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Publication Date

2018-07-02

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How To Make A Pearl
A Documentary Film by
Jason Hanasik

Abstract

For the last ten years, John Kapellas has lived in complete darkness. Allergic to the entire spectrum of light, Kapellas' doctors have tried a myriad of drugs to give him more time in the light. When one of the drugs' side effects made him "go nuts," Kapellas began drawing circles on all of the surfaces in his home.

A year after his brush with suicidal ideations, John has covered most of his walls and ceilings with "a million messy circles" and he's finally ready to tackle the most emotional drawing he's made to date: a mural memorializing one of his late partners and his partner's lovers.

"How To Make A Pearl" is a documentary short which explores Kapellas' inner landscape through archival footage from when he was six, thirty, and in his early forties and the daily reality of building a life seen by the light of a single battery LED flashlight.

Original Treatment

Working Title: Pinholes of Light: John Kapellas' Descent into Darkness

Log line: A portrait of a man who has become allergic to light, lives in almost complete darkness and has figured out a way to survive and thrive.

Narrative: In 2007, John Kapellas started breaking out in full body hives. He said that his skin felt like it was burning. After many trips to various specialists, his doctors conclude that Kapellas is having a hyperimmune response and has become allergic to light. Over the course of the next ten years, Kapellas loses the ability to be in any part of the visible spectrum and lives life by a single battery flashlight.

Pinholes of Light begins in Kapellas' pitch black apartment. Nature sounds powered by Kapellas' various iPods/speakers fill the blank visual field. The single beam of Kapellas' flashlight illuminates his path and the objects he's made and collected over the years. The phone rings and John begins listing the various items he needs from the store.

Huddled over a series of post it notes, Kapellas delivers a queer list of items and then moves to the fridge revealing barren bins.

While bizarre, Kapellas' medical condition is the explosion from which this film launches so after this short, mysterious prologue, the audience is informed of Kapellas' medical condition via title cards. After which, the train of the film begins and after more scene setting and an explanation of Kapellas' coping strategies, we learn of Kapellas' lifetime of trauma.

Kapellas is upstairs —on his bed— rummaging around a bin of markers. He's drawing colorful circles on a small tin while explaining in voiceover that he only has a limited amount of time in the

light before he burns. We learn that in 2005, Kapellas was on a drug that made him feel suicidal and because the Veterans Administration was unable to get a therapist out to see him quickly enough, he chose to start drawing circles on his wall. A year and a half later, his walls are almost completely covered in large, abstract flowers and he is just about to begin a mural of three empty leather jackets on the last blank wall. He says that while the drawing helped him refocus his attention, he was still unable to get the pain of his childhood and Vietnam to keep quiet.

At six, Kapellas witnessed his father trying to kill his mother. He says he doesn't fully remember the incident but that he does remember chewing his fingernails so often that they would perpetually bleed. Four years after the incident, his father finally left his mother and when his stepfather wasn't much better at being a parent, he went to Tarzan, Hercules and the Christian church to find a protector/a father.

Kapellas enlisted in the military as soon as he could and was shipped off to Vietnam. He returned relatively unscathed from the incident and got married. A few years into the marriage and after one child was born, Kapellas realized that he was gay. His wife

did not want to get divorced but Kapellas knew that he couldn't remain celibate the rest of his life.

One day, at an adult bookstore he and his wife often visited, Kapellas met a man who wanted to have sex with him. Kapellas was equally intrigued but shared that he was married and that the man would need to first meet his wife. The man agreed, they all met, and then Kapellas and the gentleman went and had sex. According to Kapellas, what was an abstract desire was now very real. Curiously, Kapellas and his wife had sex one more time and his wife became pregnant. Their second child was born shortly before the divorce was finalized.

Kapellas came out in 1985 as HIV/AIDS was sweeping through the San Francisco Bay Area and the world.

