

Document Citation

Title	Stan Brakhage: 3 new works
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Source	<i>San Francisco Cinematheque</i>
Date	1993
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Brakhage, Stan (1933-2003), Kansas City, Missouri, United States
Film Subjects	A child's garden and the serious sea, Brakhage, Stan, 1991

STAN BRAKHAGE: 3 NEW WORKS

June 3, 1993

This evening's program is the third presented this season by the Cinematheque to feature recent films by Stan Brakhage. Earlier programs included the complete *Visions in Meditation* and a number of his exquisite hand-painted films, including *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse*.

Blossom—Gift/Favor (1993); 16mm, color, silent, 30 seconds

This short hand-painted film will be shown twice. First at 18fps and then, following *Boulder Blues and Pearls and ...*, at 24 fps.

Boulder Blues and Pearls and... (1992); 16mm, color, sound, 22 minutes.

Music by Rick Corrigan.

Peripheral envisionment of daily life as the mind has it—i.e., a terrifying ecstasy of (hand-painted) synapting nerve ends back-firing from thought's grip of life. (S.B.)

A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea (1991); 16mm, color, silent, 80 minutes

In poet Ronald Johnson's great epic *Ark*, in the first book *Foundations*, the poem "Beam 29" has this passage: "The seed is disseminated at the gated mosaic a hundred feet/ below, above/ long windrows of motion/ connecting dilated arches undergoing transamplification:/ 'seen in water so clear as christiall/ (prairie tremblante)" which breaks into musical notation that, "presto," becomes a design of spatial tilts: This is where the film began; and I carried a xerox of the still unpublished ARC 50 through 66 all that trip with Marilyn and Anton around Vancouver Island. As I wrote him, "the pun 'out on a limn' kept ringing through my mind as I caught the hairs of side-light off ephemera of objects tangent to Marilyn's childhood: She grew up in Victoria: and there I was in her childhood backyard...": and then there was *The Sea*—not as counter-balance but as hidden generator of it all, of *The World* to be discovered by the/any child ... as poet Charles Olson has it: "Vast earth rejoices,/ deep-swirling Okeanos steers all things through all things,/ everything issues from the one, the soul is led from drunkenness/ to dryness, the sleeper lights up from the dead,/ the man awake lights up from the sleeping." (*Maximus*, from "Dogtown—I")

—Stan Brakhage, verbatim from Canyon Cinema Catalog #7



Stan Brakhage's subject has frequently been himself but *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea...* is biography once removed. The film was shot on Vancouver Island, where Brakhage's second wife, Marilyn, grew up....

At 80 minutes, *a Child's Garden* is Brakhage's longest film since *Tortured Dust*, his last portrait of his first family, and he uses a lifetime of polished techniques—prisms, diffusion lenses, sudden camera movements, percussive shifts in exposure, oversaturated colors, tricks of scale—to suggest Marilyn's world as an enchanted island in the midst of some pellucid sea. Despite the typically jagged rhythms and the occasional shock-cut (from reflected full moon to shimmering clear water), the pace is leisurely and the structure fluid: a sun-dappled lawn, with a crawling baby glimpsed at the top of the frame, dissolves into a correspondingly dappled ocean.

Whales and starfish frisk around this green haven. The imagery in the first half of *A Child's Garden* is almost completely natural; the movie's title invites elemental metaphors. Behold the rainbow forest, the bower of night, the sky of fiery turquoise, the mountains of mist, the crystal sea. (Is that a ruby or a bicycle reflector?) Gradually, some sort of amusement park begins to insinuate itself into the montage of El Greco skies and Turner seas. Flashes of murals, fountains, people playing miniature golf suggest a fairy-tale village or Oz-like dream....

—J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*, Feb. 9, 1993



We are, all of us, obsessed with what we once had but no longer possess. For some, the irretrievable dwells in material forms or physical embodiments—the simple loss of a favorite photograph or book, or the graver loss of one's health or the departure of a loved one. For others, the objects of obsession are more abstract, their loss perhaps more harrowing because they ravage and corrode the intellect—the loss of reason, the loss of innocence, the loss of childhood's wonder and abandon.

Stan Brakhage has spent a substantial portion of his artistic career in relentless pursuit of the latter. More than any other American filmmaker, Brakhage has—for four decades—passionately plumbed the depths of his own psyche in an attempt to re-discover the primal innocence of vision, to film the world the way a child's unschooled eye sees it. In his many writings and films—from the often-quoted and frequently parodied "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of the word 'green'?" in *Metaphors On Vision*, to films like *Scenes from Under Childhood*, *Agnes Dei Kinder Synapse*, *Sexual Meditation: Open Field*, and many others—Brakhage has pursued with grail-quest intensity an elevated state of perpetual wonderment and amazement akin to that which a child's mind/eye would see.

While his attempts to do so have sometimes fallen short, his recent long film *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* certainly does not. The film exudes beauty, freshness and joy. Images wash over the viewer in sensuous waves—limpid, inviting, ultimately intoxicating. This co-mingling of earth and sea, the twin lost worlds of Eden and Atlantis, "limn" the edges of consciousness with organic ecstasy. Periodic flashes of sun and sky snap the mind to attention like the tang of the salt sea in one's nostrils only to disappear again immediately beneath the swelling tide.

A Child's Garden slowly leads the viewer through the childhood world of Brakhage's second wife, Marilyn. While viewing the film I almost thought I could hear the filmmaker saying, "My God! What an exquisite and enchanted place to have been a child. What must it have been like for her to grow up within arm's reach of the sea and its nacreous treasures: to splash through tide pools inhabited by quivering starfish, to swim with the whales, to absorb the sea's tranquility and its wrath, to drink aquamarine with one's eyes?" As Hoberman notes above, this film is unique among Brakhage's work in its attempt to visualize the germinating consciousness of an Other, and not that of the maker himself. In previous films where Brakhage has turned his camera onto another's world, he succeeds more often in merely imposing his will on that world than in capturing the unique essence of it. For example, in the *The Loom* (1986)—a meditation on the backyard menagerie kept by his first wife, Jane—Brakhage's will to possess almost turns the film into an (unintentional) portrait of the wild soul's entrapment by the penitentiary of marriage. (That's an admittedly biased reading based retrospectively on the knowledge that Stan and Jane's marriage of many years was about to dissolve.) In contrast, *The Child's Garden* succeeds quite beautifully in its empathetic embrace of Marilyn's backyard wonderland. Brakhage's immersion in Marilyn's world is whole, complete, utter. The film's great beauty is exactly this—it is rooted in the maker's sublime and profound love for another human being. It's almost as though Brakhage is insisting that the act of seeing with one's own eyes is no longer enough; to approach the world with compassion and love, we must first start seeing through the eyes of others as well.

—Albert Kilchesty