A titanic of personal film, Lawrence Jordan went to high school with Braugh, formed Canyon Cinema with Baillie, and created masterful 16mm films – even his own genre.

by Donphan Blair

Lawrence Jordan creates handcrafted cinema, notably his dreamy animated pieces made from collages of old engravings. They suggest what a poet might have made had Edmond de Goncourt invented film in the Romantic era. Take his 1975 short "Spectre Mystagogique" – How's that for a Romantic tale? But Jordan's films are hardly space-y, run, Wish film as an arye piece, technically as well as aesthetically. To provide a cliché feel, Jordan animates it at frame per move, at opposed to two or three, despite the doubled work load.

He has also made live action films, narrative features, personal documentaries, and pieces of no discernable genre save that of "Jordan." When I visited him recently – he looks great at 76 – he said "What saves me is that I have a lot of different things. A lot filmmakers get stuck on the type of films they make and [think] everything else is crap. I didn't get into that." Another thing that saves him. In addition to being utterly artistic and technically adept, he's mellow and open-hearted. Hence, he was a great crony, my favorite film teacher.

In 1974, I was an over-ambitious San Francisco Art Institute student trying to shoot a feature called "Sammy Delirium." Lawrence would calmly and deliberately dissect my scenes, neither adding a fear of the immensity of the project, nor offering ill-advised advice.

"Personal film" is his preferred term for what is variously labeled avant-garde, underground, alternative, poetic, or experimental.

Unfortunately, no term quite hits the art from the head, often prompting Jordan to explain, "I was an art student who worked with canvas, or The only reason [my work] has 'big films' is the stuff that runs through the projector." Jordan had his high school in Denver, which he attended with another personal film master, Stan Brakhage, although they only watched films and didn't make any together until after graduation. Since moving to the Bay Area in 1955, Jordan has immersed himself in the region's arts, poetry and mystical inner workings, as well as film scene, helping found the Canyon Cinema Collective, among other things. He has created over 40 personal films and "poetic documentaries," as he likes to call them, and three dramatic features, although he is now known for his animated collages.

In 1970, he received a Guggenheim Award to make "The Sacred Art of Tibet," a personal doc, and became chair of the Art Institute's film department. A few years later, Cansus invited him, along with other West Coast film artists, who has shown and lectured throughout North America and Europe. Indeed, the Toronto International Film Festival past called: they want to show "Cinematic Architecture and Beyond Enchantment," his two most recent films – not because he passed the submission review but because the programmers wanted him.

I visited Lawrence in his lovely Penetaha home, which faces out on a field is deer wanderer by a lake). It is built on a lush garden where he has a small but amusingly well-outfitted and complete film and fine art studio. We started by reminiscing about being teacher and student.

CineSource: I thought the Art Institute was beautiful, and it was especially beautiful in the 70s.

Lawrence Jordan: The 70s was the high point. Then the graduate program ended. A lot of those people are still around. Some of my students are teaching me digital now. Some are in charge of companies: David Weintraub at Video Arts, John Carle at Monocle. The 70s was the height of not only the Art Institute, but of San Francisco [art] filmmaking. That was when James Braugh and many people were making poetic films –


Then Ernst Gehe came over. My hirings at the Art Institute were Guvno Nelson and George Schatz.

And Walter Murch.

Yes, but I didn't meet him. I hired him over the phone for a semester when I was in San Salvador. James Braugh was doing a few classes before I started, but wasn't in the film department.

We started getting more active and he came in. We had a pretty strong group at that time, as you remember.

Yes, and it was also strong with students. It was the two together, really.

The students really wanted to make film. Of course, everybody at that time wanted to make film.

There was a diversity of opinion. In the 80s, [SFAM] became very politicized with Marxism and Structuralism. You know, the culture war. Once, it was me and James Braugh not against the class. They were decrying "rich art," saying that some films we saw were invalid, of the "people."

