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Independently Intimate Directors

By DENNIS LIM

ARTISTIC and romantic partnerships are tricky things, susceptible to envy, one-upmanship and other dysfunctions, but Bradley Rust Gray and So Yong Kim, New York-based independent filmmakers who have been married for 10 years, have hit on a working method that is both equitable and harmonious. Each is a director with two movies apiece so far, and both are such close collaborators — they produce each other's work and often write and edit together — that they freely use the first-person plural in discussing their movies.

Their two latest films, as it happens, arrive on New York screens this week. Ms. Kim's second feature, "Treeless Mountain," which had its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival last year, will open at Film Forum on Wednesday. Mr. Gray's second feature, "The Exploding Girl," which made its debut at the Berlin International Film Festival this year, will screen in competition at the Tribeca Film Festival.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Bradley Rust Gray and So Yong Kim, married directors whose latest films are arriving on New York screens this week.



Bradley Rust Gray/Oscilloscope Laboratories
A scene from Ms. Kim's "Treeless Mountain."



Carolyn Drake
A scene from Mr. Gray's film "The Exploding Girl."

"It's almost as if they think together," said Ben Howe, a producer who worked on both movies. "It's definitely one or the other's film, but every decision is made with the other one close at hand."

Ms. Kim, 40, and Mr. Gray, 38, are both miniaturists who specialize in narrowing the frame, in a literal sense, given their fondness for tight close-ups, and also in how they seem to filter the world through the consciousness of their protagonists. Their new movies and their debut features — Ms. Kim's "In Between Days" (2006), about a lonely Korean girl newly arrived in a North American Koreatown; Mr. Gray's "Salt" (2003), a road movie and tentative love story set in Iceland — all share an interest in the formative experiences of young lives. They are poetic and realistic in equal measure, and they have a knack for zeroing in on seemingly small moments and making them feel anything but small.

"For us the most important thing is emotional impact," Mr. Gray said one recent afternoon at the couple's apartment in the Prospect Heights section of Brooklyn. Their 2-year-old daughter, Sky, who had opted to forgo her nap, was sitting in on the interview and providing musical accompaniment with her toy keyboard.

"With your first films you want them to be personal, even if it seems self-involved," Ms. Kim said.

While "In Between Days" was informed by her teenage years in Los Angeles, the heart-rending "Treeless Mountain" mines her childhood in South Korea. Ms. Kim's parents divorced when she was young; her mother went ahead of her children to the United States, and Ms. Kim lived for a spell with her grandparents on a rice farm. The movie tells the story of two sisters, 6-year-old Jin (Hee Yeon Kim) and 4-year-old Bin (Song Hee Kim), who develop their own ways to cope as they are shuttled from one family member to another.

"Writing it was the most difficult part," Ms. Kim said. "I couldn't proceed until Bin and Jin were their own individuals. If I saw too much of myself, it wasn't ready."

She was inspired by a few thematically similar movies, including Jacques Doillon's "Ponette" and Hirokazu Kore-eda's "Nobody Knows." But when it came time to make the film, being a new mother was her most powerful motivation. (Sky was four months old when they started casting in South Korea.) "There was a sense that if I don't make this film now, I'll never make it," said Ms. Kim, who has described "Treeless Mountain" as "a letter to my mother." (Her mother, she said, "thought it was O.K. the second time she saw it.")

It did not hurt that she and Mr. Gray had an infant with them when they were looking for actors at Korean elementary schools. "I don't think we would have had access if I wasn't a mom," Ms. Kim said.

There was an inevitable maternal aspect to working with her young performers. Even though the girls were often acting out situations in which their characters were alone, she tried to provide a sense of security by sitting next to them, just off camera.

While editing “Treeless Mountain” with Ms. Kim, Mr. Gray was simultaneously trying to get a feature called “Jack and Diane” off the ground. He was planning to shoot the film, a teenage lesbian romance with werewolf overtones, in the summer of 2008. The financing was in place, and for the lead roles he secured Ellen Page and Olivia Thirlby, the actors from “Juno.” But after Ms. Page earned an Oscar nomination, she had to postpone for a year.

