

## 2024 FILM COMPETITION WINNERS

### Grand Prize



Sponsored by Rab | \$5000

### *Champions of the Golden Valley*

(USA, 2024, 81 min)

Director: Ben Sturgulewski

Producers: Sturgefilm, Tideshift Studio, Katie Stjernholm, Baktash Ahadi

In the remote mountain villages of Bamyan, Afghanistan, a newfound passion for skiing attracts young athletes from rival ethnic groups to the slopes. With minimal gear and makeshift skis, the determined ski coach Alishah Farhang organizes a thrilling ski race that fosters camaraderie, joy, and triumph. "The ultimate underdog story." – Variety

**"The current state of global unrest, the increasingly destructive effects of climate change (and the impending election, if you're American like me), can leave us overwhelmed and at times guilty for finding delight in the mountains. This film reminds us we are multitudes: joy and grief, hope and despair, coinciding in times of political crisis and persecution. There are beautiful wide-ranging shots that juxtapose the stark black and white present to the bright colorful images looking back, almost wistfully, at an enchanted past memory. One gets a sense of unfettered freeness in the pockets of snow. The lasting impact of the fleeting moment in time can be felt as the ski program continues to be resilient, to foster the joys of being in the mountains, and its sparkling feeling of hope."**- Shelma Jun, jury member

\* Jury member Joaquin Gomez abstained from the Grand Prize deliberations due to his involvement in the film.

## Best Film: Adventure



Sponsored by Kahtoola | \$3000

### *109 Below*

(USA, 2023, 14 min)

Director: Nick Martini

Producers: Stept Studios, Sarah Stewart, Ben Osborne, Lex Hinson

*109 Below* tells a tale of resilience and grit when elite rescue volunteers go out of their way to save the lives of strangers.

**"Adventure is such a loaded word. Going on an adventure sounds so unabashedly bright and positive. Charting a new line to the summit. Braving the elements. Testing your courage. Pushing your stamina beyond the pale. Riding the edge of risk. But as we all know, in the mountains there's a fine line between adventure and misadventure. It's one thing to risk your own life, or that of a partner—and something else again to risk the life of a total stranger who is not even on the mountain. Here is a film that's not about the momentary thrill of an adventure, but also its harrowing consequences. Without judgment or sentimentality, it brings the dangerous work of mountain rescue teams into stark focus by telling the intimate story of a hiker who owes his life to the death of a man he never knew. Directed with empathy and gravitas, the narrative spans decades of moral reconciliation in a mere 14 minutes, while opening up a debate it can't hope to resolve."**

— *Brian Johnson, jury member*

## Best Film: Environment



Sponsored by ANEW Climate | \$3000

### *The Giants*

(Australia, 2024, 91 min)

Directors: Laurence Billiet, Rachael Antony

Producers: General Strike, Matchbox Pictures, Laurence Billiet, Rachael Antony

From a seedling to forest elder: the film is a masterclass that draws on Bob Brown's 50 years of inspiring activism, from the Franklin campaign for Tasmania's last wild river, to today's battle for the Tarkine rainforest. Brown's story is interwoven with the extraordinary life cycle of Australia's giant trees, brought to the screen with stunning award-winning cinematography and immersive animated forest landscapes.

**"Australia is home to some of the most ancient forests and tallest trees in the world. They are being destroyed in wildfires and are logged mercilessly, at a catastrophic rate. The film speaks for these phenomenal living beings with the help of the creative, almost surreal and very immersive animations that make us feel like we're wandering through the trees canopy. The botanical narration is interlaced with a human story, also tightly connected to the trees, metaphorically and literally wrapped around their trunks, branches and roots.**

**Conservationist and LGBT activist Bob Brown couldn't care more about the ecosystem of Australia and of the entire world. Along with the personal struggles and political career of the Greens leader, the film also recalls the history of environmental protests under Bob Brown's charismatic leadership."** - *Kasia Biernacka, jury member*

## Best Film: Mountain Sports



Sponsored by NRS | \$3000

### *Big Water Theory*

(France, 2024, 83 min)

Director: Emile Dominé

Producers: AADO Media, Emile Dominé, Jules Dominé

Follow kayaking superstar Nouria Newman and two childhood friends as they navigate one of the world's most challenging sections of whitewater — the Rondu Gorge of the Indus River in Pakistan. Documenting Nouria's attempt at completing the first female descent of these unbelievable rapids, *Big Water Theory* is set against the stunning backdrop of the Karakoram mountains and highlights the irreversible nature of the sport.

