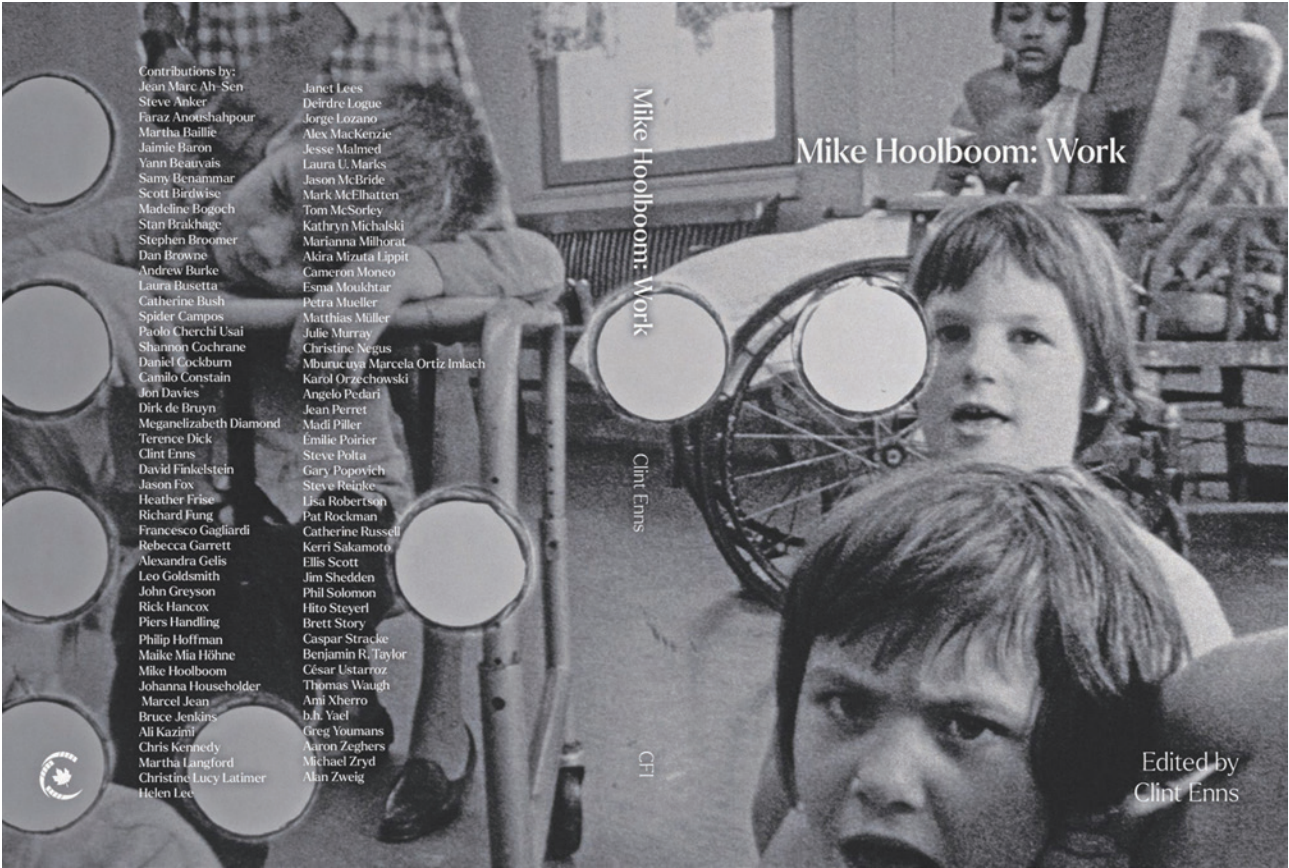




Courtesy Clint Enns and the Canadian Film Institute.

