compelling. What matters for Van Sant is personal charisma, the play of light and shadow. He works with the strange solarisation effects in the phase of the photographic print.

Van Sant's Polaroids have the power to reveal sublimation as it happens, that decisive moment when desire takes shape, and when imagination surpasses reality.

Van Sant stops using his Polaroid in the late '90s. But he continues to photograph, in parallel to his films, shooting pictures for fashion magazines or for rock bands, always trying to push the limits and to find seek for sources of inspiration beyond the cinematic context.

## CONSTELLATIONS

Gus Van Sant has been living in Portland since 1983. He transforms the city, surrounded by forests, with his camera into a place of encounters and fictions, with a group spirit: the gang of junkie outlaws in *Drugstore Cowboy*, the band of vagabonds in *My Own Private Idaho*, or the street kids in *Paranoid Park*.

*Mala Noche* reveals the city's working-class neighbourhoods and groups of illegal Mexican immigrants. This expressionist drama, which employs chiaroscuro and low-angle shots, is a free adaptation of the novel written in 1977 by Portland native poet-artist Walt Curtis, an exponent of the Beat Generation. Van Sant has preserved the Beat Generation's political and sexual views; especially in *Milk*, a biographic film about the famous gay militant who was assassinated. Van Sant acknowledged the Beat Generation leaders as spiritual fathers. He directs the writer William S. Burroughs in three films: in *A Thanksgiving Prayer* Burroughs faces the camera and reads his spiteful poem against imperialistic America.

Because of his underground past, Van Sant successfully ignores traditional cinematic codes. He values the importance of working within a group of people trusting each other, in the middle of a constellation of trustworthy influences. Such was the case, for instance, with the actors Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, who were also co-writers of *Gerry*.

Gus Van Sant likes taking risks. In *Psycho*, he copies shot-for-shot Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960); in *Elephant* the allusion is to Brit Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), which refers to the metaphorical elephant in the living room, which everyone ignores. In these films haunted by violence films, Gus Van Sant investigates the social context, such as in *Good Will Hunting*, where the hero is a reckless delinquent on the road to becoming a mathematical genius.

Gus Van Sant films youth with depth and sensuality. With originality and liberty he pays homage to his precursors.

## PAINTING

Gus Van Sant has painted at various stages in his life. Several collages are from the 70s. His series of large-scale watercolours, displayed at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, was made in 2011. Some of these watercolours represent on canvas dreamlike flashes, exciting visions on the background of desert wilderness in the American West. Others are portraits of unknown teenagers with defiant faces from the Internet, with a style reminds certain portraits by David Hockney. Surrealist humour and youthful turmoil.



For Van Sant, the activity of painting is independent from his films. Nevertheless, there are conspicuous similarities between both artistic means and some recurring motifs. On canvas, the naked giant walking on Los Angeles recalls the heroine's oversized thumb in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. The crazy Elvis playing golf recalls Janice (played by Nicole Kidman) as she skates on the very lake where the body of her hated sister-in-law is hidden, in *To Die For*. The man in burgundy sweats recalls the hero's apathy in *Last Days*.

Van Sant's painting is "amateur", in the etymological sense of *one who loves*. Painting has enabled him to create a working space that reveals moments of pure emotion. In his paintings Gus Van Sant never tells about his life, he tames and metaphorizes it. He paints his childhood home. He paints the landscapes that have important for him. He paints the murky objects of his desire. He paints his icons. He paints his demons.

## MUSIC

Gus Van Sant has turned film music into a language in its own right. He composed soundtracks (country songs sung by K.D.Lang for *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*). He used classical works (Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* illuminating the grey sky in *Elephant*); he composed and performs songs in *Mala Noche* and *Restless*, thus completing the circle of a multi-medium approach to filmmaking.

In each of Van Sant's films, music features as a counterpoint to the image, thereby unsettling the plot. Music is conceived as a zone in which what is seen is in conflict with what is felt: an echo chamber for the characters' inner journeys.

*Last Days*, made in 2005, is the one that most explores this complex soundscape. The film highlights the last days of the singer Kurt Cobain, who before committing suicide tried to break free from the claws of show business. Gus Van Sant intentionally makes the audience feel frustrated and stunned, not using a single song by Nirvana. Instead, he asked Michael Pitt, the main actor, to compose part of the soundtrack. In the film we can hear *Venus in Furs* by Velvet Underground, *Doors of Perception* by Hildegard Westerkamp as well as *On Bended Knee* by the R&B vocal group Boyz II Men, whose music video Gus Van Sant shows within the film.

The music video format, between art and commerce, fascinates Gus Van Sant for its unclassifiable nature. Since 1990, he made various music videos, for David Bowie, for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and for Hanson. At the junction between music and film, the music video has the astonishing nature of experimental film, to which Gus Van Sant definitely belongs.