Okay, let's say on that one. Art is elitist because all this political stuff is not high art. It's propaganda. So what you have is people making art for the art. It's elitist. Let's don't avoid it. It is. When Adam Sinop a historian of avant-garde cinema came to lecture at the Art Institute, someone said, "These films are very self-indulgent. This is the definition of American avant-garde film. Indulgence in self, let's don't avoid it. It's people exploring themselves. That's what my work is about. My interface with the inner world is animation – that's my inner world. My interface with the outer world is my personal poetic documentary, as I call it. I taught a class called "Personal Poetic Documentaries. It goes back quite a ways: New York in the '35, the work of Helen Levit [the photographer] on the street. It's a tradition where the artist goes out with a camera and interfaces with the real world. Or the camera turns inward and

you're exploiting your unconscious. So yes, the films are self-indulgent because they indulge in the self.

When Braugh and I were arguing against the Marxism – the irony was the Soviets invented a lot of the avant-garde techniques.

Oh yea, the Soviet cinema is so rich.

Did you run into the Marxists in the 80s?

I never did. Was that coming from the students?

Yeah. In the 80s, it was all very congenial, there was a Moroccan filmmaker, Simonet Eldery, a guy making a noir film, another we helped shoot 35mm frame per second – he was aiming down explosions. But then I went to South America for two years, and, when I came back, it was odd, it had become very cliquish. At first, I thought, These students, I don't know, I just don't like them. But then I read somewhere that art students are intensely neurotic because they aren't even artists – they're just art students looking for their identity.

So I forgive them. I work around 'til 91 and enjoyed the hell out of it, even with the students.

I had a different experience. The conflict that I ran into at the Art Institute was in the faculty. Not in the 80s – there was no conflict then – but later. I don't know if it was the type of classes I was doing or whether I was intimidating or something. I taught for 30 years at the Art Institute. I taught some genius who never gave me any trouble. It was an ideal job. You could never ask for anything better.

I was one, I suppose, and enjoyed it immensely.

I always felt that when we got the class going, it was just about film – we didn't get into theory or criticism. We just looked at film and made film and enjoyed it in the class, everything ran smoothly. The school had its problems, but always in the faculty.

Do you want to define that? Not to institutionalize. Just the philosophical fundamentals.

No, I'm not going to get into that because that is over.

The help among Canyon Cinema, right? I just spoke with the Canyon Cinema director Dominic Angervigne [see article p4]. It was you, Bruce Baillie, and Robert Nelson.

Bruce started the showing part in Canyon [at a bar in the Oakland Uptown]. Robert Nelson, Van Metre, and I started the co-op [aspects] because we needed a place to distribute our films.

So you were the guys running it, shipping films?

We wanted to get out of sending films from home. We wanted to have somebody to send them out to first, it was in somebody's house. Then, I remember Robert Nelson and I building walls in the basement of the screenshot Church to Edith Kramer could have an office. Edith ran Canyon, most of her year and went on to the Museum of Modern Art and finally ran FPA [Pacific Film Archive].

We started the co-op, modeled on the New York film-makers. Co-op Bay Canyon became a much better co-op, eventually. Dominic and his partner decided at some point that they would just run a business-like, and they did. They really got customers and made it viable. I still talk to Dominic about once a week. Where did you join that community? And where did you come from?

I grew up in Denver. Stan Braugh [one of the best know avant-garde filmmakers] and I went to high school together. Both of us came to San Francisco in the 50s. I spent one summer in New York, but then came back. From 1954 on, I have been in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those were pretty intense days: the early '60s through the '70s. There was a lot of freedom and new things getting started. In the '50s, it was even more so. The first rock '70s revolution were the Joseph McCarthy [Red Scare Senate Committee] hearings. We were influenced by the radio listening to that. And from that time on, we wanted to break away from that kind of society. So McCarthy started the rebellion inadvertently...

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You can edit so easily in digital. But film shows you down and that’s an advantage... [Steven Spielberg] said, fairly recently, that he cuts film, not digital, because film gives him time to think between cuts. That’s going so work to the advantage of young filmmakers. Digital cameras are going to - we don’t want to be judgmental here - stuff that’s made quickly.

