



THE CARNEGIE  
MUSEUM OF ART

VISITING ARTIST: LARRY JORDAN  
DEPARTMENT OF FILM & VIDEO  
MARCH 3, 1990

**SOPHIE'S PLACE** (1986) USA, 90 minutes.  
Directed by Larry Jordan.

Larry Jordan has been making independent films for more than 30 years. Quietly, without fanfare or much public notice, often working with small crews or completely alone, he has made dozens of spectacularly beautiful films. His great theme is the celebration of the power of the human imagination; his films are full of enchanted spaces, film worlds set apart from the banality of daily living—privileged arenas in which the imagination can run free.

Jordan uses cinematography to give his live-action films a shadowy mysteriousness. That same quality is even better realized in his animated films, for which he is probably best known. A long string of these extraordinary animated films has now culminated in the new, feature-length *Sophie's Place*.

*Sophie's Place*, in the filmmaker's words, "evolved from and revolves around the mosque (both interior and exterior) of Saint Sophia in Constantinople." Static engravings of Saint Sophia, of castles, of trees and flowers, serve as settings for a spectacular variety of foreground objects that dance across the frame. Objects and figures change shape, transforming themselves via rapid montage. A huge eye and eyebrow rotate on a large bald head. Photographs of human and animal figures cavort about with a jagged rhythm.

It is a commonplace of film history that almost from its invention, cinema has tended to portray either magic or reality. Jordan has acknowledged both trends in *Sophie's Place*. His jaggedly moving figures are hand-colored animations based on Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of animal and human locomotion. But his film's magic is not merely historical reference.

One thing that is clear from several viewings of the film is that there is no readily discernible "program" or single coded set of meanings for all of Jordan's objects and symbols. Indeed, a specific decoding would be false to the filmmaker's intent. Jordan is not trying to create a secret, hieratic world that the ordinary person cannot enter. Rather, he is using his images and symbols to evoke a variety of thoughts and emotions. Thus, there are few moments of stability in the film: the objects and backgrounds are forever changing, and there is not even a sense of a single controlling direction in Jordan's progressions. In fact, Jordan placed no time

limits on himself. He had no predetermined plan and did very little editing after the fact. Still, the result is expansive, inclusive, and open.

Behind the continual transformations is a pattern of apparent stability that becomes change, which settles into stability that we know will be only momentary. Man, woman, plant, animal, church, castle are all envisioned as being in some way interchangeable. The film's spectacular variety of objects, backgrounds, movements, colors, and transformations actually leads the viewer, in one sense, to a vast unity. In this regard, the history of Saint Sophia may be relevant, since Jordan cites it as a major inspiration for his film. The building has undergone major transformations over the centuries. First built as a Christian church in the sixth century, it was damaged repeatedly by earthquakes and rebuilt several times, always with changes. In 1453, it became a mosque. Islam, of course, seeks to incorporate aspects of Judaism and Christianity. Today, Saint Sophia serves as an ecumenical museum open to all.

*Sophie's Place* is not, however, a quest for the One behind the many. Rather, its variety of images is like a series of masks that are shadows, spectacles set against an unknowable darkness. We know that no object, no progression, no movement, is stable or absolute. Jordan's compositions oscillate between an illusion of depth and the flatness of a photograph. The perspectives of the backgrounds, and the shapes and movements of the objects, often suggest deep space; at the same time, a flat, pictorial quality reminds us that all is illusory. The spiderweb background serves as a metaphor for the film's whole world; the colors of each image are like illusions spun over an underlying darkness. In Jordan's world, there are no fixed principles or dogmatic truths. History, and past culture, are not absolute, but rather traditions that are ever changing and that can be reinterpreted and reinvented in anyone's imagination. The history of civilization becomes a shadow play for the eye, a perpetual dance in the mind.

—Fred Camper, *Chicago Reader*, 12/18/87.

The film and video programs of The Carnegie Museum of Art are supported by: National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Howard Heinz Endowment and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.