

Larry Jordan headlines animation show at Cinematheque

by Karl Cohen

The San Francisco Cinematheque is presenting this month "Ink, Pixel, Cutouts, Spray," a wonderful collection of rarely seen independent animation. The program features the premiere of Larry Jordan's *The Visible Compendium*, along with seven other shorts that display a wide variety of approaches to animation as a fine art form.

Curated by Eric Theise, the program highlights artists who approach animation as a personal art. They are not interested in trends or making humorous or violent cartoons for the commercial market. It isn't likely you will ever see their work on televi-



Doug Haynes' *Common Loss* (1979).

sion or at commercial movie houses.

Larry Jordan is a prime example of the independent animator. He began working in animation in 1960 after making live-action shorts in the '50s. Jordan assembles wonderful collages of cutout and hand-painted images that come to life on the screen. Most of his work uses images taken from old engravings and other graphics, which are then manipulated under the camera so they appear to move when the film is projected. His art owes more to the collages of the surrealist Max Ernst than to the work of Hollywood cartoon

directors.

Jordan's latest film, *The Visible Compendium*, took two years to make and is his most technically refined work. It is a real joy to watch the film unfold. He takes us on a trip to idyllic lands where plants smile, an image of a tiger appears in the sun and nude women wander about comfortably. Transportation in this world is sometimes provided by hot-air balloons with sails or flapping wings. The film is a magical journey through a world rich in enigmatic images.

There is plenty of humor in Jordan's work. It stems not from gags but from unusual juxtapositions of sound effects and visuals. His soundtrack includes both unfamiliar and common noises, electronic music, circus calliopes and other sounds.

Jordan, who works on an animation stand he built in his studio in Petaluma, uses neither scripts nor storyboards. He creates his soundtrack first and then animates to it. He spends months gathering and hand coloring his images, and then additional time sorting them before deciding which image will work best with each background.

In a recent interview Jordan said, "I prefer the viewer to discover meanings and to interact with the images and incidents, bringing [his or her] own predispositions into play, forming personal stories and personal meanings from the symbols and signs presented." *The Visible Compendium* is "a catalog of visible possible experiences, some at normal time, some speeded up or slowed



This image from Larry Jordan's *Sophie's Place* (1986) is representative of his whimsical style.

down, some continuous, others broken up. I wanted to construct enigmas for the viewer to puzzle over and delight in. [The film] attempts to engage the mind, and particularly what is *unknown* in the mind, rather than what has been seen and known a thousand times over."

Larry Jordan teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute and Sonoma State University. His work has been shown internationally at major film festivals, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and other venues.

The Visible Compendium will be shown with several other outstanding works. The oldest (1912) is a Russian film by Ladislav and Irene Starevitch, *Revenge of the Kinetograph Operator*. Ladislav Starevitch was an entomologist before experimenting with animation. His first film uses real bugs manipulated a frame at a time in front of the camera to make them appear to move. The film is a delightful tale about a married beetle who has an affair. This gem is full of risqué behavior.

Another important film in the program is *Satiemania* (1978) by Zdenko Gasparovic of Zagreb, Yugoslavia. It is a rich variety of masterfully drawn images set to the music of Erik Satie. Short piano selections set moods

ranging from humorous to violent, pastoral to erotic. Many animators rank it as one of the all-time great independent works.

The only computer work in the program is Larry Cuba's *3/78* (1978). It was made when access to computers was difficult. Cuba, who lives in Santa Cruz, used a \$100,000 PDP 11/45 computer and a \$50,000 Vector General display system. His pioneering work features dots of light dancing to the soundtrack. The images form striking patterns that suggest perspective and depth.

John Whitney's *Yantra* is related visually to *3/78*, but was done mechanically using cutout templates that rotate over other templates to create moving dots of colored light. It is a personal yogic meditation of breathtakingly beautiful mandala forms made over a 10-year period from 1950 to 1960. (Shortly after Whitney completed it his brother James introduced him to computer technology. Together they produced the classic *Lapis*, which consists of images of far greater complexity that were created in a much briefer period of time.)

Doug Haynes' *Common Loss* (1979) is the only piece in the show that has been seen several times in the Bay Area. He was a student of Jordan's at the San Francisco Art Institute in the '70s, and also works in cutout animation. He taught at the Art Institute of Chicago, and now teaches at San Francisco City College and Film Arts Foundation.

Rose Bond, creator of *Cerridwen's Gift* (1986), works with cameraless animation. Her images are painted directly onto clear 35mm film. In this film, Cerridwen plans to give a gift to her son, but through a twist of fate the wrong person receives the gift. Fiona Ritchie did the narration, and Michael O'Domhnaill, a Windham Hill recording artist, provided the music.

The final work, *T.Z.* by Robert Breer (1979), is a playful fantasy set in his apartment. Objects come to life, fly about and sometimes metamorphose into other things. An apple becomes a telephone which then becomes Felix the Cat. Breer combines line drawing with real objects, photos and other materials in this entertaining work.

"Ink, Pixel, Cutouts, Spray" will be screened Sunday, March 24 at 8 p.m. at the San Francisco Art Institute (800 Chestnut St.). If you don't like to walk up hills, arrive early for a parking space in front of the school. ■