



ONLOOKERS

A film by Kimi Takesue



“Visually Stunning!” – The Playlist

OPENS Friday, Feb. 16th, 2024 in U.S. Theaters

[Metrograph: New York City, NY](#)

WORLD PREMIERE

Official Selection: Slamdance Film Festival 2023 – *Breakouts Competition*

WINNER: *Breakouts Feature-Honorable Mention*

INTERNATIONAL PREMIERE

Official Selection: Cinéma du Réel- *International Competition*

USA | 72 min | 2023

Press Materials: www.onlookersfilm.com

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LOGLINE

A visually stunning, immersive meditation on travel and tourism in Laos, reflecting on how we all live as observers.

SYNOPSIS

ONLOOKERS offers a visually striking, immersive meditation on travel and tourism in Laos, reflecting on how we all live as observers. Traversing the country's dusty roads and tranquil rivers, we watch as elaborate painterly tableaux unfold, revealing the whimsical and at times disruptive interweaving of locals and foreigners in rest and play. Drawn to spectacle, tourists swarm to magnificent Buddhist temples, the ordered rituals of monks, and sites of dazzling natural beauty, then recede like a passing tide, leaving Laotians to continue with their daily lives.

ONLOOKERS transports viewers on a sensorial journey of deep looking and listening, inviting audiences to reflect on their own modes of tourism, while asking the looming existential questions: Why do we travel? What do we seek?

LONGER SYNOPSIS

ONLOOKERS explores the paradox of travel: Why do people fly thousands of miles from home to lounge in a Laotian guest house sipping smoothies while watching re-runs of the TV show "Friends"? Why do we climb to the top of a colossal mountain just to snap selfies, rather than enjoy the extraordinary view? We are present, but absent. Looking, but not seeing.

With wit and a gentle eye for social critique, ONLOOKERS observes Western backpackers and tour groups from East Asia descend upon Laos, a small socialist country in Southeast Asia economically dependent on international tourism. Once the most heavily bombed country in the world during the Vietnam War, Laos is now a cheap destination for international travelers. ONLOOKERS tracks the intricate choreography of travel, and the power imbalances at play, as tourists and locals intermingle, vie for space, and move on parallel tracks without contact, oblivious to one another.

Compelling questions animate the film: What is the difference between a tourist and a traveler? Between participant and onlooker? Where does curiosity cross into intrusion? What activities give our lives meaning? How does a place become a commodity? Is sustainable, respectful cross-cultural travel even possible? How much of tourist life involves waiting: arrivals and departures, boredom and cellphones? And why, finally, do we travel? What are we looking for?

Of the many contrasts that structure the film, we return, again and again to the ordered rituals of Buddhist monks--the sweeping and gardening, chanting and praying. Dressed in vibrant saffron robes, the monks become the fetishized symbols of Laotian culture for the tourist, and the ultimate photo-op. ONLOOKERS deviates from the tourist path to find small, quotidian moments of everyday life in Laos that might easily be overlooked: young girls playfully pose as models while collecting water at the river's edge; at the school playground a pudgy boy eats chips while coyly smiling at the camera; a group of Laotian women faithfully gather at the side of the road at dawn waiting to offer alms to the passing monks. At the heart of ONLOOKERS is the quiet presence, the warmth, and the curiosity of the filmmaker. She, too, is an onlooker, tourist, and photographer-looking at people

looking—and documenting in formal tableaux the experience of travel with its fluctuating moments of uncertainty, intrusiveness, exhilaration, fatigue, disappointment, absurdity, and surprise.

As the journey wears on and the tourists begin to tire, we finally see Laotians engage in their own recreation and fun: children chase each other in a bouncy castle at a carnival, old men play a game of bocce at dusk, a crowd gathers to cheer on its favorite team at the boat race. In the end, we are all looking for ways to escape, to play, and to feel alive together.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Growing up in Honolulu, Hawai'i, I was always keenly aware of tourism. I watched tourists at a critical distance—sporting their garish aloha prints and fake leis, traipsing along the sandy beaches sunburned and tired, often talking too loudly and disregarding local etiquette.

