

Once Upon A Time In The Mid-West

Kyle Kibbe : *Cinematographer*

The Bad News: Fred Camper speculates that avant-garde film practice in the U.S. died in 1966 when Stan Brakhage and other masters began teaching. The commoditization of a certain type of "poetic vision" had begun. Experimental film seems to occupy an increasingly marginal place in contemporary cinema. Today at the intersection of film's decay and digital media's ascendancy we look upon the idiosyncratic ultra personal musing of the film "artist" or as Jonas Mekas would proclaim himself "a filmer" as primarily a genre. One to be appropriated, poached from the archive to signify rather than proclaim. The excesses of the dueling Romantic and Modernist impulses that structured the mid-century avant-garde have been repurposed to feed the unquenchable post modern appetite for images and narrative strategies. One need only to look at television commercials and contemporary Hollywood product to see experimental film's usurped legacy.

Clearly Bernard's films survive (and deservedly thrive) as documents. That's high praise and arguably one of film's inherent attributes. Bernard's interpretation of artistic practice, the mediums purity, and individual authorial authority has long since been overthrown. For me, these films are outstanding reminiscences of bygone times when the role and reign of the "artist" was less problematic and not subjected to today's incessant interrogation. The artisanal effort marshaled for each and every one of Bernard's films also needs to be recognized. Anyone who has ever edited with reels, rewinds, moviescope, and splicing block (especially in 8 and super 8mm) knows the hands on physicality it entails. It is a far cry from the button pushing of today's non-linear editing. In fact today it is precisely this genre's determination to destroy the tyranny of "commercial" film's temporal linearity with such a leaden tool kit that garner it such "artisanal" respect.

Correspondingly Bernard's insistence that film titles be typewritten strikes me as wry humor. A "mechanical", cool description for the rowdy torrent of untamed individual expression contained within.

The Good News: What better atelier to be mentored in than Brakhage's. "Imagine an eye unrul'd by man-made laws of perspective, ..." Yes...that school. That mid-century aesthetic put Bernard's painterly approach and graphic intuition to good service. As Bernard himself states "What generated my own work into existence are the very visuals I thrive on -- the actual sensuousness of film; percussive implosions of color, streaming images over unknown fragments, tumbling combinations within shuffled variables."

Bernard's gifts as a visual artist are bold and abundant. His trust in the "sensuousness of film" is well placed. His understanding and manipulation of light, luminosity, and reflection continually impart a sense of volume and a highly tactile dimension to his imagery. In some cases Bernard in painterly fashion directly applies paint, ink, and bleach, to the surface of his hand scratched and disfigured film emulsion. His cursive camera work examined in brief sequences is suggestive of close up examinations the likes of deKooning and Pollock. Bernard's films seek the emotive energy of the abstract expressionist paintings of the 50's while simultaneously craving a 60's style ecstatic transcendent experience of psychedelic revelation. It's a mash-up of mid century desire. A desire these days served up accompanied by a hefty dose of irony, delivered via non-linear button pushing. Today, that desire viewed in retrospect could be seen as self indulgent navel gazing, a trip down the rabbit hole of melancholic interiority and self-portraiture. Thankfully, its delight in life's sensuousness survives. With this sensuousness Bernard's work puts forward an implicit acceptance of our materiality. An acceptance repeatedly manifest in his work's voracious need to witness, catalog and archive all manner of life, it's beings, objects and light.

What we are left with is

Pulsating crimson, ebbing tides, birds in flight, voyeuristic visions, bodies in motion, bodies in death, twilight blue, circuitous cigarette smoke, furrowed brows, balletic light illuminating quivering leaves, phthalo green, cascading waters, rock-strewn crags, fractured emulsions, canary yellow, bodies of water, breasts, bodies in water, decaying flesh, music seen, and a profound silence so heavy and deep that when internalized we feel our eyes blink, our hearts beat.

The Variant Chants of Joseph Bernard

Monica Saviron: *Filmmaker*

"Some govern the world, others are the world"

The Book of Disquiet, by Fernando Pessoa

Joseph Bernard's Super-8mm films are in defiance of the law of any instructions. His pristine silent prints shine in the territory of the unattainable and unspoken, like Morse code-notated songs. In 1983, he finished the 16-minute color film-collage Variant Chants, a mesmerizing canticle that mixes poetry, photography and painting — all vital driving forces of the artist structural constellations.¹ This is one of his forty films accepted at the Academy Film Archive in Hollywood for future preservation and study.

