

Silk screen

Selina Robertson talks to the documentary-maker niece of Danny Williams, the recently rediscovered film chronicler of the New York pop art scene

In July 1966, Esther B Robinson's uncle Danny Williams drove home to Massachusetts, with a shaving kit full of drugs, and took his own life. Thirty-four years later, Esther's grandmother Nadia came to visit her granddaughter's workplace at the Warhol Foundation, and casually mentioned to the staff there that her son Danny Williams had lived with Warhol and then mysteriously disappeared. Thus began *A Walk Into the Sea* – Robinson's personal investigation into her own family's hidden history and that of Warhol's Factory. 'I think I knew he was gay', states Robinson, 'but I didn't know that he lived with Andy. I became aware of the power of Danny when I was 13 because there was a shelf in my grandma's house of books about Warhol and the Velvet Underground, which was an eccentric thing for a 70-year-old person to have.'

Williams (pictured with Edie Sedgwick) was indeed Warhol's lover, and in his short life made over 20 films and became the Velvet Underground's technician. After dropping out of Harvard in 1965, he moved to Manhattan and began a film career working with luminaries like the Maysles brothers (watch out for Albert Maysles' interview in the film, where he anecdotally gives the documentary its title and humbly offers Williams credit for his own career). Robinson saw pictures of Edie Sedgwick and Lou Reed when she was a kid, but because of her uncle's disappearance nobody talked about what happened. Fear and guilt are two emotions she has always felt 'When someone's missing it's like they are in the room with you,' she explains. With support of the Whitney Museum, Robinson tracked down a box of 16mm films at MoMA that had her uncle's name written on it. She waited for two years in

bureaucratic stasis for the films to be released. 'I didn't interview anyone until I had the films. We had Danny's wooden box [with] notebooks, newspaper clippings and stationary', she says, when questioned about the film's timeline. She talks briefly about the personal resentment that she still feels towards MoMA; in the end she had to produce Williams' old receipts for processing and buying the films to prove that they belonged to her family and were her uncle's films, not Warhol's.

A Walk into the Sea is, amazingly, Robinson's first foray into filmmaking, and it's clear that the documentary is made with love and support. Close friends Adam and Jem Cohen co-shot the film and her husband T Griffin (of Fugazi) composed the score. Her interviews with Brigit Berlin and Paul Morrissey amongst others are gentle, but probing. 'It's not a comfortable thing to be a Warhol Factory person; it's a really difficult legacy,' she states, tactfully. Certainly watching the world premier last year in Berlin of Williams' silent avant-garde films (*Factory*, *Harold Stevenson 1&2*, *Trips* and *Parties*) was a big goosebump moment. Williams' films captured the joy, celebration and good times of those early Factory days vividly. So what is her uncle's legacy today? 'I think that Danny's unique gift was that he was able to capture a unique moment in history that is highly chronicled, but is not witnessed with love and euphoria.' As the Warhol circle continue to trash each other to death, Robinson and Williams' films offer us a captivating peak into something other.

***A Walk Into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory* is released on DVD on Mon 18 Aug (Revolver).**



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**'TO BE A WARHOL
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DIFFICULT LEGACY'**

