



Lawrence Jordan *Chateau/Poyet* 2004
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JOSEPH CORNELL and LAWRENCE JORDAN TATE MODERN, STARR AUDITORIUM 29 MAY 2005, 15.00

Presented in collaboration with Compton Verney and LUX

Fantastic landscapes of the mind is what makes the unique work of San Francisco animator Larry Jordan so compelling. With a taste for nostalgic romanticism for intricate turn-of-the-century illustrations, Jordan creates a magical universe of work using old steel engravings and collectable memorabilia. His 50-year pursuit into the subconscious mind gives him a place in the annals of cinema as a prolific animator on a voyage into the surreal psychology of the inner self.

Born in Denver, Colorado, in 1934, Jordan was introduced to filmmaking by Stan Brakhage, one of the pioneers of American experimental film. As classmates, they began to investigate the possibilities of filmed 'psychodrama,' a form of free-association using dream imagery. One of Jordan's earliest films, *One Romantic Adventure of Edward* (1952) uses erotic visual references assembled in the style of the then in-vogue classic school of 'Russian montage.' Brakhage made his acting debut in this film and both experimented with psycho-adventures throughout the 1950s, as did other early experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren.

Jordan attended Harvard University from 1951-53, where he became attracted to the work of surrealist painter Max Ernst. He also recalls, due to his active involvement with the university's film society, being influenced by the work of another surrealist, Jean Cocteau, and in particular *Blood of a Poet*. But it was through his reading of Ernst's collage novels, *Women Without a Head/Women with 100 Heads* and *A Week of Happiness*, that inspired him to collect engravings, then re-filming them into what became his first collage experiments. At the time, experimental filmmakers often looked to the world of art and poetry in their quest to develop a new filmic language using historical references.

In the 1950s, Jordan was spending time with Stan Brakhage on New York's Lower East Side/The Bowery, where he had the chance to meet American collagist and surrealist Joseph Cornell. Between 1955-65, Jordan studied and collaborated with Cornell, who has remained a kind of spiritual mentor for his work. Cornell, born in Nyack, New York in 1903, studied romance languages at Phillips Academy before starting his own obsessive career collecting visual fragments from literature, dance, art and film publications to create masterpieces of collage, culminating in his dimensional boxes. Cornell, also interested in the work of Max Ernst and the surrealists, also made a trilogy of surrealist films: *Cotillion*, *Midnight Party* and *Children's Party*. Jordan has fond memories of Cornell as a cultural eccentric, passionate about poetic engagement within the context of his 'monologues.'

—Jackie Leger

Cornell, 1965

Lawrence Jordan, 1965, 16mm, 7 minutes

Jordan's film study of Cornell's box works in progress. There are glimpses of the artist's work space in the famous bungalow house on Utopia Parkway, as well as a few moments of Cornell himself, until recently thought to be the only footage of him ever taken. Near the end of the film he stands at the door to his garage, arms folded, staring ahead, preoccupied, seemingly in another world.

The Midnight Party

Joseph Cornell, 1940s, 16mm, silent, 4 minutes

In *The Midnight Party*, we move from a ballerina spinning by her teeth in midair to a breathtaking backwards shot of birds in the air, shot from just below and in slow motion; to a tightrope dancer doing crazy walks

(accompanied by a photographic trick which makes her look like a small doll); to a shot of an observatory window opening onto the night sky. A little girl sleeps in bed with her doll and Cornell cuts to a constellation. Next is a striking sequence with a young girl as Lady Godiva, riding on a horse with long tresses of hair covering her naked body. In the final sequence, an angry Thor sends lightning bolts to the earth, causing mayhem. (Among other things, *The Midnight Party* stands as a tribute to Cornell's talent for collecting astounding footage from the early years of cinema.) The associations are there for the viewer to make and have much in common with his early collage works (his box work was just in its beginning stages at this point).

Almost exactly in the middle of the film, a title 'The End' appears for a split second, seen backwards, suggesting that the film could also be seen backwards from the end. (Reflections and reverse images are hallmarks of Cornell's film work.)

Carousel

Joseph Cornell, 1940s, 16mm, 5 ½ minutes

Carousel seems for the most part a straightforward and entertaining film about animals in the zoo. We progress from elephants and monkeys in swinging motions to a group of water scenes to feeding time and back to the water. (There is a dark moment here nonetheless. We see a monkey throw another in the water, and later a group of penguins jump into the water. After both shots, Cornell cuts to a crocodile entering the water, and though it couldn't be the same place or time, one instantly fears for the safety of the smaller animals.) A lovely progression of giraffes from left to right and then egret from right to left closes the film.

Jack's Dream

Joseph Cornell, 1940s, 16mm, 4 minutes

Jack's Dream is a brief nightmare, suffered by a puppet dog, in which a dragon threatens to wreak havoc on a domestic scene. A sinking ship provides one of the most surprising and lyrical moments in all of Cornell's found footage work. The dream logic of the film, which mysteriously connects a battle at sea with Jack's pursuit of the dragon, foregrounds Cornell's affinity with Surrealism.

A Legend for Fountains

Joseph Cornell, 1957, 16mm, 17 minutes, tape sound

'Other flaneur fantasies, like *Angel and A Legend for Fountains* (both 1957), were shot for Cornell by Rudy Burkhardt. Late in life Cornell completed more found-footage films with editor Larry Jordan, and after his death in 1972 some earlier cinematic cut-ups were discovered that some scholars now consider near finished. One of his so-called 'goofy newsreels' combines shots of a Gimbel's department store's 'children's jury' with forests, biplane air shows, Native American dancing, and an underwater marriage. Fittingly for a work by the shy Cornell, who travelled only through his imagination, it concludes with the seal of the Department of the Interior.'

Ein Traum der Liebenden

Lawrence Jordan, USA, 1964, 16mm, 7 minutes

White silhouette figures of man and beast perform airy feats against shifting colour backgrounds. 'I wished to show new incidents in the lives of the Greek gods, not included in the mythology passed down to us. I had read all the myths and wanted there to be more.'

Chateau Poyet

Lawrence Jordan, 2004, 16mm, 6 minutes

The scene is set in front of a French chateau. The camera chases improbable incidents across the screen. Many are constructed out of one of Jordan's favourite engravings illustrators: Poyet. Duels occur on a tight rope. Blow guns spear exploding spheres. The timing of the animation is exquisite, existing in an atmosphere balanced between frenzy and delight.

Visions of a City

Lawrence Jordan, 1957-1978, 16mm, 8 minutes

The protagonist, poet Michael McClure, emerges from the all-reflection imagery of glass shop and car windows, bottles, mirrors, etc. in scenes which are also accurate portraits of both McClure and the city of San Francisco in 1957. At the same time it is a lyric and mystical film, building to a crescendo of rhythmically intercut shots of McClure's face, seemingly trapped on the glazed surface of the city. Music by William Moraldo. I don't think of this as an 'early film' anymore, since it never came together until '78. Now it's tight.'

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