

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE
Hollywood
REPORTER

'Burden': Tribeca Review

The late sculptor Chris Burden gets a wide-ranging portrait.

John DeFore



Courtesy of Tribeca Film Festival

Outside Los Angeles, where his late works have become surprise crowd-pleasers, sculptor Chris Burden is probably known mostly as the nut who had a friend shoot his arm with a rifle and called it art. That perception is changing, thanks in large part to a 2013 retrospective in New York, and the enlightenment continues in *Burden*, Timothy Marrinan and Richard Dewey's excellent portrait of the artist, who died almost a year ago. Not comprehensive but a must for festgoers seeking to understand the amorphous creature called "contemporary art," it deserves theatrical exposure beyond fests before it finds a berth on video, where it should be a go-to reference point for some time.

Seen near the film's start, in vintage interview footage with a bow-tied Regis Philbin, Burden immediately counters a stranger's expectations: Quiet and thoughtful, he has none of the swagger or hunger for attention one imagines upon learning of an artist whose early career consisted of self-punishing performances. Burden had himself nailed to a VW bug, wriggled nearly naked on broken glass, inhaled water and was kicked down stairs.

Early on, someone compared him to a famous star-spangled daredevil, and the label dogged the rest of his career, to his justified chagrin. The famous stuntman was "a trickster," Burden explained, while his own works stripped away hype and showmanship to expose something

essential. An assistant would say of late sculptures like "Urban Light," the grid of street lamps now glowing in front of LACMA, that Burden wanted no crookedness in them, so that the piece itself would "disappear" and the only thing left would be the idea. That's a useful perspective to bring to something like the performance in which Burden was bolted to a floor near two buckets of water with live electrical wires in them, his life depending on the likelihood that visitors wouldn't kick a bucket over and electrocute him.

An investigation of these early actions could easily fill a whole film, but Marrinan and Dewey rightly focus just as much on what Burden did after leaving "danger art" behind. They spend time with him on the property he amassed over decades in Topanga Canyon, talking about his proclivities as a collector of stray objects — street lamps, fountains shaped like turtles, Erector sets — that might later be transformed into art. Behind-the-scenes material shows some of the complicated labor required to make things that look as simple as "Urban Light." While the movie speaks a bit of the dark period in which Burden's fondness for drugs and firearms frightened friends, these recent interviews seem to reveal a man more at peace than someone who dreamed up 1971's "Shoot" could reasonably expect to be.

The film barely mentions the second wife, artist Nancy Rubins, who shared that Topanga Canyon property with him for decades. And it doesn't quite explain how the seeming darkness of his 1970s performances gave way to the childlike joy of, say, *Metropolis II*, an immense model city traversed by countless toy cars. But it has a great time observing the change. Even for viewers who know much more about Burden than that thing with the rifle, it's almost certain to trigger a hunger for more.

Venue: Tribeca Film Festival (Spotlight)

Production companies: Screenprint Pictures, Submarine Entertainment

Directors: Timothy Marrinan, Richard Dewey

Producers: Timothy Marrinan, Richard Dewey, Josh Braun, Dan Braun, David Koh

Executive producers: Stanley Buchthal, Simone Haggiag

Editors: Aaron Wickenden, Michael Aaglund

Composers: Andrew Bird, Roger Goula

Sales: David Koh, Submarine