In ONLOOKERS the tables are turned and I am now the tourist, traveling through Laos on a standard itinerary, from Luang Prabang to 4,000 Islands, alongside fellow backpackers and tour groups from around the globe. Those who have had the privilege to travel internationally know that even with the best of intentions, no one is above the vulgarity of tourism.

And, yet, with travel there is also great possibility for new understanding, meaningful cross-cultural encounters and illuminating life experiences. What does it mean to be a conscientious visitor? How do we interact with one another while respecting cultural boundaries? How do we sensitively engage with unfamiliar spaces, architecture, and nature? What are the different layers of “looking” and “seeing”?

ONLOOKERS contributes to a body of work that I've created over 20 years that explores the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural encounters: [LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE](#) (Peru, 2013), [WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?](#) (Uganda, 2010), and [HEAVEN'S CROSSROAD](#) (Vietnam, 2002). Led by curiosity, these are all visually driven, observational, intimate, hand-made films whereby I work alone, shooting and recording sound. Without a set agenda, I wander and find overlooked, everyday moments that are rich in meaning: funny, poetic, upsetting, moving. I'm interested in the interplay between naturalism and stylization in filmic images. How can the spontaneity of life unfold within a fixed, formal frame? This is a thrilling form of filmmaking that requires patience; I wait for moments when all the elements cohere: color, light, movement, meaning,

ONLOOKERS invites the viewer on a physical and emotional journey through Laos with its shifting rhythms of stimulation and stasis. The film raises politically relevant questions around travel and sustainability, particularly in a time of COVID and “revenge tourism”; I'm also keen to create a sensory experience for the viewer and a contemplative space for reflection. In a world of constant distraction, ONLOOKERS insists on the importance of attentiveness. What might we gain if we look and listen deeply?

-Kimi Takesue

PRESS

"Visually-stunning! ...showcases how tourism can have an effect on a country and its local people."

-Charles Barfield, [THE PLAYLIST](#)

"Revelatory!... *Onlookers* presents the viewer with a series of modular, fixed-frame images of both locals and tourists in Laos. With exacting compositions, Takesue observes tourists as they seek the physical artifacts of Buddhism—temples, statues, monks at work—lured by the promise of Eastern exoticism...*Onlookers* provides a piercing and ironic examination of seemingly benevolent cultural consumption."

-Michael Sicinski, [FILM COMMENT](#)

"If you're looking for a new kind of travel film, this is for you."

-Benjamin Franz, [FILM THREAT](#)

"Compelling! ...Through a series of consistent wide shots, the camera never moving, to a sound tableau that picks up the most subtle touristic rustling...*Onlookers* not only grabs your gaze almost subconsciously, but it also elicits nostalgia and self-reflection of one's own such experiences."

- Steve Rickinson, [MODERN TIMES REVIEW](#)

"A surprisingly funny observational documentary feature...is all about these times when eyes meet each other, or a lens, and that recognition causes one party to fall in or out of balance...But [Takesue's] not merely reversing too-common gazes or commenting on tourism's cannibalization of a place...*Onlookers* is instead the pithy result of her long look at a place and its tourism from untrodden angles. She is able to look at travel critically as well as see its potential."

-A.E. Hunt, [FILMMAKER MAGAZINE](#)

"Who are these "onlookers" if not at the same time them, her and us, filmmaker and spectators, villagers and travellers? ...Faced with the ravages of tourism and the persistent colonial mentalities, it is easy to forget this register where the gaze suspends prejudices and establishes a level of equivalences; a group-based approach able to question the way in which roles are constructed, and where the work of filmmaking merges with the exercise of hospitality."

