

Los Angeles Filmforum presents
Seasonal Affects: Films of Jonathan Schwartz
Sunday, February 18, 2024, 7:30 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2024 is our 49th year. www.lafilmforum.org

Programmed and introduced by Irina Leimbacher, Visiting Professor at Cal Arts

Jonathan Schwartz (1973-2018) was a much-loved filmmaker, an inspiring teacher, and a whimsical and witty friend. His unique 16mm films incorporate handheld gestures, in-camera superimpositions, and an acute attention to the evanescent qualities of the perceived world. Whether shot near his home in Vermont or during cinematic journeys to India, Israel, Turkey or Iceland, his work embodies a devotion to the ephemerality of external worlds and a responsiveness to profound and shifting internal states. Incorporating fragments of poetic texts (by writers such as Cormac McCarthy, Susan Howe, Rajesh Parameswaran, James Tate, F. Scott Fitzgerald) or eschewing words altogether, the films both lacerate and console us as they move between sorrow and delight, despair, and exultation.

Jonathan made films as he lived his life. Gestures of appreciation and awe towards the world and for those he loved, his short films are also dialogs with texts and ideas he found compelling. In all his work, he gives expression to both the beauties of the concrete and the transience and power of ineluctable time. A flower, a face, melting ice, a shift in light — Jonathan's lens holds them with generosity and care, for his and our gaze. Time becomes a palpable preoccupation through his engagement with the seasons and their variations, and in his own cinematic processes in which a camera roll might have images superimposed that were shot months apart. His attention to transformations wrought by light, his physical movements with the camera, and his in-camera winding and re-winding of filmstock all embody his and the world's fortuitous memory and fleeting hold.

Tonight's program includes nine of Jonathan's films, made between 2005 and 2018. We move between a collage of flowers in *For Them Ending* (2005) to the camera rolls in *Three Miniatures* (2014), to the observational simplicity and beauty of *New Year's Sun* (2010). Two of his travel films are included: *Den of Tigers* (2002) which was his first film shot in India when he was working with Mark Lapore, and *Nothing is Over Nothing* (2008) depicting a personal journey to Israel. Several of the films are lyrical or philosophical responses to cherished places, moments, and people in rural Vermont and New Hampshire, the area in which he lived, including *If The War Continues* (2012), *Animals Moving to the Sound of Drums* (2013), and *A Leaf is the Sea is a Theater* (2017). His final completed film, *The Crack-Up* (2017) is an excursion through fear and transformation, a meditation on personal and planetary crises shot mainly in Iceland. Raw and sublime, it asserts the vulnerability and uncertainty of our human hold on identity, on life, on time.

Jonathan studied and worked at Massachusetts College of Art, taught courses at the School of Museum of Fine Arts, Bennington College, and was Associate Professor in the Film Department at Keene State College from 2008-2018. His films have screened nationally and internationally, including at the New York and Ann Arbor Film Festivals, the Brakhage Center Symposium, Images in Toronto, the Austrian Film Museum. A full retrospective was shown at the Punto de Vista Film Festival in Pamplona, Spain in 2019 with an accompanying book on his work.

Program and Notes by Irina Leimbacher, Jonathan's friend and colleague

Screening:

For Them Ending (2005, 16mm, color, sound, 3min.)

"swallowed up in the sky, the sound sustained by echo, always fading.
the nature of a season, moving forward with growth or death or growth.
or I was wondering how to make New England fall colors linger so if you couldn't visit soon the yellow oranges and reds would still be waiting for you" - JS

...a poem made of imagery from a gardening volume, a book of flower prints, and the sound of a firework display. The images of the colored flowers, when added to the sound of pyrotechnics, become a graphic representation of exploding buoyancy. Like in a Lewis Klahr film, the images appear to collage a story-driven narration. There is motion created by the succession of cuts, and by the hand-handled camera movements so essential to Schwartz's style--allowing a non-aggressive, handcrafted, and detail-oriented approach to the world. Movement is more essential than any possible tale. The camera follows the shape of printed instructions, drawing verses in the air. The vivid texture and colors of these images transform the ink into trails of meaning, ways to translate inner subtleties into corporeal nature. - Monica Saviron

A Set of Miniatures (A Certain Worry, (an aging process), A Kind of Quiet) (2014, 16mm, color, sound, 9 min.)

a kind of quiet situated amid the in between of ascending and descending. it seems hard to land and when this happens something else might disappear. an aging process located in the peonies blooming and in the early summer river and in the light that falls across playful bodies. a certain worry enveloped in the covering of the ground, illuminated around a face, light on something ferocious, touch upon something gentle. – JS

Den of Tigers (2002, 16mm, color, sound, 19 min.)

"an invitation to walk look listen. West Bengal, India. collected, or pretend to." - JS

In Den of Tigers, filmed in Calcutta, India, the clang and hum of an outdoor marketplace gives way to a quick jam of tablas and chengilas, or a man's voice explaining that perhaps "...where you are sitting right now, it might have been the den of a tiger." But what we see are haircuts performed on the side-walk, books stacked floor-to-ceiling, eggs boiling in a broad black pan. The perceptual experience is condensed by layering images and sound from different moments, but in the very same way it is expanded and a third space created through the happy montage. - Cinema Project

Animals Moving to the Sound of Drums (2013, 16mm, color, sound, 8min.)

