

PROGRAM NOTES FROM THE CATALOGS OF THE 1978 LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL FILM EXPOSITION (FILMEX), where one of the programs of American Independent Animation featured the work of Robert Breer, Larry Jordan and Harry Smith:

"Animation is a technique of synthesis which can "breathe life into" static forms. Animation is, furthermore, a term used to identify many of the most radical visions of cinema. The first three programs of this series are intended as tributes to five influential American artists--Oskar Fischinger, Jules Engel, Robert Breer, Larry Jordan and Harry Smith--who have chosen to realize important aspects of their creative vision through film animation. All five men have worked with live-action photography, and each has achieved recognition for his work in painting, drawing, lithography and/or sculpture. Here, however, we pay homage to them for their brilliant experimentation with the varieties of cinematic rhythm, and for their invaluable contributions to the understanding of that which is uniquely "filmic" in the art of film.

"The fourth program is a survey intended to provide an overview of other important American independent animation artists currently at work here or in Canada. The majority of the film-makers represented in this program are young; others have long-established, well-respected careers to their credit. All have done impressive work--and all have been influenced in important ways by the embarrassment of riches bestowed by Fischinger, Engel, Breer, Jordan and Smith.

"The films included in these four programs do not outline a history, or define the ranges of a genre. Neither does the selection purport to be the "very best" work of the artists represented. Rather, the films have been chosen in an attempt to fully illustrate a number of unique artistic sensibilities, and to give some sense of an incredibly broad, important, and too little known field of cinematic endeavor which constitutes a major portion of American film heritage."

ROBERT BREER, LARRY JORDAN, HARRY SMITH

"If the concept of "independent" animation carries with it the idea of non-conformity to "traditional" animation, then the works of Robert Breer, Larry Jordan, and Harry Smith would be prime examples of an artist's willingness to create non-objective images which, at the same time as they harken back to no particular reality, also provide an extremely rich feast of texture, color, shape and sound.

"Independent animation is to the Hollywood cartoon as "experimental film" is to the Hollywood narrative feature film. Each of the three artists in this program has brought into question one or more of the principles cherished by cartoonists...

"Larry Jordan with his collage technique incorporates images of familiar objects with those of a mystical impulse to yield an entirely new sense of the way things might be. Jordan's work indeed animates, or "brings to life", frozen realities by placing them into contexts where they might not have heretofore resided. Moreover, it is his films' sense of spontaneity which causes the viewer never to consider, "I'm looking at stills of common things put together in some new order." Rather, the viewer encounters an altogether evolutionary kind of storytelling."

Larry Jordan

Jordan, like Fischinger and Smith, sees cinema as a spiritual instrument. For his first New York retrospective, in 1965, he wrote: "I believe that now is a most important time for individual spirits to shine forth and re-affirm human dignity and shine light into the depths of the human heart. . . . I propose here to give you my most accomplished black and white films, my most congealed film-poems of the inner life, in visual terms." With unusual candor and modesty, he added: "These films are highly personal and I have not yet reached a point in my art where I feel they will hold the same quality of enchantment for the general audience as they do for me. Someday I hope to show these visions of love in terms of color film that will satisfy both you and myself. I believe the great God who made the sun will see us through. And without darkness, we could not perceive its opposite: Light."

He was born in 1934 in Colorado. By one of the not altogether unusual quirks of fate, he went to high school with Stan Brakhage. They both began to make films in 1952 and in those years helped each other out, both technically and as actors. Jordan was slower than Brakhage in finding his mature style, although his early films, long neglected, look very interesting when revived today. In 1960, he began to apply the collage techniques he had been studying in the works of Max Ernst, Joseph Cornell, and Jess Collins to animated film. The earliest of them to be selected for this program is Duo Concertantes (1961).

Duo Concertantes has two parts, The Centennial Exposition and Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway. Both Patricia and Hamfat Asar, the two most spectacular of his animations, operate against the backdrop of a fixed scene. In the former, it is a back view of a young lady framed in a doorway looking out upon woods and a lake; in the latter, Jordan uses an engraving of a seacoast with cliffs. Time and a change of culture have given a surrealistic and nostalgic aura to Victorian woodcuts, as Max Ernst and several collagists between him and Jordan have known for five decades. Where Ernst slammed together radically incongruent images from such found material and thereby released the terrors of monstrosities and the sensual depth of inconceivable landscapes, Jordan has chosen to refine their delicacy and to push his images almost to the point of evanescence — a limit represented in several collages by the reductive metaphor of a film within a collage-film flickering with pure imageless light.