- Antoine Thirion, [CINEMA DU REEL, Centre Pompidou](#)

"Kimi Takesue's *Onlookers*, despite its placid veneer and languid pace amid the sightseeing landmarks of Laos, is loaded with the tension borne of ocular entanglement between subjects in their daily environments, tourists ogling per their mandate, Takesue's own camera and subject position as traveler, and our apparently fixed positionality as witnesses to the scenes she captures. The result is as complex and open ended as the social co-existence it reveals. Through a series of expertly framed static takes (and meticulous sound design), we're free to let our senses wander between the sometimes humorous, sometimes off putting, and always porous borders between seen and seer— and might just take pause to consider who could be observing us as we do."

-Inney Prakash, [PRISMATIC GROUND, Brooklyn Academy of Music](#)

"Enchanting...Takesue walks a fine line allowing for one to judge for themselves what they are seeing while gently injecting her own sense of discovery and good humor in curating the experience."

-Stephen Saito, [THE MOVEABLE FEST](#)

"Stunning visuals exploring what we see and what we know, what we are present for and what we are absent for." -Mark Rifkin, [THIS WEEK IN NEW YORK](#)

"A lyrical examination of the quirks, impacts and tempo of tourism."

-Scott Iwasaki, [THE PARK RECORD](#)

Kimi Takesue...gives birth to a non-narrative work, whose efficiency, sincerity and even the plastic beauty that remains, give its own spectators something to nourish a calm reflection. The intellectual scope of Onlookers is certain, and without forgetting the sensations that cinematographic art can provide (through images and sounds), the film proves to be quite relevant. The form and the content marry the intention of the filmmaker in a pure and perfect way.

-Maxime Bauer, [EAST ASIA](#)

"A human mass, they (the tourists) constitute a phenomenon in the natural sense, and their arrival is a migration, a godsend for the locals as much as a calamity. But the film, like the Laotians themselves who are so stoic and so good-natured, ultimately takes a very tender look at these tourists...You can easily recognize yourself in the great weariness of these travelers."

-Tristan Tailhades, [ZONE CRITIQUE](#)

"Both for its strong connection between the visuals and the sound, and the non-judgmental observation of mass tourism, Takesue's documentary approach is comparable to Sergei Loznitsa's "Austerlitz" (2016) shot in the concentration camps at Dachau and Sachsenhausen. "Onlookers" comes up to its name in the appropriate empirical meaning: it is not interventional, not pro- or against what is going on in front of the lens. Visually strong, with the narrative completely built on moving images, and without as much as one single spoken or written comment, "Onlookers" motivates the viewers to ask themselves a question: why do we travel the way we do, with eyes wide shut? "

- Marina Richter, [ASIAN MOVIE PLUS](#)

"A gentle meditation on the nature of "travel" and the disruptive qualities of "tourism", Takesue's elegantly lensed images seem to argue for a more active reflection on the world and our place within it rather than remaining a perpetual onlooker observing without thought or feeling."

-Hayley Scanlon, [WINDOWS ON WORLDS](#)

INTERVIEWS & ESSAYS

[FILMMAKER MAGAZINE "Kimi Takesue on ONLOOKERS"](#) -A.E. Hunt

[THE MOVEABLE FEST: "Kimi Takesue on the Wandering Eye in ONLOOKERS"](#) – Stephen Saito

[TALKHOUSE: "Seeing and Seeking"](#) – Kimi Takesue

SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS

WORLD PREMIERE: Slamdance Film Festival- WINNER: Honorable Mention- Breakout Features
INTERNATIONAL PREMIERE: Cinéma du Réel- Centre Pompidou, FRANCE (Competition)
ASIAN PREMIERE: DMZ International Documentary Film Festival, SOUTH KOREA
Krakow International Film Festival, POLAND (Samsung Excellence Line Competition)
Prismatic Ground, BAM-Brooklyn Academy of Music, NYC
Asian American International Film Festival, NYC

THE FILMMAKERS

KIMI TAKESUE, Director / Producer / Cinematographer / Sound Recordist / Editor

Kimi Takesue is an award-winning filmmaker working in documentary, experimental and narrative genres. Takesue's films have screened at more than 250 film festivals and museums internationally including Sundance, Locarno, Toronto, New Directors /New Films, Cinéma du Reel, Centre Pompidou and MoMA and have aired on PBS, IFC, and the Sundance Channel. Takesue is the recipient of Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships, as well as the "Breakthrough Award" from Chicken and Egg Pictures recognizing women who have made significant contributions to the documentary field.