Ashley [James, Oakland shoemaker and KTOP director, see article p8] says he runs into people shooting digital who know nothing about lighting, nothing about composition. They think all you do is press a button. But Ashley, when he comes here to shoot, will spend two hours just getting the lighting set-up. [James was shooting ‘Moments of Illumination’, a movie about Jordan, directed by his wife, Kathryn Golden, both of students at the Art Institute in the 1970s.]

Of course, Ashley’s taken longer and that gives Kathryn a lot more material to work with when she edits.

That’s the advantage of digital: You get a lot more material and you can get to it quickly. With some filmmakers - not all - that will again make things too easy. Everything will look kind of the same. That’s what happens with commercial film. That’s why the number of bad films in commercial film is astronomical.

So you never tried making a photo digitally? I shot a little for Joanna [Jordan’s girlfriend] some years ago on videotape, but it just doesn’t turn me on. The thing is: with a film camera, you have a very limited amount of film in the camera. And that film is very expensive. So what it does for me is it, it refreshes my brain up a different level. I am really working at my highest possible level when I shoot film. This is the real thing: it’s very expensive, I don’t have much of it. So I’m gonna get a really good image or I’m not gonna turn the camera on. That slows you down.

And then the editing, I love handling film. I like pushing buttons on sound, but not for having images pop up. I like having pieces of material. It’s like making collage. I actually like gluing one piece of film to another. I like splitting one piece of film to another and seeing what it looks like. Making one piece at a time. Do you edit on a filmboard? I’ve got a good - I’m really good - KEM. I think with digital you have a whole lot of material. It’s like a sculptor with a huge block of stone. And you chip away at it and take away what you don’t want. But with film, at least with me, it’s like building up one piece of clay on another piece of clay: it’s putting things together rather than chipping away.

Have you seen your four-disc DVD album? No, I’ve heard about it though. It was beautifully... Lawrence Jordan

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Yeah. You made films in high school with Brakhage?
No, we did some after high school, at his house in Denver, and a couple times. One was called ‘Unglued Windows’. I started making films in college - that was 1952 - at Harvard. There were no classes, only a film club. The seniors taught the freshmen. That’s quite a club filmmaking has been going on for a long time.

In the late ’50s, Bruce Conner and I started a film society because there was nothing doing in San Francisco. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know what was going on in the Bay Area. Bruce Conner and I started a film society because there was nothing doing in San Francisco. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know what was going on in the Bay Area. Conner and I got into a church on Washington Street and started a thing called Camera Obscura. After that, I built a theater on Kearny, just off Broadway, called The Movie, to show experimental films. Before it was opened, I told my parents to turn it into a theater. I could see that I could not make films and run a theater at the same time.

What sort of films were they showing? ‘Andelusian Dog’, ‘Maya Deren’?
Those sorts of things. There was a couple named Rainsey, who ran it as a combination of film society and restaurant. Kenneth Anger lived above the theater. There were two apartments. When I was working there, I lived in one. Eventually he became a porn film theater; I think it is still.

Kenneth Anger, he was local?
No, mostly from Los Angeles. Well, me moved around, I was in France, in Europe, a lot. What was the groundbreaking film that put underground film on the map? Was it [anger’s] ‘Scopophilia’?
Yes, that really made the rounds. There were a lot of blockbusters. Later, ‘Wavelength’, by [Michael Snow]; Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren were the films that I saw and I looked into in high school and got excited about film. How did you find and get these films?
There was something called ‘Cine 16 run by Anvil Vogel in New York. [The American-Jewish refugees who founded the New York Film Festival]. We were also renting films like, ‘Intolerance’ and ‘Birth of a Nation’ from the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) rental library.