The background picture of Patricia returns us to the moment when the American avant-garde film found its first image of interiority, that is, to the image of Maya Deren pressing her hands against the window in Meshes of the Afternoon to gaze inwardly upon a double of herself chasing the mirror-faced figure. The doorway in which Patricia stands is both the port of exchange and the barrier between the inner and outer worlds, as Maya Deren's window and before her Mallarme's "Fenetre" had been. Outside, tiny images descend from the top of the screen. First an elephant comes down and slowly sinks out of the bottom, but in his downward course he deposits an object which hovers on the horizon of the lake. The discontinuous power of that horizon line to hold objects from falling down the flat screen provides the film with a frail but finely conceived tension between two illusionary gravities, that of the actual theatre in which we see the film where objects must fall from the top of the screen through the bottom as if to land on the floor under our feet, and the represented gravity line, the horizon, within the engraving. The manifestation of objects and their movements within the film enumerate the variations possible between these two centers of gravity.

A hand appears in the upper frame; then a statue appears on the horizon like the spot to which the hand pointed. In the incessant materialization and disappearance off-screen or suddenly vanishing by moving of objects and creatures, the usual way of defeating the gravitational forces is by growing wings and flying off-screen, at the edges. At one point, an egg becomes a butterfly, which then breaks the hitherto established norm of separating inside from outside by flying inside the house and disappearing within.

(continued)

- The inside/outside distinction and its evaporation generates the central apperceptive metaphor of the film. A picture stand appears on the horizon. On its white screen a black and white flicker occurs; slides appear in sequence; then a bird flaps its wings in an evocation of the origins of cinema. It flies off the screen and into the illusory landscape surrounding it. In the final extensions of this trope, a swarm of bees appears on the little screen; some disappear as soon as they overreach its frame, but others escape into the landscape. These bees come inward, past the unmoving woman, and are lost within the house. To commemorate this triumph of the imagination, a star falls splashing into the lake, an egg takes wing, and Larry Jordan's most delicate film ends.

Throughout Jordan's remarkably prolific period in the early Sixties (eighteen films between 1960 and 1965), he assembled his short films into series and released them as such. Duo Concertantes is unique in that both films are collage animation. More often the sets combined films of animation with live views. One such collection, released in 1965, was called Deep Colors. It contained Ein Traum der Liebenden, Johnnie, and Jewelface. The middle section will not be included in this program. It is a live-action portrait of a small boy, made as a protest against war. I will quote the film-maker's notes (which are often the most illuminating guide to his films) on A Dream of Lovers and Jewelface:

Ein Traum der Liebenden (A Dream of Lovers): "I like the warmth and ritualistic charm of this animation. The colors are exceptional. White silhouette figures of man and beast perform airy feats against shifting colored backgrounds. I made the backgrounds and the animation separately and superimposed the two in the lab. Monk soundtrack."

Jewelface: "A film that is very precious to me. A little over one-half of the imagery is composed of a series of unusual visionary (I can only describe them as) "color-drawings" by artist George Herms of Topanga, California. I have then made an inter-cutting of rich color images photographed in the artist's own surroundings. In no sense is the film documentary, because we contrived the images, but out of very ordinary happenings, changed into disconnected, enigmatic looseness."

One can see an immense formal development between Hamfat Asar (1965) and Our Lady of the Sphere (1969), where Jordan used virtual motion into the depth of the screen and color conflict for the first time. The phantasmagoria which characterizes his remarkable vision, is nevertheless quite consistent for all of his collage animation. His notes on these two films are:

Hamfat Asar: "This is a complicated series of animated scenes involving all my thoughts on life, light -- and especially the realms of death and the underworld, but not death in a negative sense. ASAR is an ancient name of OSIRIS, the Egyptian god of the dead, through whom the deceased hoped to attain the light of eternal life. Hamfat is used by certain tribes to anoint and protect the dead from the powers of darkness."

Our Lady of the Sphere: "Our Lady of the Sphere is an animated allegory of the worlds of life and death. Some of the thematic material is based loosely on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. However, there are no literal symbolic references in the film. True to Surrealist tradition, the objects and characters in the film do not refer to anything other than themselves; they operate in a new dimension under new laws that have meaning only inside this film. The film-maker has a private story which he sees in the film, but it is not intended that the viewer see this same story, but that the film stimulate a personal story inside the viewer, which is of the viewer's own construction."

In Hamfat Asar, the film-maker generates tensions similar to that of the discontinuous horizon in the earlier film by stretching a tightrope across his seascape. A figure on stilts crosses it repeatedly while creatures and objects float by in the background, manifest themselves, and obscure the foreground or cross and perch upon the tightrope. In the course of his crossings, he will

(continued)

become a bird, a train, a floating balloon.

Once, the entire picture bursts into actual flames. Later a star explodes, first whitening, then blackening out the whole image. When the landscape reappears, the tightrope is gone, but the man on stilts starts to cross, successfully, as if it were there. He does not complete the passage until, at the end of the film, a cloud floats by on which he can stand.

