

ON THE FLIPSIDE

Tony Rayns salutes an American/Korean husband-and-wife team whose twin offerings shone in the Forum

Too many mediocre American indie features are acclaimed for making a virtue of modest resources, but Bradley Rust Gray's **The Exploding Girl** actually does find the world in a grain of sand. Gray's film, his first since the made-in-Iceland feature 'Salt' (2003), smartly sidestepped Sundance to premiere in the Berlin Forum and will certainly be widely seen in the months ahead. Twenty-year-old student Ivy (Zoe Kazan, granddaughter of Elia) comes home to the Brooklyn suburbs for her summer vacation and stops en route to pick up her childhood friend Al (Mark Rendall) from his college; he ends up staying with Ivy and her dance-teacher mother because his own mother has rented out his room. It's an almost entirely uneventful summer – Al's main interest is a rooftop pigeon loft – but Ivy is quietly devastated when her college boyfriend breaks up with her, which threatens to trigger her epilepsy. By the time the fall semester comes around, Ivy and Al are on the brink of admitting to themselves that their strongest feelings are for each other.

What makes this riveting viewing is the miraculous

combination of naturalism (the performances never for a moment seem like 'acting') and visual poetry; every shot and cut is made with the precision of a Philip Larkin poem, and even the pigeons are superbly choreographed. Gray has an unusual, Hou Hsiao-Hsien-like talent for suggesting the feelings and thoughts of his characters without needing to dramatise anything; he makes formalism look informal. His choice of title requires a word of explanation: 'In Between Days', the terrific debut feature by Gray's wife and partner So-Yong Kim, was named after a song by The Cure, and the flipside of that 12-inch single was a song called 'The Exploding Boy'.

So-Yong Kim's own new feature was also screened in the Forum. An autobiographical piece about a six-year-old girl and her little sister abandoned into the care of wayward, unsympathetic relatives in the Korea of the mid-1970s, **Treeless Mountain** is similarly touching and finely observed, if a little too linear in its construction to transcend the 'chronicle of travails' syndrome. It headed a substantial group of new Korean features in the Forum selection. The most promising was of these was **Members of the Funeral** ('Jangryesigeui Member'), Baek Seung-Bin's somewhat overwrought film in which a gay physiotherapist, his embittered literature-teacher wife and their death-obsessed daughter all find themselves written into a novel by the charismatic boy who delivers food from a Seoul street stall.

There were more ailments and heroic attempts at cures in two outstanding East Asian documentaries. Cong Feng's **Dr Ma's Country Clinic** ('Ma Daifu de Zhensuo') explores the hardships of a community in China's rural Gansu Province, using consultations in the eponymous clinic as a key to larger problems. Soda Kazuhiro's **Mental** ('Seishin') breaches the Japanese taboo on frank discussion of mental illnesses, again using the practices of one pioneering clinic to put wrenching personal histories into wider contexts. There's nothing doctrinaire or didactic in either film, but both go far beyond the pieties of sentimental humanism.



THE EXPLODING GIRL