What films got you really excited around that time?
I especially liked Anger’s ‘Ezana D’Artifice’ (1953), filmed at Trevi Fountain in Italy, where all the décor is very Baroque. That was a very successful combination of film and music. That influenced me a lot. But it wasn’t until I moved to Marin County that I had an epiphany one day. I was very taken with the collage novels of Max Ernst. At that time, they were not on the market - you couldn’t buy them. So I sent him his copies - I had two. I was one of the very few people who asked for his novel ‘Dro Concretas’ (1964). There was a whole chain of experimental festivals at that time. They just sprang up and disappeared. That was the same. Yeah. ‘[Dro Concretas]’ was winning prizes in those festivals even before it had a sound-track. Then I was improvising with the radio for sound while I was showing the film in a café in San Francisco, and at this time. It played with the film from beginning to end. I called the station, found out what it was and that became the soundtrack. I found out later that Kenneth Anger had done some of that. You pluck it out of the air. That stuck with me all these years. The sound for films just comes when it’s time. Sometimes, you don’t even know when it comes from.

Interesting. Now that was your first film college film?
Are there a couple of other sides that you feel are strong pieces? I know you also did narrations.
Yeah, but the narrative films came later, in the mid-’70s. I did one that I think is pretty good. It’s called ‘The Old House Painting’. I think I saw that one.

You’re sure you did. I think that was the most successful. I did a long fairy-tale film called ‘Hildegard and The Magician’, and then kind of a surrealist film called ‘The Hypnosis’. It was shot in color, when we were first getting color negative in 16mm. Those don’t show very much. The animation is what everyone wants to see.

Have you ever shot a film in digital?
No, just family films for fun. Film always has one advantage. You down it, you can’t make it in such a little way as you can with digital equipment. Making digital films is not cheap. It costs nothing to actually shoot, but the equipment to make a good digital film costs a fortune. So you’ve either got to buy expensive stuff or you’ve got to pay expensive rental in postproduction.

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Film Camp Flashbacks, Circa 1974

On location in Layowalla, N. California, for Jordan's 16mm feature "The Apothecary," which he wrote, directed, produced, and shot. (Top, left-right) Janet Cassella (taught sound at Art Institute), Jordan's daughter Lorna Star (now lives on a ranch in Idaho), Robert Krieg (acor), Steven (the bell), Diane Levine (went to LA) and became an extremely high-powered and wealthy television producer, a man we couldn't identify (I cry). Second row) Jordan, Paula Holliday (acor who narrated two of Jordan's films), Larry Husston (of the bulky mustache, also SPAD student), and Paul, with the craft service chief (of whose name is forgotten but whose food is certainly - delicious). The film was made on the good stuff, except the long narratives. Look how nicely done it is. It's by Facem Mobile Media, which has distributed my work for years. Jordan also directed it with Carri on a project that never found its audience, which doesn't mean one doesn't. I did a two-hour film while Joanna and I traveled. This is part of the H.D. reel, with a long poem by the poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, a friend of Ezra Pound, and director of Duncan). The film is about a woman rambling by herself and coming to terms with aging. Joanna plays the central role. So it's a travelogue and (evokes) a poetic theme.

Okay, any films I like are too. Our Lady of the Sphere; 1970, that rants, "Oh, It's 1973," Once Upon A Time! (1974), Moonlight Sonata (1975), Masquerade (1981). I then did a long animation, a rhythm of the Ancient Mariner! (1977, 45 min) Jordan uses a 24 animation frames move per second, rather than 12 or 8. Says, "It gives a different feel." Aha with out-out-out... Yeah. Doesn't illustrate. And then I did a feature animation called Sophie's Place (1986), with 86 minutes. Visible Compendium (1991), and Blue Skies Beyond the Looking Glass (2006). Then one disc of the five films. There was also The Sacred Art of Film (1972). A documentary... Yeah. And I did a documentary on the work of Joseph Cornell. I was his assistant in 1965 back to Flashing. New York. I learned box making, which Jordan continues to do. His gallery work, ironically, is more lucrative than his films.

Was that the period you were in New York? No, I went back especially for that. "Visions of a City" was shown a lot, which is a film I made in the 50's with Joanna's ex-husband, Michael McClure, the poet.

Would that be your oldest film that you saw?