Mr. Gray and his producer, Karin Chien, had been developing the film for nearly three years at that point, and another year of inactivity was too depressing to contemplate. Without a story in mind, he called the actress Zoe Kazan, who had impressed him when auditioning for “Jack and Diane,” and proposed a collaboration. “The Exploding Girl” and Ms. Kazan’s character — a college student with epilepsy, home in New York for the summer — took shape through a series of conversations.

Mr. Gray paired Ms. Kazan with Mark Rendall, a young Canadian actor and a close friend of Ms. Page. “I knew tons about him through her, although he didn’t know that,” Mr. Gray said. “The Exploding Girl” hinges on the simplest of plots — one romance ends, another begins — and in a nod to the kindred coming-of-age drama of Ms. Kim’s first feature, it borrows its title from a Cure song, “The Exploding Boy,” the B-side of the single that provided the title for “In Between Days.”

“The Exploding Girl,” which Mr. Gray wrote in four days and was shot in 17 days last summer in New York, adapts the hand-held vérité intimacy of “Salt” into something more refined, using longer takes and a more stable camera while remaining attuned to the tiniest mood shifts. In this film “you’re observing the character,” he said. “In our other films it’s like you are the character.”

Mr. Gray cited “Café Lumière,” a minimal 2003 drama that the Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien shot in Tokyo, as a major influence. Like Mr. Hou’s movie “The Exploding Girl” functions both as a discreet character study and as a tranquil city portrait, finding moments of repose amid urban cacophony. They shot with a lightweight high-definition camera, which the cinematographer, Eric Lin, was able to conceal in a bag that he held on his lap for the subway scenes.

For Ms. Kim writing and rewriting helps create the distance from her autobiographical characters; Mr. Gray builds in that distance by making his characters teenage, female, gay and/or Icelandic. The intensity of young love and lust is a constant in his work. “It sounds hokey, but the first time you find love, that’s something everyone knows,” he said. “It sets your outlook on life.”

Mr. Gray and Ms. Kim, who have been a couple for 15 years, met as students at the Art Institute of Chicago. (For their first date he invited her to join him on his predawn rounds delivering muffins in a crime-ridden area on the West Side of Chicago.) Ms. Kim was studying performance and dabbled in film only because she was looking to create projections for her performance pieces. Both she and Mr. Gray started out in experimental film and drifted toward narrative filmmaking while he was studying at the British Film Institute in London, where they were widely exposed to world cinema.

When talking about their movies Mr. Gray and Ms. Kim reflexively assume the roles of each other’s biggest fans.

“Brad’s films seem very original,” she said. “My sensibility is not exactly new.”

He countered: “Her films are more natural. I have to work harder.”

She disagreed: “He has 5,000 options and explores all of them. I’m focused on one thing.”

Spousal bickering leads to the occasional blowup during production. “I had to kick Brad off the set when we were shooting ‘Treeless,’” Ms. Kim said. “He gets fidgety and nervous.”

Mr. Howe, their producer, said, “They do have an at times combative relationship, but it’s more like creative tension.”

Ms. Kim is now writing her third feature, which, in a change of pace, revolves around an older man. Mr. Gray is refocusing his energies on “Jack and Diane” (Ms. Page has since dropped out), set to be their most expensive movie yet; it will have stars, werewolf makeup and animation.

Even when Mr. Gray and Ms. Kim graduate to bigger budgets, “they’ll find an intimate way of working,” Mr. Howe said. “I don’t think it’s possible for them to get the moments they’re looking for without being protective of their process.”

In a sense, Mr. Gray said, they have learned to thrive on limitations. “There’s something to be said for being forced to make decisions,” he said. “The pressure helps make our films happen.”

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