

Lawrence Jordan

Lawrence Jordan has been at the forefront of experimental cinema, particularly through his innovative use of animation, for nearly six decades. Born in 1934 in Denver, in high school Jordan helped form a club called the Gadflies, whose precociousness extended to renting films from the Museum of Modern Art in New York: D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* and Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, as well as films by Jean Cocteau and Maya Deren.¹ But San Francisco was the place to be in the 1950s, and after a year at Harvard, Jordan went west. He looked up Stan Brakhage, with whom he had attended high school and who was living in the basement of Robert Duncan and Jess's house at 1724 Baker Street. The year was 1954. Jordan recalls that the walls and floors of the house were painted different colors, to optimize the effect of light as it intersected with color in the room: a black floor abutted a white wall, which was flanked by one persimmon-colored wall and one pink wall.² For Jordan, this demonstrates the degree to which Jess understood the relationship between constituent parts. It also proves how deeply integrated house and work were in both Jess and Duncan's worldview. Jordan has described this condition, and how special the Jess and Duncan household was, better than anyone else: "It's a whole lot more than bourgeois values, it's a magical kingdom and it needs to be protected from all the wayward vibrations that come and go... And that taught me a great deal about being civilized, which is hard to find in this American culture."³

Some months later, Jordan and Brakhage left San Francisco for New York, and spent the summer of 1955 there, sleeping on couches in Deren's Greenwich Village studio.⁴ Deren was, according to Jordan, "the ultimate bohemian," not to mention a force in every room, and she introduced the two young men to Joseph Cornell, who arrived one day with a beautiful actress in tow and proceeded to give a monologue for nearly two hours.⁵ Jordan and Cornell began a correspondence that lasted ten years, at which point Cornell convinced Jordan to return to New York to work with him. Jordan spent another summer in New York, this time in 1965, but again returned to the Bay Area, eventually settling in Petaluma, where he has lived and worked since. In 1960 he married Patty Jordan, who in the 1950s had documented the San Francisco art scene with hundreds of extraordinary photographs.

Jordan's contributions to the Bay Area over the course of nearly sixty years are nothing short of pathbreaking. With fellow filmmaker Bruce Conner, he began the film society Camera Obscura and built San Francisco's first 16mm experimental theater, The Movie, in North Beach in 1958. He was one of the founding organizers of the film cooperative Canyon Cinema and founded the film department at the San Francisco Art

¹ Scott MacDonald, "Nathaniel Dorsky and Larry Jordan on Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Joseph Cornell, and Bruce Conner," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24:1 (2007): 2.

² Interview with the author, March 21, 2011.

³ Solnit, 34. Jordan shot *Trumpit* in the Baker Street basement, and Brakhage made two films there: *In Between* and *Winter Shadow Garden*. Of *In Between*, Jordan says, "Jess hated it, *hated* it... [because of] Stan's exaggeration of the *magical*. Jess felt the film was artificial." MacDonald, 5.

⁴ Lawrence Jordan, "My Travels with Stan," *Millenium Film Journal* 41 (Fall 2003): 76.

⁵ MacDonald, 6-7.

Institute in 1969, where he taught for many years. Bruce Conner learned how to edit film from him, he played Faust in Robert Duncan's staging of *Faust Foutuat* at the 6 Gallery in 1955, he assisted Wallace Berman with his (only) film, *Aleph*; and he worked with Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, John Reed, and Christopher Maclaine, among others.⁶

Jordan has made over fifty experimental films (he prefers 16 mm) as well as numerous collages and collage boxes. He is especially drawn to Victorian engravings, which he animates. There is often a reciprocal relationship between the films and collages, as when collaged scenes serve as backgrounds for the films. *Hawk Haven*, for example, began as a background for the film *Gymnopédies* (1966), in which various objects move and transform across this static scene of castles and verdant foliage, while eponymous music by Erik Satie plays. The entire film is tinted blue, a Technicolor dream. Later, in the 1990s, Jordan collaged the hawks into this romantic scene, and the piece was reborn as *Hawk Haven*. This technique of reusing material, even one's own earlier work, is especially prevalent among Bay Area artists concerned with scavenging and recuperating old or discarded material. Engraving, Jordan reminds us, was illustration, not fine art.

Jordan's films are wondrous and surrealist, alchemical in the manner of George Méliès and Max Ernst. A formative experience for Jordan occurred in Larkspur, California in 1961, when Jess lent him two of Ernst's collage novels, *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une Semaine de bonté* (1933).⁷ Jordan carefully photographed each image, one by one, with a Roloflex camera, and realized, as he puts it, "I've been seeing a movie in extreme slow motion, one image after another."⁸ He began collecting engravings then, and animating them. Ernst's collage novels use engravings, a medium already obsolete by the time he made them, and they are associative rather than didactic: they purport to be novels, and they exploit seriality, but they tell no linear narrative. Considering Jordan's richly multivalent animations to come, one can see how appealing this precedent would be to him. Ernst's collage novels, Jordan's animations, and Jess's paste-ups all are infused with that at times elusive quality which Robert Musil called a "sense of potentialities."

Heavy Water, or The 40 and 1 Nights, or Jess's Didactic Nickelodeon, is a collaboration of sorts between Jordan and Jess. Collaboration was loose and informal those days: Jess had a set of forty-one collages made mostly from *Life* magazine issues in 1955, which he wanted to fall into frame like a nickelodeon. He had picked out a piece of music for each collage, so sound and image would cut from frame to frame. In 1962,

⁶ This list is compiled from P. Adams Sitney, "Moments of Illumination," *Artforum* X (April 2009): 164; and Michael Duncan, "Lawrence Jordan," in Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & His Circle*, exh. cat. (New York and Santa Monica: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers and the Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005): 190-191.

⁷ The latter, which Duncan gave to Jess in 1952, was especially influential to Jess's own practice. See Michael Auping, "Jess: A Grand Collage," in *Jess: A Grand Collage, 1951-1993*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1993): 48.

⁸ Patricia Kavanaugh, "Interview with Lawrence Jordan," *Animatrix: A Journal of the UCLA Animation Workshop* X: 32.

Jordan recorded the music (some from San Francisco's Playland at the Beach, where there still were nickelodeons), filmed the collages, and edited the resulting film.⁹ On the occasion of the work's debut, Jess wrote to Duncan that his "political machine" "works wondrously well in its rickety way, playing a one-revolution march step of slightly indeterminate measure and lilt, on bell, cymbal, rasp, thwack and clock."¹⁰ Jordan and Jess also collaborated on Jordan's film *Finds of the Fortnight*, albeit in a different way. Sometime before *Heavy Water*, Jess sent Jordan a number of collaged text pieces that he thought Jordan could use as intertitles in a film. Jordan attempted, unsuccessfully, to make a live film that would feature the collages; it was only in 1980 that he shot *Finds of a Fortnight*, in which cut-out animation alternates frame by frame with Jess's text collages, so that the two artists' work is literally interwoven together, creating a flickering or strobe effect.¹¹ This laborious technique results in an exquisite metaphor for appropriation, collage, and collaboration: the attempt to transform disparate material into a new whole, as the cut and the suture initiate their own alchemy.

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⁹ Interview with the author, March 21, 2011.

¹⁰ Letter to Robert Duncan, 25 April 1962 and 3 May 1962, Robert Duncan Archive, The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, State University of New York at Buffalo.

¹¹ Interview with the author, March 21, 2011.