Attractive and new to the scene, Kapellas quickly met many men and became HIV positive. During the 80s and 90s, John buried many friends, lovers, and partners. In the mid 90s, he met a man named Ira at a country western bar. The two men quickly started dating and eventually bought a home together—a block from Kapellas' ex wife and their kids.

Ira and Kapellas lived together for five years before Ira succumbed to an AIDS related death.

Over the course of the film, Kapellas revisits the mural of the empty leather jackets that he began towards the top of the experience. Ira, his dead lover, is one of the men in the source photograph.

Kapellas' past and present dance with each other throughout the film. For Kapellas—living in the dark—his memories are as real and vivid as any other image.

Pinholes of Light is an exploration of the ways in which Kapellas navigates the imaginary line between the past and the present. How he is pearling the experiences—he says that his traumas are the grain of sand in an oyster and that drawing allows him to take that grain of sand and make a pearl out of it. The film is a reminder that if we don't process the experiences which inflict pain, they'll get caught in our body and our body will create a situation where safety is the most important thing and safety may be a dark apartment.

Major Film Characters

Verite

John Kapellas
Jason Lloyd
Sasha & Cooper (the cats)

Archival

Maureen Cooper (John's mother)
Teri Flynn (John's ex-wife)
Bri Kapellas (John's daughter)
Corey Kapellas (John's son)
Ira Mer (John's late partner)

Script

Picture	Sound
Pitch Black Room John enters by flashlight and answers the phone	Verité dialogue [00:00:28] Hello, uh, I need, um, post-its and pipe cleaners, if you find 'em. I don't know if you're going to those kind of stores. I need cereal. Um, I need, let's see, cherry tomatoes, kale, um, Aveeno lotion.
John is rooting around in the fridge	[00:01:14] I don't have a lot of anything. I've got two carrots and some beets so I need. Yeah, I sort of need all that vegetable-y stuff. And blueberries, blue-berries, yeah. But I have some bread and... Oh, OK. We'll see. We'll see you real soon.
Text Cards	In 2007, John Kapellas began to break out in rashes when he was exposed to light. Doctors have been unable to determine the cause. He has lived in the dark ever since.

<p>In Loft area, arranging workspace</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:02:03] Hercules</p> <p>V.O. [00:02:11] Everyday I choose what I'm going to do, in the light cause I only have I can only do it for so long any given time before I start to burn.</p> <p>Verité dialogue [00:02:29] I have more stuff than I need. Pencils.</p> <p>VO I love drawing. Uh, It's like my it's like a, my window a window into, you know, time in the light.</p>
<p>John presents line drawing and the reference photograph for the line drawing of three men in leather outfits to camera</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:02:49] That's sort of a sketch of where it's going. I'm not sure if I'm going to do the hat or not it's a sketch of this photograph. This is Ira and these are his partners, Doug and Terry. I'm gonna take this and I've been drawing, drawing it out and I'm gonna try drawing it in circles and see what happens. So, that's the goal.</p>

Camera pans over murals on the wall and ceiling

V.O.

[00:03:40] I mean when I first started drawing the circles on my wall, I was having I don't know what you call it. Uh, I had started a drug called Mexiletine which is the pill form of Lidocaine to see if they could stop the, some of the pain in my face.

Lyrica another drug had stopped the pain response from my neck down which was great. So, they were looking for another drug for the face and but that one made me nuts. It just made me mentally unable to stop thinking negatively. So I was only on that drug for a couple months and I went off it and took another couple of months and I realized I needed to call the V.A. for help because I was becoming more. I didn't feel like I was suicidal but I was more suicidal than I thought I should be. And so I started, uh, started that process with the V.A. It brought up a lot of stuff from Vietnam and from my childhood that I couldn't get away from. I just couldn't.

John presents and then demonstrates the use of an EMDR machine

Verité dialogue

[00:05:00] These things light up so they're. I put the bags over them so I can hold them.

V.O.