Takesue's feature documentary [95 AND 6 TO GO](#), a portrait of her Japanese American grandfather in Hawai'i, was nominated for the 2017 European Doc Alliance Award and screened at over twenty-five international film festivals, including CPH:DOX, Doclisboa, DOC NYC, and Dok Leipzig. The film won the *Special Jury Prize for Best Documentary Film* at Indie Memphis and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific International Film Festival. Takesue's critically acclaimed Ugandan feature documentary [WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?](#) was commissioned by the International Film Festival Rotterdam and premiered at the festival, followed by screenings at MoMA *Documentary Fortnight* and the Los Angeles Film Festival where it was a Critics' Pick by *Time Out-New York* and *LA Weekly*. Takesue's films have received positive reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Variety*, *Bomb Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, among others. Her films are distributed by Women Make Movies, New Day Films, and the Criterion Channel. Takesue is Professor in the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at Rutgers University-Newark.

KIMI TAKESUE: Filmography

ONLOOKERS (2023)	E=NYC2 (2005)
95 AND 6 TO GO (2016)	SUMMER OF THE SERPENT (2004)
LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE (2013)	HEAVEN'S CROSSROAD (2002)
THAT WHICH ONCE WAS (2011)	ROSEWATER (1999)
WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME? (2010)	BOUND (1995)
SUSPENDED (2009)	

RICHARD BEENEN, Co-Producer

Richard Beenen is a visual artist and photographer whose final art and video have been exhibited at MoMA, Museo D'Arte Contemporanea Roma, White Columns (NYC), Los Angeles Museum of Art, Viper-Basel, Courtisane Festival, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Richard has co-produced numerous award-winning documentaries and short fiction films that have screened at film festival and museums internationally including Sundance, Toronto, Locarno, BAFICI, SXSW, Rotterdam, CPH:DOX, and MoMA. Richard has received artist fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation and the Pollack Krasner Foundation.

SOPHIE LUO, Co-Producer

Sophie Luo is a producer and filmmaker. She has produced numerous commercial campaigns, digital

shorts and films including the Grammys campaign for GAP featuring SZA, Metro Boomin, and Awakafina; a Justice Democrats short featuring Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the award-winning documentary 95 AND 6 TO GO by Kimi Takesue. Her additional clients include Nike, TED, Facebook, Clinique, NYU, and the National Institute of Reproductive Health. Her short film CLOSING ANNISA won the Golden Reel Award for Best Documentary Short at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival and screened at the Athena Film Festival, Anchorage International Film Festival, Omaha Film Festival and Seattle Asian American Film Festival. She was recently selected for Women in Film's inaugural Emerging Producers Program.

CREDITS

Director and Producer

Kimi Takesue

Cinematography by

Kimi Takesue

Co-Producers

Richard Beenen

Sophie Luo

Consulting Producers

Sara Archambault

Karin Chien

Sound

Kimi Takesue

Edited by

Kimi Takesue

Colorist

Christopher DiBerardino

Supervising Sound Editor & Re-Recording Mixer

Tom Efinger

Sound Editor

Abigail Savage

Audio Post Facility

Red Hook Post

Post Production Picture Finishing Services

Postworks New York

Post Works Account Executive

Pete Olshansky

Post Works Finishing Producer

Patriciana Tenicela

Matthew Gonzalez

Legal Services

Justine Jacob

Cecilia Mao

Publicist

Sylvia Savadjian

Titles / Key Art Design

Yen Tan

Closed Captions

Cheryl Green

Distribution Assistants

Emily Drennan

Alex Su

SALES AGENT

Impronta Films

Ana Fernandez Saiz

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Chicken & Egg Pictures

Corporation of Yaddo

Macdowell

Marblehouse

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Rutgers University – Newark

Women Make Movies Production Assistance Program