**"This film skillfully examines anatomy of extreme sports, where even one little error can have irreversible consequences. It delivers a masterclass in risk-taking, elevating kayaking to an art form that demands extraordinary precision and courage. Like matadors reading the next move of a wild animal, the protagonist and her team navigate the deadly rapids of the Indus River, executing a series of breathtaking, narrow escapes. To an untrained eye, it might all seem a bit mad—like purposefully skiing down an avalanche-laden slope. This quest keeps the audience on the edge of their seats through the entirety of the film. The characters are like “river whisperers,” with an unmatched ability to read complex water movements. Ultimately, this is a story of small humans bravely facing vast nature—tiny figurines in plastic kayaks amid the foaming, powerful waters of the Indus, seemingly on the brink of disaster yet miraculously making it down the rapids unscathed. Is it luck or skill? Mostly the former, with just a touch of the latter.”- Masha Gordon, jury member**

## Best Film: Mountain Culture



Sponsored by Happy Yak | \$3000

### *Mongolia, Valley of the Bears*

(France, 2023, 88 min)

Director: Hamid Sardar

Producer: Lato Senu Productions, Muriel Barra

In Mongolia, Taiga forests and pure waters have kept an entire population nomadic for thousands of years. In the last 30 years, the rich natural resources have fallen prey to illegal hunters and miners, who are often locals. Appointed ranger Jal Tumursukh, a former hunter, now enforces the law of environmental protection, attempting to put an end to poaching but in the process also threatens cultural tradition.

**"Mountain culture is a world of passionate extremes. It can be a playing field or a war zone. A meeting ground where nature is loved or feared, conquered or revered—a wilderness where people fight over the right to consume nature, or protect it. Our winning film explores these conflicting agendas without presenting simple solutions, but by framing an extraordinary story in an exquisite setting that looks like nowhere else on Earth. It's a movie of many genres. A cinematic spectacle that distills poetry from landscape. An eco-documentary too complex to be doctrinaire. A character drama with a trickster protagonist. A western about an enforcer who fights an outlaw band of poachers by recruiting warriors from their ranks. This year's Mountain Culture Award goes to a film that takes this ever-expanding niche of cinema to new heights." — Brian Johnson, jury member**

## Best Film: Climbing



Sponsored by Arc'teryx | \$3000

### *Adra*

(UK, 2023, 53 min)

Director: Emma Crome

Producer: Coldhouse Collective, Harriet Sykes

Llanberis is the diamond at the heart of North Wales and is the epicentre of climbing in the UK. *Adra* gently gifts us a sense of home, community, and belonging as local climbers Zoë Wood and Lewis Perrin Williams take us on a nostalgic journey, exploring how this place has impacted the lives of the climbers who have lived, worked, and played in this beautiful corner of Cymru over the last century.

**"Flamboyant, colorful, and laden with a distinctly irreverent British humor, this film explores the legacy of British climbing through the stories of self-proclaimed misfits on a philosophical quest for bolder things. It captures the authentic climbing culture born in the slate quarries and on the sea cliffs of Wales, one of the wettest places on Earth. Rooted in the rebellious spirit of the 1980s Thatcher era, the film's characters passionately speak of the ethics of climbing — leaving no gear behind and the principle of "never falling off" the railway nuts used for protection. With lyrical and stylish visuals, the film's technicolor archival frames weave a love letter to the spirit of 'climbing from one's heart' and to a place British climbers call home."**

— *Masha Gordon, jury member*

## Best Film: Snow Sports



Sponsored by the American Alpine Club | \$3000

### *Wild Days*

(France, 2024, 83 min)

Director: Yohan Guignard

Producer: L'Endroit, Pascal Barneville

Four friends from Savoie have a crazy idea: 50 days of self-sufficiency in Alaska's Denali massif. *Wild Days* takes us on a gruelling overland journey to a place where time drifts, spirits wander off, and where friendships are created and then tested by commitment..

**"This self-filmed journey does a remarkable job of capturing the raw moments that occur in an expedition - the child-like thrill at the start of the journey; the tensions between different personalities, each with their own expectations and hangups; the staggering emotion at the sheer beauty of a moment that feels impossible to process; and the moments of self-doubt, uncertainty, frustration that have you questioning one's (self-imposed) goals. It highlights our desires to push the boundaries of our sport, to consider other ways of challenging yourself, such as hauling dry suits and rafts on a toboggan behind you to achieve a fully human powered expedition into the Denali massif."**

— *Shelma Jun, jury member*

## Best Feature Film



Sponsored by Grangers | \$3000

### *Ashima*

(USA, 2023, 86 min)

Director: Kenji Tsukamoto

Producers: Gray Hat Films, Kenji Tsukamoto, Minji Chang, Roy Choi, Dave Boyle

Ashima is an intimate portrait of elite rock climber Ashima Shiraishi as she travels to South Africa to try to become the youngest person in the world to climb a V14-graded boulder problem. Accompanying Ashima is Poppo, an eccentric, hermit-like, retired avante-garde dancer, who also happens to be her father.

**"This film is a very subtle, intimate and tender portrait of a young climbers' family relationships and of a teenager searching her own path through life. The film shows unique coaching methods of her father, the parental expectations and the young person learning self-discipline and self-confidence. The creators achieved a beautiful zen style throughout the entire film. With remarkable cinematography, static frames and calm, almost ceremonial pace of narration the film is very intense emotionally but far from being overdramatized. The film director shared with us a profound, nuanced story that makes us think about our own style of parenting and the relationships within our own families. In this case parental love together with the young climber's determination made the impossible possible."**

— *Kasia Biernacka, jury member*



## Best Short Film



Sponsored by DUER | \$3000

### *The Bird in my Backyard*

(Canada, 2024, 20 min)

Director: Ryan Wilkes

Producers: Trochilus Films, Ryan Wilkes, CBC

The *Bird in my Backyard* follows a window salesman turned hummingbird expert as he documents the secret lives of the hummingbirds that nest in his urban backyard.

