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Filmmaker tries to return thought to art

R. Bruce Elder's
complex works
get symposium
this weekend

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In truth, R. Bruce Elder is a pretty simple guy.

He wants only one thing out of you — thought. Think the big thoughts. Dig the intellectual challenge. Go deep. Get scared. Lose you way. Think some more.

And you can do all these things with tonight's screening of films by other artists that dove-tail with Elder's own works — films as early as Kenneth Anger's *Eaux D'Artifice* (1953) and as recent as Jordon Belsen's *Mysterious Journey* (1998).

The films show starting at 6:30 p.m. at Ryerson's School of Image Arts. And tomorrow the university hosts a free, all-day, all-Elder symposium in the Eaton Theatre (Elder is a professor at Ryerson).

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"I think there's a kind of prejudice right now against demanding art," Elder said in an interview, "against art that's meant to puzzle you, to upset you, annoy and delight you, against art where you have to sort out your feelings about it."

There's an edge to this Elder-rama, and tomorrow's line-up has many heavy hitters in the experimental arts, including filmmaker Stan Brakhage, film historian/teacher Peter Harcourt, arts theorists Janine Marchessault and John Picchione, and composer/theorists

James Tenney and Udo Kasmets.

Elder's film work is not the kind to make Hollywood re-think what it's doing. His films are mostly long, always complex and visually rich. The entire multi-hour *Star Wars* series is a nice light snack compared to one of Elder's multi-course image banquets.

His most recent film is *Crack, Brutal Grief*, is comprised almost entirely of manipulated Internet imagery.

Elder's writing is no less demanding. In his last book, *A Body Of Vision: Representations Of The Body In Recent Film And Poetry*, he surveys a number of experimental filmmakers, like Ed Emshwiller, James Broughton and Bruce Conner, as well as Brakhage.

But typically, this survey is a way for Elder to get revved up for his quest into "the strangely intimate relation between the artistic imagination and Gnosticism," a pre-Christian mystical religious belief.

Brakhage, who goes back many years with Elder, is the subject Elder's current study, *The Films Of Stan Brakhage In The American Tradition Of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein And Charles Olson*.

The public's disinclination to deal with complex ideas, Elder thinks, comes from a lack of a "common mythology."

"For hundreds and hundreds of years there was such a thing as a common mythology," he said. "We share it up to 100 years ago. But people no longer have a shared mythology which they can bring to the interpretation of a particular work or to an understanding of art."

"The loss of this common mythology has been disastrous."