¹ Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision" Anthology Film Archives; 2 edition (June 1976)

Filmmaking allows Bernard to combine the movement, density, and emotional charge of Joan Mitchell's brushstrokes, with the percussive associations of Frank O'Hara's poems. In a purely aesthetic manner, the richness of Bernard's frames brings together the chaotic pouring of accumulated textures of Jackson Pollock, and Piet Mondrian's need to rearrange an underlying lack of order.

This palette of light and composition conducts the varied artistic references into a private, solitary work that seems to flounder in the agitated waters of personal memory.

At a time when artistry is measured by viral, loud noise, Bernard opts for meticulously exploring the scales and realms of the small and quiet. Filmmaking is the antechamber that enables the brain to speak the language of drifting consciousness and daydreams—a misty reality that can only be imagined in the intersection between analysis and possible interpretations. Chants of death, triangulations, and mystic truths are expressed with a disposition that reminds of the nostalgic humor of poet Robert Creeley: "We live as we can, each day another—there is no use in counting."² In Bernard's work, frames within frames are shaped with reiteration, and intuition. Shot in Provincetown, MA; Detroit, MI; and Birmingham, MI, the film's exalted colors contrast with the intimacy of the artist's single-frame work—from his basement, Bernard observes, subverts, and reassembles the polyphony of the world.

Variant Chants represents the many creative ways available in search for harmony of thought and feeling. External confusion might be tempered with methodical and metrical practices that change through time, varying principles and perspectives. Bernard measures major latitudes and longitudes with whichever small tools he can reach: compasses, translucent drafting rulers, curve templates, protractors, and text stencils inside large jars of limpid water. Units and systems cloistered in around 4 x 5mm of clear celluloid become an inaudible song shouted with apparent humor, melancholia, passion, and compassion. The overlapped and superimposed images of objects, written words, educational footage, 35mm slides, painted glasses, familiar faces, and surfaces act as bandages on the wounds of sex, creating, living, and healing.

Bernard's pictorial vocabulary is made of vibrant colors like "the hammers of a glass pianoforte,"³ asymmetrical balance, and variant repetitions that provide deep inflections of tonality. The images of an airplane crossing the sky, glass marbles, skulls and figures from pop-culture reappear at different angles and distances, moving in opposite directions. Light relentlessly moves inside the frame as ink would trace forms to be read on wood or paper. In fact, Variant Chants could be interpreted as a film letter mailed before its content gets burned. It includes a final postscript that reflects on the mystery of chance and of the quotidian life, as if everything were there for a strange reason.

Just as Beethoven's symphonies orchestrate an exuberance for the joy and struggle of life, so, too, does Bernard channel two seemingly contradictory sentiments. He exalts the value of the passing moment, of all things going against the current, and the difficulty of measuring the weight of our experiences with the rapid speed we tend to leave them behind.

One of the most striking aspects of Variant Chants is its ability to transmit emotion with rapid cuts, a sense of both depth and buildup. It is an editing that filigrees varying speed, backgrounds and foregrounds, providing a continuous flow of interpretations, of the complexity of seeing. Images are fractured in primary colors, scattered as if in a mind-expanding vision of our most immediate surroundings. The fusion of gleaming colors and movement tears the image apart, freeing the beauty and feelings in the eyes of the filmmaker—a kind of prescience brought up through the reflection of light on pieces of broken vessels.

Half archaeologist, half philosopher, Joseph Bernard calls for the unconscious, abandoned, and forgotten, while recalling the purposes and pleasures of making a film. His Variant Chants aids to rhythmically breathe in and out actuality, creating a sort of chord of varied forces, lures and lulls, debits and credits. With undefiled liveliness, in this film the sensations, shapes, textures, and colors remain, while words languish like mirrors of a jagged reality. The filmmaker guides inner reverberations to the covering veneer with swaying tufts of light that glisten over layers of textures. This is a work that salutes a sense of virulent disquiet managed with confident, firm pulse.

Light remarks and reflects gracefulness through obstacles, following serpentine furrows—they are paths for peaceful discoveries. In a way, Bernard captures a meditative light that seems to bath memories in silent farewells. The making of the film generates an idea of expansive life by stewing transient visages, enchanted chants. Colors spot and crack. Fragments, sized, assessed, gauged, fall at rattling pace. Over time, the measure of what is lost becomes, if nothing else, indivisible.

1 Referring to mentor Josef Albers's engraving series, *Structural Constellations*.

2 "Was That a Real Poem or Did You Just Make It up Yourself?" From *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*. University of California Press. 1982-2004

3 "Music." From *Lunch Poems*, Frank O'Hara. City Light Books. 1964.