I just started therapy three or four weeks ago, uh, with a trauma therapist and in my first appointment he introduced me to this, a box he had a little electronic gadget that you can turn on and it vibrates and you hold two, two round things that are connected to the box and they both vibrate and uh, they're, they're wonderful they keep you in the present so that you don't get lost in the stories that you're telling.

<p>Archival Footage: John as a six year old boy: John and his brothers running around and laughing John getting a haircut</p>	<p>V.O. [00:05:41] Like my mother told me that a story that I had walked in on my dad stomping on her and breaking her ribs at a certain point. I was about six or seven she said and I don't remember seeing that but I know that I chewed my fingernails till they bled and I didn't know why but I also knew I loved my dad. She said I saved her life. She said my dad was trying to kill her at that point.</p>
<p>Black Screen Video plays on laptop of an older man</p>	<p>S.O.T. (Tarzan Yell) [00:06:26]"What was that?" "That I believe my dear, is Tarzan."</p>
<p>John looking at laptop John getting in his bed under the covers Laptop plays Tarzan clip from YouTube</p>	<p>V.O. [00:06:26] So Tarzan and Hercules were some of the father figures I went to that were on TV at the time. There's almost always in that mythology or genre a, uh, There's often a boy or a young man that uh, Tarzan or Hercules or you know the muscle guy has taken under his wing and he's going out into the world and, uh, but he's often got somebody he's protecting.</p>
<p>John looks at professionally shot black and white photographs of him modeling for the camera</p>	<p>Mix of Verité dialogue and V.O. [00:06:54] Just found this in a box uh, the other day they're photographs from some of the things from when I was modeling.</p> <p>I had a window washing business for most of my life and that was uh, modeling was sort of something that was fun on the side and completely different.</p> <p>My wife got me into this. She kept telling me that I was cuter for her than the guy she was seeing in the magazines so she told me to be a model and I don't know, she threw away all my white underwear and socks and bought me all colored underwear and socks and, and uh she got me thinking about fashion I was pretty boring, I guess.</p>
<p>Archival Footage: John, his wife and their two kids ham it up for the video camera</p>	<p>S.O.T. [00:07:49] "I can't see." "Hi everybody." "Look at Bri. Look at her." "Hi everybody."</p>

Archival Family Footage continues	<p>VO So I came out when I was around 30. Um, and I had two kids, uh, four and one.</p>
Archival Family Footage continues	<p>S.O.T. "There's Corey right in the middle."</p>
Archival Family Footage continues	<p>S.O.T. [00:08:08] "There's Corey right in the middle." V.O. It was a process with my wife working out how we would split up and it was tough cause we both we loved each other and it was a painful experience.</p> <p>But our choice was to live together a celibate life uh, and raise the kids and just not think about sex and I didn't. I felt like that would be setting myself up for failure.</p> <p>We used to go down to the adult bookstore and buy whatever we both wanted and, and in that area one day when I was there without her I met a guy who wanted to have sex with me and made that plain and I was attracted to him and I said, "I would I was interested and would he come home and meet my wife first" because that's sort of the deal we had. And he said yes. So, drove him up to the house and introduced him to my wife and told her that you know I'd be back later and went off and was parked in front of the guy's house and said "you know I haven't really..."</p>
Archival Family Footage continues	<p>S.O.T. 00:09:34] Oh yeah, we forgot to pray.</p>
Archival Family Footage continues	<p>V.O. [00:09:35] ...done this before. I don't know if this is going to work." And he took his finger and rubbed it on my lips and said, "Well?" And I said, "Oh I think this might work." It just it was like electricity, it was amazing.</p> <p>My wife and I hadn't had sex for quite a while, uh, some years, since since Corey was born I think but the next month we did and we made Bri and that was the last time we had sex again.</p>

