

LAWRENCE JORDAN

Lawrence Jordan (b. 1934) has been at the forefront of experimental cinema, particularly through his innovative use of animation, for nearly six decades. Born in Denver, Jordan became a film buff early on. In high school he helped form a club called the Gadflies, whose precociousness extended to renting films by D. W. Griffith, Jean Cocteau, and Maya Deren from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After high school he went off to Harvard, but San Francisco was the place to be in the 1950s, and after a year, Jordan went west.

On his arrival he looked up former high-school classmate Stan Brakhage, who was living in the basement of Robert Duncan and Jess's house at 1724 Baker Street. 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.¹ Duncan described the paint scheme as "two walls in a hot tangerine orange, one wall in a soft orange-pink and one in white; ceiling in white; floor in what the paint company with poetic inspiration calls Bermuda blue."² For Jordan, this demonstrates the degree to which Jess understood the relationship between constituent parts working together. It also proves how deeply integrated house and work were in both Jess and Duncan's worldview. Jordan has well described how special the Jess and Duncan household was for him: "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

Jordan and Brakhage spent the summer of 1955 in New York, sleeping on couches in Maya Deren's Greenwich Village studio. Deren introduced the two young men to Joseph Cornell, with whom Jordan began a correspondence that lasted ten years. Jordan worked for Cornell in the summer of 1965 but then



Lawrence Jordan, 1967

returned to the Bay Area, eventually settling in Petaluma, where he has lived and worked since. In 1960 he married Patty Topalian, who was close to Jess and Duncan and in the 1950s documented the San Francisco art scene with hundreds of extraordinary photographs.

Jordan played Faust in Robert Duncan's staging of *Faust Foutu* at the Six Gallery in 1955. With fellow filmmaker Bruce Conner he began the film society Camera Obscura and built San Francisco's first 16 mm 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 Institute in 1969, where he taught for many years (Bruce Conner learned how to edit film from him). He assisted Wallace Berman with his (only) film, *Aleph*; and he has worked with Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, John Reed, and Christopher Maclaine, among others.⁴

Jordan has made over sixty 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* (p. 236), for example, began as a background for the film *Gymnopédies* (1966), in which various objects move and transform across a scrolling scene of castles and verdant foliage, while the eponymous music by Erik Satie plays. The entire film is tinted blue, a Technicolor dream. Later, in the 1990s, Jordan collaged 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 surreal—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). Jordan carefully photographed each image, one by one, with a Rolleiflex camera, and realized, as he put it, "I've been seeing a movie in extreme slow motion, one image after another."⁵ 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 & 1 Nights, or Jess's Didactic Nickelodeon is a collaboration between

Jordan and Jess. Collaboration was loose and informal in the 1960s. Jess had some collages made mostly from *Life* magazine, which he wanted to fall into a frame like a nickelodeon. He had picked out a piece of music for each collage, so sound and image would cut from scene to scene. In 1962 Jordan recorded the music, filmed the collages, and edited the resulting film. 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 to make a live film that would feature the collages, but it was only in 1980 that he shot *Finds of the Fortnight*, in which cut-out animation alternates frame by frame with Jess's text collages so that the two artists' work is literally interwoven, creating a flickering or strobe effect. 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.

—Tara McDowell

- 1 Lawrence Jordan, conversation with Tara McDowell, March 21, 2011.
- 2 Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 122.
- 3 Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 34. Jordan shot *Trumpit* in the Baker Street basement, and Brakhage made two films there: *In Between* and *Winter Shadow Garden*. Jess and Duncan make a brief appearance in Jordan's film *Circus Savage* (2009).
- 4 This list is compiled from P. Adams Sitney, "Moments of Illumination," *Artforum* 47 (April 2009): 164; and Michael Duncan, "Lawrence Jordan," in *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle*, ed. Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, exh. cat. (New York and Santa Monica: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers and the Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005), 190–91.
- 5 Patricia Kavanaugh, "Interview with Lawrence Jordan," *Animatrix: A Journal of the UCLA Animation Workshop* 15 (2007): 32.

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