MIKE HOOLBOOM: WORK

Edited by Clint Enns
Canadian Film Institute (2024)

In one of the more than 100 short reflections that comprise Clint Enns’ monumental *Mike Hoolboom: Work*, noted experimental film curator Mark McElhatten writes of Hoolboom’s 2015 film *Scrapbook*: “Some films take a lifetime to watch. I’m still watching *Scrapbook*.” After finishing Enns’s collection, I felt something similar: some books take a lifetime to read. McElhatten’s rhetorical gesture speaks to the way *Scrapbook* sticks with you long after watching it. But it is also evocative of the way Hoolboom—a prolific experimental filmmaker with an expansive and varied body of work that spans almost five decades—works and reworks his films and reuses and remixes the sounds and images of others. As Enns notes in his introduction, Hoolboom’s “films are in an ongoing state of transition, often subject to radical revisions and retouches by the filmmaker. Hoolboom is always grappling with new ideas, thinking through images, creating visuals to carry emotions that are too difficult or complicated to resolve in a single viewing,” (2). To understand Hoolboom’s expansive body of work is to take an entire lifetime to watch, rewatch, remix, and reflect. *Mike Hoolboom: Work* is an indispensable tool in that quest.

Given that a still from the film also serves as the cover image, the book’s alternate title may as well be *Mike Hoolboom: Scrapbook*. A scrapbook of a hundred different writers tackling a hundred of Hoolboom’s films. A scrapbook of new writing, excerpts of old writing, reflections from and an interview with Hoolboom himself, stills, images, catalogues, dialogues, monologues. McElhatten describes *Scrapbook* as “a living picture book with a human voice, a memory book.” The same may be said of this volume.

When Enns asked me to review his book, I admitted that I was not as familiar with Hoolboom’s work as I would like to have been, though I eagerly embraced the opportunity to spend some time with what I knew was an expansive and complex body of work. After reading Enns’ collection, it became clear that not only was Hoolboom an incredibly prolific artist, but also one that defied easy categorization and resisted attempts at being consistently legible over time. Some contributors remarked that the film they revisited for their piece seemed to have changed since the last time they viewed it—though was it because the film had changed, or the viewer had? Other contributors, watching their chosen film anew for the first time, felt the film didn’t reflect the person they thought they knew Hoolboom to be. With a body of work so prolific, so varied, and constantly under revision, *Mike Hoolboom: Work* captures, somewhat paradoxically, the growth and development of Hoolboom’s films over time, but also the films as they exist only in this single moment in time. More synchronic than it is diachronic, the work described in *Mike Hoolboom: Work* may no longer be the work that you and I watch the next time we return to Hoolboom’s films.

Mike Hoolboom: Work mirrors the form of many of Hoolboom’s own edited collections by other Toronto-based filmmakers, including those on Madi Pillar, Deirdre Logue, b.h. Yael, Richard Fung, and Philip Hoffman, all of whom now return the favor and contribute pieces to Enns’ collection. The

book is structured as a series of short reflections on individual films, organized in reverse chronological order. The first half of the book is devoted to the more than 90 films Hoolboom produced between 2015 and 2025—as many as he produced in the preceding 35 years. In dealing with such a short but prolific time in Hoolboom’s career, this first half of the book has a certain stream of consciousness quality that reflects the feverish pace with which Hoolboom has been producing work. But as the book continues to move backwards through to the first three decades of his almost five-decade career, the pieces become more languid, more disparate. You get a stronger sense of the boundaries between each of his films, about their distinct differences and modes of production. Episodic more than narrative, Enns’ collection resists providing a singular image of Hoolboom the filmmaker. Instead, different Hoolbooms emerge: the Hoolboom who made urgent films about HIV, the poor student Hoolboom whose films delighted and confused his professors, the punk Hoolboom making scrappy work at The Funnel, the writer Hoolboom publishing written work almost as prolifically as he was producing films, the confessional Hoolboom, the portrait-artist Hoolboom, the activist Hoolboom.

Given the breakneck speed with which Hoolboom has been producing and exhibiting work and its centrality to the development of experimental cinema, it may be surprising that this text is the first monograph devoted entirely to him. However, in his 1993 article “ABCs of the Canon” (which Enns reprints near the end of the collection), Hoolboom asks: “What does it mean to be part of a canon of experimental film? To be at the center of a marginal practice?” Some thirty years later, *Mike Hoolboom: Work* doesn’t provide a clear answer to the questions, though perhaps a clue is in Enns’ title: to be at the centre of experimental cinema is to *work*.

JON PETRYCHYN