Well, it's one of the earliest films on here. "Waterlily" on the album and it's the oeuvre. That was 1937, "Visions of the City" started in 1957, and then I re-edited it in 1979. Reviving a piece, kind of a novelty, no? There were a number of things I worked over after I came back from Europe the first time. I just had the energy to finish things that were on the shelf. I was never able to cut the footage I shot of Cornell in 1965 until that 75 period. So go on at it! I know I'd be mixed up. "Winter Light" is a film I like very much. I made that in 1983. Three years after I moved here for the first time, I just had the energy to finish things that were on the shelf. I was never able to cut the footage I shot of Cornell in 1965 until that 75 period. So go on at it

The period of film movements influenced a lot. A lot of stuff went into TV and also into the films. The films used to fill up shelf. and those guys would make long sequences of films that were in like art films. What do you think is the overall purpose of alternative film? Since Hollywood is the center of commercial film, it would be almost impossible to make an art film center anything up. Probably. Film is a little esoteric. Probably

The personal film movements influenced a lot. A lot of stuff went into TV and also into the films. The films used to fill up shelf. and those guys would make long sequences of films that were in like art films. What do you think is the overall purpose of alternative film? Since Hollywood is the center of commercial film, it would be almost impossible to make an art film center anything up. Probably. Film is a little esoteric. Probably the personal film and getting into topical film and issue film and sociological film and political film.

As by Michael Moore?

Yes, and ethnic film. But for the person who is making film in the same way that the painter is painting on canvas. In a purely personal way, that's a difference.

I've always been good with good audiences. The people who go up to seem to know what they're there for. We have a pretty good time. The only time I ran into an ideological shoot-up was in the '70's in New York at the Millenium Film Work Shop, East 4th St. I was showing The Sacred Art of Film and half the audience thought it was a wonderful film. The other half thought it was horrible. A Westerstan was saying something about those (narrative) images. I didn't say much. The audience argued back and forth.

You had bit gold.

It was fine.

Art film does keep going out of favor, like jazz, then it comes back. Do you see any trends toward more personal filmmaking in the postmodern, post-millenium, post-apocalyptic generation?

Well, I don't believe too much in trends except back in the '50s. It was so tense that everybody got on similar wavelengths. It was almost like telepathy. There was a real flourishing of film as art. And the strongest people kept on making films. It became institutionalized in the colleges and museums. I suppose there are people in New York - New York I think it's a bit of every trend - who will say what trend is in voyeur right now. I don't know what it is. However, you're always going to have a few people who do their own thing and push through and be best known. Of course, those are the ones I'm interested in.

We upgrade a young woman out of C.C. (California College of Art, Junior College, see archives) who loves your films. Her films were obviously influenced by your work. Yeah, your work influences people. I was influenced when I started. That's how you start.

Mira Derekh, Kenneth Anger, the Russian and French cinema - all were my influences. The personal film movements influenced a lot. A lot of stuff went into TV and also into the films. The films used to fill up shelf. and those guys would make long sequences of films that were in like art films. What do you think is the overall purpose of alternative film? Since Hollywood is the center of commercial film, it would be almost impossible to make an art film center anything up. Probably. Film is a little esoteric. Probably...
3D creates the opportunity for a proper return to Hollywood North.

3D makes the cinema for a proper return to Hollywood North. There is a window right now. You think back to 1983-84, when the laser video stores were cropping up. I used to live near a video arcade and one of the first ever blockbuster-type places. You’d go in and it was like—empty shelf space everywhere. The reason it was a new business and the indie movement hadn’t kicked in. That created a demand for indie product.

“Now we’re not talking about mainstreaming of that and into the digital downloading age. Rating money to produce films has become difficult.”

“3D means opportunity. There are so many people that have something we have that ‘Journey to the Center of the Earth,’ ‘Avatar’ and ‘Up’ didn’t have a secondary market. 3D is a way of achieving that. 3D is reducing the window, there’s an ongoing market to acquire 3D content. Nobody will say that window that we have in the movie business is going to be the window where that window there’s gonna be this requirement for content. We want to show that Northern California is hot to fill that requirement.