<p>Back in John's apartment: he turns the light on for a visitor</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:10:28] I should leave the light on, huh? Uh, so this is Jason coming in.</p>
<p>Jason enters the apartment</p>	<p>V.O. [00:10:31] You know Jason and I dated for about four years. Uh, we're still friends we're not dating anymore but he still brings me food.</p>
<p>Jason and John try to figure out how to remove a CO2 canister in the kitchen</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:10:42] John: Hey you, Now, do you know how to take this out? Jason: I have no clue. I've never John: Well shit, I don't either. Well, that was easy.</p>
<p>They remove the canister and John gives Jason a hug</p>	<p>V.O. [00:10:55] We have such a great time but he's a lot younger than me. He's uh, now he's, I think he's 41 and he and I got on really well and he could live in the dark with me here really well he was here a lot.</p>
<p>Their embrace ends and John move to a cabinet to fetch his wallet</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:11:10] John: Thanks for shopping. Jason: Thank you. Well, I'll call you, I'll call you then from Open Hand. John: Okay. Jason: Alright, see ya J. John: You need some money? Jason: Oh yeah, that would be nice. John: How much?</p>
<p>John gives Jason some money, they embrace again and Jason leaves.</p>	<p>V.O. [00:11:21] But I can't go out and meet his friends I can't go. You know so ultimately after a couple of years it's hard when your partner can't, doesn't know any of your friends you know and your life is going on outside still but there's this, it's an interesting thing, I'm a sort of a stuck in time like person in here.</p>
<p>John is in the loft area, in front of the mural of the leather jackets.</p>	<p>Verité dialogue [00:11:50] Never had a problem with them fitting on these before. Let's see, Doug, Terry, and then Ira will be down there.</p>

John flips through a picture album containing photographs of him, Ira, John's kids, and their friends.

V.O.

[00:12:14] I met Ira one day at the country western bar which was called the Rawhide back then and he was dressed in full leather because he was only there for a little bit. He was going to go over to a leather bar —The Eagle— and I saw him across the room and sort of had, had a response and he looked at me and so we ended up walking and meeting in the middle somewhere and after talking with him for a while I remember thinking, I didn't want to just think about him sexually. He was interesting and fun to talk to so we set up a date and started seeing each other.

John returns to the loft area and draws more circles on the leather mural.

He hadn't been tested. He didn't know if he was positive or not. But I could tell by you know hugging him and just feeling him his lymph nodes were swollen and he was probably positive. And it took me a long time to convince him to get tested.

You have to remember his partner had just died of AIDS, too. So he you know he it wasn't just you know he was worried about that. He had been through the whole shebang.

They had been together for 20 years. He's one of the guys in the, in the leather jacket. he is the first leather jacket up there and then Terry is the second and Ira's the third.

Series of shots with John in front of and using a microscope. Peppered in between him using the microscope are views of what he's looking at under the microscope's lens.

Mix of Verité dialogue and V.O.

[00:13:38] The microscope is totally fun for watching things. You know anywhere where dust lands turns into a bacteria garden.

Oh this is so easy to get lost in.

I'm a gardener. I love gardening and I've not been able to garden that much since I've been in here.

This is a rosewood box of a friend of mine who died quite awhile ago. He had HIV.

Um, He's. His name was Ken Leeds. He's the one that left me his piano.

<p>John is playing the piano and signing.</p> <p>Archival footage of John and his friends in Acapulco</p>	<p>Verité singing [00:14:21] "Work your magic, Spread your poison. Keep this body alive, work your magic, Spread your poison. Keep this body alive. To breathe the sunshine in. Feel moonlight on my skin. To touch your heart of gold. To watch my kid's grow old.</p>
<p>Archival footage of John and his friends in Acapulco</p>	<p>V.O. [00:14:42] I don't think I've processed all of the things that happened in those that decade sort of the 90s. I mean it started in the 80s but the the mass die off was for me really happened in the late 80s and 90s.</p>
<p>Archival footage of John and his friends in Acapulco</p>	<p>Verité singing [00:15:22] "Spread its poison, keep this body alive. Work its magic spread its poison, keep this body alive. To breathe, the sunshine in. Feel moonlight on my skin. To touch your heart of gold. To watch, my kids grow old. Magic potion for curing me. You're the poison killing me. Kill me day by day I'm dying to live and stay this way.</p>
<p>Archival footage of John and his friends in Acapulco</p>	<p>V.O. [00:16:13] It happened so fast. And it was like an ocean wave that just kept rolling in and in and in and so you never really got time to recuperate from one amazing person after another dying, young.</p> <p>Was worse for me than Vietnam. Different kind of war and death but definitely the same kind of feeling, I remember thinking that more than once.</p>
<p>John is singing at the piano. He finishes, turns towards the camera and turns off the light.</p>	<p>Verité singing [00:16:53] I'm a medicine man. I'm here cause the medicine can. I'm a medicine man. Here cause the medicine can.</p>

