

Flashing stars and orbs! Well, silent film stars are one ingredient within the a *Looking Glass* (left), a recent short film by Canyon Cinema founder and colla subject of an evening-length San Francisco Cinematheque program. Whether in the new *Adam's Apples* — a goody gumdrops Christian sicko, Mads Mikke the shoulder) has got modern-day great Danish star appeal



## Magic stars

A journey through the looking glass with Lawrence Jordan

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"When we use *magical* in a positive sense," filmmaker Lawrence Jordan explains, parsing an adjective that is frequently brought up in discussions of his work, "it really means my eye is fresh at this moment and what I'm seeing is a discovery." Jordan's films — in particular, the animated collages composed of Victorian magazine illustrations, Gustave Doré engravings, and flashing stars and orbs for which he is most famous — are the visual records of such moments of discovery.

The more than 40 experimental short (as well as three feature-length) films Jordan has made over his 40 years in the Bay Area are as much documents of the fanciful flight paths of his free associations — what he calls his "inner world" — as they are fleeting glimpses of a precinematic visual culture that has long since vanished. Thanks to an upcoming program put on by the San Francisco Cinematheque as part of its Bay Area Roots series, audiences will get the chance to discover — or perhaps rediscover with fresh eyes — the work of

a filmmaker and advocate (Jordan helped found Canyon Cinema) who truly deserves to be called a Fog City maverick.

Like the cryptically beautiful boxes of Joseph Cornell, Jordan's films exude a certain innocent surrealism. His poetic assemblages of fantastic fauna, romantic vistas, and hermetic symbols seem aimed at enchanting rather than disturbing the viewer through the kind of sexual shock tactics that were more the *métier* of Max Ernst. "That part of surrealism we don't qualify for," Jordan says, referring to himself and Cornell, for whom he worked as an assistant in 1965, filming over the course of his stay at Utopia Parkway in Queens the only extant footage we have of the notoriously reclusive artist and his fabled workspace.

Jordan's choice of the inclusive pronoun reveals both the slight reserve and matter-of-factness with which he speaks of his work and the strong sense of kinship he projects when talking about the artists — such as Cornell and collagist Jess Collins, who worked under his first name only — who became colleagues, served as inspiration, and, more often the case in a career filled with notable collaborators (Watts Tower sculptor Simon Rodia and Orson Welles), functioned in both capacities.

Following his high school friend and early collaborator Stan Brakhage to San Francisco from New York, Jordan moved into a basement flat below the poet Robert Duncan and his partner, Jess, whose baroque collages of finely crosshatched renderings of his source material shared

affinities with Jordan's then-still-developing aesthetic of assemblage. "[Jess] was the high priest of art magic in the time that I knew him," Jordan says.

Magic, as it turns out, keeps coming up in our conversation, whether in a passing reference to *The Wizard of Oz* (Jordan owns a complete set of the *Oz* books) or when Jordan cites that magician of silent cinema, Georges Méliès, as a major influence. *Blue Skies beyond the Looking Glass*, completed last year and one of the highlights of the cinematheque's program, is very much an homage to the evocative power of early cinema.

A jubilant séance, *Blue Skies* resurrects silent-era stars such as Lon Chaney Sr., Lillian Gish, and Mary Pickford via some amazing screen test footage and invites them to tango with intercut animated segments. The film offers a nice summary of Jordan's cinema of attractions, in which old signs are transmuted into wonders once more, restoring some of their mystery. "I don't know about alchemy academically," Jordan reflects, "but I am a practicing alchemist in my own way." **SPRO**

### WORKS OF LAWRENCE JORDAN

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