“Remember, I’m not from the business, so this is an external observation. But if somebody produces a $200,000 indie movie and, you say, ‘Don’t do it really well. Don’t spend much money. It can make great movies.’ It says that these guys were lucky. Making a movie of the scale of ‘Golden’ or ‘Endora’ is not going to be easy. So, it’s a proof of concept. I think the success of ‘Golden’ will advertise Northern California to the rest of the world. It’s more money than your traditional theatrical indie film.

“Right now, you can go off and shoot in other places and get tax credits, and so on. But you really have to think about the costs of relocating people or training people or using new people. Here you have a lot of experience that you can’t find anywhere else. And then you have the brand that you have been part of. If you want to make a reasonably budgeted 3D movie, Come to Northern California. That’s what we’re hoping to see with ‘Golden’ and that’s what I think we will see.”
Hopper was really a quite a fantastic guy. Yes, he was a bit paranoid - he had two bodyguards - but he admired Bruegel (Koons). He was also a photographer and he became a director, but also showed a very, very good show at the Paul Anglim Gallery in San Francisco.

He had a reputation of being nice and drug-adding but he also was dedicated to the arts. I think it is quite funny that Hopper didn’t like people towering over him - he was fairly short.

The trouble is Connolly pulls his films, but his behavior grew increasingly eccentric. He had withdrawn those three times before, sometimes for as long as a year. That’s tall stuff like this from Eastman-Kodak.

But he was a great teacher and leader in the field and he was always right about artistic principles - he demanded that artists get paid. I would get a museum calling - I won’t mention any names - and they would ask if they could get a copy of ‘I Spy, Bazinga,’ thinking they intended to transfer to DVD and continuous loop for three months. I would say, ‘No, you’re not. You have to pay me and you’ll have to get permission.’

We have been able to give a major boost to the experimental filmmaker. So how did alternative film start here?

In the ’60s, it was New York and SF. In New York, it was the New American Cinema Group, run by Kerri Maro and Ron Bennett. Then he had to leave to New York. In San Francisco, it was the Conner and Scarecrow partnership, which lasted until the early 1970s. This was their early work, with the connotation of experimental film.

They started making documentary films in Canyon. The 1960s saw an explosion - Canyon was formed in 1961 or 1962. The history has become somewhat patchy as the work has been stolen.

What is our source for this information? We can only go as far as the Conner, the Scarecrow, the Conner and Scarecrow partnership, the Canyon Cinematheque, the Conner Cinematheque, the Conner Collection at the Stanford University, the Conner and Scarecrow partnership, the Conner and Scarecrow partnership. We simply can’t go any finer.

There is a lot of enthusiasm in the arts field, but there’s a lot of nonsense.

I think the 1970s was the period of the rise of the alternative film industry. The 1970s saw a great deal of activity. The 1970s saw a great deal of activity. The 1970s saw a great deal of activity.

In 1970, the Conner and Scarecrow partnership was formed. It was a partnership of two artists who made documentaries about the history of film. They made the documentary film “The Conner and Scarecrow partnership” in 1969, in San Francisco, and in 1970, in San Francisco, they made the film “The Conner and Scarecrow partnership.”

What other things do we know?

We run our screening room, for about a dollar a minute. We have five board members elected directly from membership. It is a filmmaker’s organization. It is a filmmaker’s organization. It is a filmmaker’s organization.

It is a filmmaker’s organization. It has the same basic rules as the classical cinema. The films are submitted, screened, and judged on their own merits. They are not submitted on the basis of their subject matter. The films are not submitted on the basis of their subject matter. The films are not submitted on the basis of their subject matter.

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As far as the 1980s, we know that there was a lot of activity. But it’s hard to say what was going on.

The Festival of the Allied Film Industry was held in San Francisco in 1980. It was a festival that was held every year in San Francisco. It was a festival that was held every year in San Francisco. It was a festival that was held every year in San Francisco.

The festival was a great success. It was a popular event. It was a popular event. It was a popular event.

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