John is in the loft area, looking at the leather mural. He begins moving things around so that he can get to the wall easier and then starts to draw.

V.O.

[00:17:21] Ira died in '94 and we were together for about five years. I was out looking for morphine for him and came back and, uh, his mother was there, had been with him when he died. And she looked to me and said, "I'm sorry I treated him so awfully this last week. I just didn't want him to feel like I approved of his life. And you know I'm sorry I, I hurt you but I don't agree with your lifestyle."

John continues to draw circles on the wall.

V.O.

[00:18:09] It's interesting the it's, it's not about one circle it's about you know a million messy circles turning into something else. I like the cellular idea, the building up of something. There's a feeling about that in in, uh, I have the idea in my head that I'm going to cover my whole ceiling and walls with circles. So, I'm going to touch every square inch of space and that is a nice feeling for me for some reason.

When you start working on pain and you're covering the pain up it's you know you're creating like an oyster, a pearl with that little grain of sand that's irritating it and they cover it up with some substance to make it, uh, not hurt. And that's kind of what this is, covering up my whole space. But I think a lot of things we do are one kind of pearling or another, trying to stop pain.

You know, we, humans take drugs since forever and each culture has drugs that are that they consider OK and drugs that they put people in jail for.

<p>John descends the stairs and begins to work out in front of a mirror.</p>	<p>V.O. [00:19:37] Every now and then I will you know walk around a corner from this part of my room to that or walk back in from the front of the house and think, “Oh my God my life is weird just totally crazy.”</p> <p>And then other times you know, it’s, I’ve figured out ways to normalize it and it doesn’t feel that weird.</p> <p>What I live on here. I have a feeling of hope that I will get out of here. But that feeling of hope also carries me if I don’t get out, you know I don’t get out.</p>
<p>John returns to the loft area, draws a few circles and then turns to his left and surveys the large, intricate mural he’s already completed. The film fades to black.</p>	<p>V.O. [00:20:17] I’ve lived enough lives and recreated myself enough times, I think I get amazed at life and the crazy things that happen to humans. But it’s, if this is you know going to be my life, I can do this.</p>
<p>Credits</p>	<p>Verité singing [00:21:13] Work your magic. Spread your poison. Keep this body alive. Work your magic, spread your poison. Keep this body alive. To Breathe, the sunshine in. To feel moonlight on my skin. To touch your heart of gold. To watch, my kids grow old.</p>

Credits

For

Jennifer Hanasik (1983-2010)
who tried to make her pearl

&

For

John Kapellas
who helped me make mine

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Made in possible by a grant from

Minette Nelson and David Eckles
The Filmmaker Fund
UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism
Black Magic Design

Archival Materials

John Kapellas
Teri Flynn

Thank You

John Kapellas
Blake Montgomery
Daniel Goldstein
Jason Lahman-Goldstein
Jackie Rooney
Jerry Rosenstein
Amanda Lucier
Graelyn Brashear
Bri Kapellas
Corey Kapellas
Teri Flynn
Jason Lloyd
Summer Chang
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Bill Weber
Greg Bodin
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Produced at The Graduate School of Journalism
University of California, Berkeley

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