The Centennial Exposition and Our Lady of the Sphere use with increasing complexity numerous backdrops which are connected by the continuous movement of a foreground figure from one to the next, although that figure tends to be undergoing its own continual metamorphosis. In Our Lady of the Sphere, several solid screen colors and occasionally split-screen two-color moments have a structural function in the complex animation. He alternates zooming motion, accenting first movements on the left side of the image, then on the right, and he uses cubist superimpositions of a single figure out of phase with itself to represent new perspectives of space and depth in animation. He also uses montage to parallel interior scenes with those taking place on a moonscape. At its most complex, in a scene of circus acrobats turning into flashing stars, he employs hand-held backdrops and three different colors in superimposition with counterpointed movements on the different levels. In the middle of the film he shows a horse staring at an easel which becomes a film within a film, flickering and breaking the limits of its frame as had happened in Patricia. The elaborate techniques of Our Lady of the Sphere permit Jordan to break through the conventions of continuity he had created and then thoroughly explored in his earlier collage films. Yet he had to sacrifice the crucial tension of the slow and delicately elaborated imagery to gain the complex dynamics of the later film.

Orb (1972) opens with a passage of French verse, which I do not recognize, which roughly translated, says: "When I turn my eyes away from this empty future, I see within myself the whole of the great past." Here is the film-maker's note:

Orb: "In this film I tried to execute a totally preconceived vision based on the permutations of the disk, call it sun or symbol of eternity. Special animation stand matting techniques were invented for this film that have never been used in animated films before. They were necessary to convert black and white materials into patterns of intense coloration not possible with generation or optical printing.

I was interested in the sense of progression, not so much through an imaginary landscape as through various visual modulations, and a sense of day, night, and eternal space without time. And I was concerned with love and adventure. The circular symbol is both the fixed point of reference -- the perpetual traveler -- and the changeable or transmutable possibility inherent in creation. It is the definable quality of space, which can itself pass through other spaces.

If these concerns seem obscure, I suppose it may be assumed that in some past life I must have been an alchemist, though I do not pursue that study now, except through the visual magic of film, especially animation combined with other camera possibilities. I do attempt to convert humble materials into golden essences, a basically unexplainable spiritual pursuit.

Also, I like to amaze my friends, and that, most probably is the best explanation of why... I do the films, that is."

The fundamental trope of this wonderful film is the transformation of the sun into a watch and a balloon. This is a foil for the eventual apotheosis of a statuary couple who wander through the shifting land, sea, and sky scapes of the film like the lovers of A Dream of Lovers.

(continued)

The true pleasure of the film comes from the varied and ingenious schemes Jordan has for changing backgrounds. The viewer, like the boy with the telescope in the film, can marvel at the flight into the screen through corridors of watches and saturns, or follow the freely floating balloon across impossible spaces. Perhaps ultimately the viewer of this film is like the fish in it. First we see a sleeping leopard, then a fish swimming under water. Like the fish we are startled and seized when the claw of the spotted cat sweeps through the water, suddenly linking these apparently different spaces.

JORDAN FILMOGRAPHY

ONE ROMANTIC VENTURE OF EDWARD (1952-64)
 THE CHILD'S HAND (1953-54)
 MORNINGAME (1953-54)
 MAN IS IN PAIN (1954)
 TRUMPET (1954-56)
 UNDERTOW (1954-56)
 3 (1954-56)
 VISIONS OF A CITY (1956)
 WATERLIGHT (1957)
 TRIPTYCH IN FOUR PARTS (1958)
 THE STUDIO: A FABLE (1959-60, unfinished)
 FINDS OF THE FORTNIGHT (1959-60)
 THE SOCCER GAME (1959-60)
 MINERVA LOOKS OUT INTO THE ZODIAC (1959-60)
 HYMN IN PRAISE OF THE SUN (1960)
 THE SOCCER GAME: THE FORTY AND ONE NIGHT'S, or JESS'S
 DIDACTIC NICKELODEON, also called HEAVY WATER (1960-61)
 PORTRAIT OF SHARON (1960)
 THE HERB MOON (1960)
 THE SEASON'S CHANGES: TO CONTEMPLATE (1960)
 FOUR VERTICAL PORTRAITS (1960-61, unfinished)
 THE MOVIE CRITIC (1961, unfinished)
 THE MONKEY (1961, unfinished)
 CIRCUS SAVAGE (1961, unfinished)
 DUO CONCERTANTES (1961-64)
 ENID'S IDYLL (1962)
 SHOMIO (1963-64)
 PINK SWINE (1963-64)
 THE DREAM MERCHANT (1963-64)
 RODIA-ESTUDIANTINA (1963-64)
 BIG SUR: THE LADIES (1963-64)
 JOHNNIE (1963-64)
 JEWEL FACE (1963-64)
 HAMFAT ASAR (1965)
 CORNELL 1965 (1965)
 THE OLD HOUSE PASSING (1965-66)
 THREE MOVING FRESCO FILMS (1960-68)
 (ENID'S IDYLL, PORTRAIT OF SHARON, HYMN IN PRAISE OF
 THE SUN)
 GYMNOPEDIES (1966)
 HILDUR AND THE MAGICIAN (1969)
 LIVING IS DYING (1970)
 SACRED ART OF TIBET (1970)
 ONCE UPON A TIME (1972)
 ORB (1972)
 PLAINSONG (1972-73)
 FIREWEED (1973)
 THE APPARITION (1973)
 RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER (1977)