



SUSPENDED ANIMATION

by Gary Morris

A scene from
Lawrence Jordan's
Sophie's Place

Animation" connotes many things to us jaded moderns — Bugs Bunny and variants, the dreaded Disney and its hellspawn, *Spike and Mike* and *South Park* with their "naughty bits," and outré confections like *The City of Lost Children*. But animation has been around as long as movies, and in as many forms. One of its innovators is Lawrence Jordan, whose 40-film career has been nicely distilled into 13 representative shorts and features on the occasion of his retirement from teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Jordan (born 1933) came to San Francisco in the mid-1950s, after

having established a minor reputation for his underground films in the style of his friend Stan Brakhage. His imagination was apparently better served by animation, judging from the evidence on display at this retrospective, and by 1961 he was doing innovative work in the genre. His reputation was made by early films like *Duo Concertantes*, which were "moving collages" that recalled the work of Max Ernst and Jess in using cut-outs from old magazines and books. Jordan's aim was to create what he called "unknown worlds and landscapes of the mind," and his approach was meticulous, painstaking-

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Lawrence Jordan

◀ Arts cover

ly creating bizarre juxtapositions and forcing his two-dimensional cut-outs into a strangely seductive pantomime of life.

The culmination of his work in this area is the five-year project *Sophie's Place*. This animated color feature has echoes of *Alice in Wonderland*, the inevitable Max Ernst, Jean Cocteau, and other surrealists. There's no plot per se, only a series of dazzling tableaux involving such unforgettably weird creations as a floating balloon with huge sad eyes, a bloody hand that suddenly rises up and waves, and — in one of the more homoerotically charged sequences — two cut-out Eugene Sandow-type naked musclemen who mindlessly run up and down stairs and engage in an unusual game of fisticuffs. (They also vaguely jab at an Isadora Duncan-

type dancer who prances obliviously on a nearby column.)

Classical gas

As random as such images sound, there's a subtle sense of purpose. One of the subtexts is Jordan's sweet satire of the Academy. Much of the imagery is classical — cut-outs of Greek statues, medieval motifs, drawings from old medical texts — but Jordan can't resist bringing these seemingly noble images to scintillating life. Every still life (and there are many) becomes a screaming tableaux vivant through the filmmaker's zany juxtapositions, sudden zooms back and forth, and literal deconstruction of his objects, which break into pieces at random and float charmingly through the scene.

The medieval obsession with creating life is also the subject of much of the film's whimsical attention. Characters suddenly radiate the medieval "essential salts"

they were thought to be made of during medieval times, or collapse entirely into this source material. Jordan even introduces a Paracelsus-like character who engages in stare-down contests with the aforementioned forlorn balloon. Jordan's foregrounding of these absurdist pas-de-deux to classical backdrops — engravings of Victorian gardens, classical landscapes — keep his theme of the attack on the Academy and, for that matter, history and science feather-light and wonderfully engaging.

Shorter animated works are also on view in this series, including some of his most important work in the genre: *Duo Concertantes* (1962-64), the well-titled *Masquerade* (1981), and *The Visible Compendium* (1991).

Jordan also has returned throughout his career to the live-action film, several examples of which are being shown. His three-part tribute to H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), which took four years

to make (1990-93), is an ambitious and mostly successful attempt to visualize the mood of H.D.'s long poem *Hermetic Definition*. *The Old House, Passing* (1967) is a ghost story with some stunningly beautiful imagery, most notably a lyrical sequence of a woman blowing bubbles in a cemetery. Less demanding but typical of Jordan's work in a more abbreviated format is the seven-minute *Visions of a City* (1957), a gorgeously evocative record of a confused Everyman (poet Michael McClure) trying to navigate a city (San Francisco) seemingly made entirely of reflective surfaces. ▼

SF Cinematheque presents Lawrence Jordan — A Mosaic of Personal Selections 3/19, 21, 23 & 26 at SF Art Institute, Pacific Film Archive and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. For information, call 558-8129.