That fall it was not intentional to have a Galway Kinnell book on the table near where the caterpillar in the doorway, feeding on our offerings, became the butterfly, feeding on honey water, staying in our house until we let it go. Or it was not known about the deer in Putney or that the baby birds in the raspberry bushes would cry to us in summer. A beloved, old friend once visited Vermont to do some work for Galway Kinnell and she described a stone table in the field where they ate meals in the afternoon -- it sounded like a song and so I looked at the book and from Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight here is that line: "The still undanced cadence of vanishing." - JS

If the War Continues (2012, 16mm, color, sound, 5 min.)

Drawing and writing are at the core of "if the war continues" (2012), a film with a hypnotizing sense of diagonal light and movement. The title refers to the 1917 Hermann Hesse short story, part of his collection of fairy tales, which ends:

"and before I could be noticed again and taken to task, I spoke to the tiny blessed star within me, shut off my heartbeat, made my body disappear into the shadow of a bush, and continued my previous voyage without thinking about returning home ever again."

Nothing is Over Nothing (2008, 16mm, color, sound, 16 min.)

...is a red message sprayed on a wall in Jerusalem, but also the filmmaker's statement on legacies and the unspoken contract of giving and receiving. A female voice reads from the previously quoted Twain book:

"There were other places where the lord fell, and others where he rested; but one of the most curious landmarks of ancient history we found, on this morning walk through the crooked lanes toward Calvary, was a certain stone built into a house--a stone that was so seamed and scarred that it bore a sort of grotesque resemblance to the human face. The projections that answered for cheeks were worn smooth by the passionate kisses of generations of pilgrims from distant lands. We asked 'Why?'

The guide said that it was because this was one of 'the very stones of Jerusalem' that Christ mentioned when he was reproved for permitting the people to cry 'Hosannah!' when he made his memorable entry into the city upon an ass. One of the pilgrims said, 'But there is no evidence that the stones did cry out--Christ said that if the people stopped from shouting Hosannah, the very stones would do it.'

The guide was perfectly serene. He said calmly, 'This is one of the stones that would have cried out.'"

A Leaf is the Sea is a Theater (2017, 16mm to digital, color, sound, 17min.)

Los Angeles premiere

'Facts are perceptions of surfaces.'

- Susan Howe

You cannot put a fire out;
A thing that can ignite
Can go, itself, without a fan
Upon the slowest night.
- Emily Dickinson

The Crack Up (2017, 16mm->digital video, color, sound, 18:18)

Los Angeles Premiere

"The ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." (F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Crack-Up*, 1936)

...an excursion through fear, near collapse, and transformation that takes its name from F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1936 autobiographical essay. Reflecting on life's "process of breaking down," it is both extremely personal and also relevant to the difficult times we live in. With sublime 16mm footage of glaciers, monumental snow-covered landscapes, and an icy, roiling sea, *The Crack-Up* alternates strident sounds and brash rhythms and gestures of the camera with moments of arresting fragility and grace. Danger, death, the unexpected chaos and destruction of life are all evoked with almost no human presence in the image. The sound of wind, rain, the cracking of frozen earth occasionally gives way to two voices: a female voice reciting from Fitzgerald's text and a male voice struggling to use language at all. Schwartz's film seems to take as its challenge Fitzgerald's admonition to simultaneously "see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."

"Stunning Icelandic land- and seascapes dominate *The Crack-Up*'s imagery, but shot in short rhythmic bursts, with forceful camera movements and different exposures so that the same image can shift from gloriously luminescent to darkly foreboding. Varying times of day and weather result in a vivid depiction of the symbiosis of earth's topography with the sun and atmosphere. Gentle snow-covered curves alternate with large- and small-scale jagged icy surfaces, and there is a magnificent sequence of blocks of ice being rocked and eroded by powerful ocean waves. Aside from tenuous flowers that appear and disappear beneath this blue-grey-white and glassy world, the film also briefly introduces other landscapes, including a cemetery with the gravestone of the filmmaker's mother. Towards the end of the film there are moments with no light, the appearance of no-thing, perhaps only grief. "- Irina Leimbacher

New Year Sun (2010, 16mm, color, sound, 3 min.)

...in which Schwartz approaches light traveling through water in all its forms. His macro lens strives to get closer to the essence, to the transparency of things, and yet, the tenebrous and doomed cry of a church's bell, and the ascending, unstoppable pitch that accompany the images end up close to the sound of a derailed train--and the unfocused, unclear vision that comes with it. - Monica Saviron

Individual film notes adapted/shortened from Canyon Cinema catalogue; for more info see <https://canyoncinema.com/catalog/filmmaker/?i=475>

Guest:

Irina Leimbacher is a teacher, scholar, and curator who currently teaches at CalArts in Valencia, CA. Previously she was Associate Professor and Film Dept. Chair at Keene State College in New Hampshire, where she worked closely with Jonathan Schwartz for over a decade. Before that she was a film programmer at San Francisco Cinematheque for a dozen years. She has presented programs of films at the New York Film Festival, MoMA, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, Cinematheque Ontario, UCLA Film Archive, SF MOMA, the Pacific Film Archive, Montreal's Festival du Nouveau Cinema, the Flaherty Seminar and elsewhere. She holds a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley.

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Coming Soon:

February 25, 2024 - Christopher Harris in person

March 8 - *La Région Centrale*, by Michael Snow, at UCLA

March 3 – Footprints of the Forgotten: Video Works on Immaterial Archives

March 16 - 1:00 - Luther Price: New Utopia and Light Fracture

March 24 - *Gaza Ghetto*, on 16mm

April 2 - Scott Stark

April 17 - *Race d'Ep*

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