**"As global citizens, we must recognize the importance of transcending the limiting and nationalistic perspectives that can insulate us from one another. Through all these films, we can break down barriers, that's where I believe the real power of storytelling resides. I would**

like to thank and congratulate all filmmakers for the great work behind creating such inspiring films and all the organizers of Banff Film Festival and the audience that completes this perfect combination. Filmmaking is about stepping outside of ourselves, like the Greek concept of ecstasy, which invites us to transcend our own perspectives and truly engage with the world around us. This film beautifully reflects the notion that sometimes the most profound discoveries are hidden just outside our back door. Even though his subject of study may be tiny, his passion and enthusiasm are immense. With a childlike curiosity, we explore the fascinating secrets hidden in our own gardens, revealing a world that is often overlooked. The cinematography is breathtaking allowing us to discover an invisible reality for the naked eye, complemented by an exquisite soundtrack and sound design that takes us deeper into this adventure. The balance achieved between dialogue and voice-over presents an emotional experience, encapsulating feelings of admiration, dedication, and a deep enthusiasm for nature. It reminds us that for a genuine connection with nature we don't have to journey far to become a life-changing experience. This remarkable film introduces us to the secretive and captivating world of the hummingbirds.”

— *Joaquin Gomez, jury member*

## Creative Excellence Award



Sponsored by Core Values Cider Co. | \$3000

### *The Smoke That Thunders*

(Canada, 2024, 4 min)

Director: Caleb Roberts

Producer: Caleb Roberts

Aiming to paddle the fabled Minus rapids at the base of Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River, Ben Marr's biggest challenge is to access them by trekking upstream. A total assault on the senses awaits as the force of the river speaks for itself.

**"This film masterfully allows the powerful sounds of nature to dominate the experience, through the raw and unfiltered essence of the elements. It takes us on an intimate journey, where the thundering rush of the falls speaks volumes more than any scripted dialogue could. The filmmaker's confidence in the water's voice, drives the film with an outstanding sound design connecting us with the beauty of the landscape and the adrenaline of the adventure. This rough approach evokes an authenticity that connects us viscerally with the experience. A short masterpiece that has the ability to encapsulate the spirit of adventure in its purest form."**

— *Joaquin Gomez, jury member*

## Audience Choice Award



Sponsored by 11th Hour Racing | \$3000

### *Champions of the Golden Valley*

(USA, 2024, 81 min)

Director: Ben Sturgulewski

Producers: Sturgenfilm, Tideshift Studio, Katie Stjernholm, Baktash Ahadi

In the remote mountain villages of Bamyan, Afghanistan, a newfound passion for skiing attracts young athletes from rival ethnic groups to the slopes. With minimal gear and makeshift skis, the determined ski coach Alishah Farhang organizes a thrilling ski race that fosters camaraderie, joy, and triumph. "The ultimate underdog story." - *Variety*

## Special Jury Mention



### *The Last Observers*

(USA, 2024, 25 min)

Director: Maja K Mikkelsen

Producer: Patagonia Films, Adam Mikkelsen

For decades, every third hour around the clock, every day of the year, Karin Persson and Lennart Karlsson have gone outside to observe and record the weather. At one of the last manual weather stations on the planet, there are no days off.

**"This film invites us to pause and witness the passion found in dedication which shines through every shot. Observation, the beginning and preliminary phase of every learning experience, might seem a passive action, but hides within a transparent respect for nature and its rhythms. The music and colors work together harmoniously, creating a magical atmosphere without any needs of flashy visuals or intense sound effects. In a world where multitasking, fast achievements and constant external validation seems to be a common denominator, observation is a forgotten behavior, and this is a reminder for us today: we often forget to observe before acting. It conveys not only the endless love and tenderness between them but also the deep passion and dedication for what life has led them to do, captured by the intimate view of their daughter's eyes."**

— *Joaquin Gomez, jury member*

## Special Jury Mention



### *Sadpara*

(Italy, 2024, 51 min)

Director: Gabriele Canu

Producer: feelms, Gabriele Canu

*Sadpara* is a journey through the heart of Pakistan's mountains that explores the bond that unites its people with the high lands. What emerges is the simple routine of a small community, strong and pristine in character, set against the immensity of the Karakoram landscape.

**"Iconic big mountains are most often associated with big expeditions, big objectives and big dreams. But what about those whose lives are inseparably intertwined with them? This film is a love letter to homeland, tradition, and what people featured in this stunning film call a 'simple life.' They are not concerned with the epic achievements and projects of the individual so central to modern athletics in the mountains, but with sustaining the land and their community in an era where the new generations feel the pressure to depart in search of the economic opportunities of city life."**

— *Shelma Jun, jury member*