

THE FILMS OF JACK CHAMBERS

By Irene Bindi

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"The fact is that the films of Jack Chambers have changed the whole history of film, despite their neglect, in a way that isn't even possible within the field of painting. There are no 'masters' of Film in any significant sense whatsoever. There are only 'makers' in the original, or at least medieval, sense of the word. Jack Chambers is a true 'maker' of films. He needs no stance, or standing, for he dances attendance upon the coming-into-being of something recognizably NEW." -Stan Brakhage 1977

Lure of the Local

"We already know the Mysterious but our minds are not conscious of it. When we open onto the Mysterious we do not do it consciously. But only by doing it do we perceive and only by perceiving can we experience the wonder of familiar appearances." Jack Chambers 1969

In the late 50s and into the 60s an art community evolved out of London Ontario that was deemed "London Regionalism". It was composed of a group of artists who acknowledged their home as the centre and subject of creative activity; who acknowledged yet refused to situate themselves in the art world of the metropolitan centre; who refused to participate in 'movements'. In fact, the term "regionalism" was jokingly adopted by the community in a spirit of defiance after a Toronto critic used it in a derisive way to describe the scene. In reality it was not an "ism" at all but a group of artists who had decided to stay home.

It's a context I like to emphasize when looking at the films of celebrated London painter Jack Chambers. This was an art community that celebrated the home place --a small conservative insurance town-- in all its manifestations, and autonomously, while completely rejecting its ideals. By the late 60s, this Souwesto town had somehow become the focal point of Canadian art. In Barry Lord's 1969 article in *Art in America* "What London, Canada Has That Everywhere Else Needs" he describes London as an art phenomenon: the most important art centre in Canada and a model for artists working elsewhere, the site of "Canada's first regional liberation front"

Though Chambers was not a self-proclaimed regionalist, he had close ties with the group of artists at work in London through this period. He returned to his hometown after several years of rigorous fine art training in Spain to find an art community that had exploded. His friend and subject of the film R-34, Greg Curnoe, emerged as the

leading figure for the group and a kind of self-appointed spokesperson for regionalism, approaching his own art-making as a free appropriation of meaning within a location, resting on a personal claim over local objects. For Curnoe the only important artwork was myopic, and his immediate surroundings were the only source of interest to his creative process. And although their aesthetic values and fundamental art philosophies differed greatly, they shared this feeling of the importance of the local as the site of inspiration and production.

In Chambers 1969 ArtsCanada article on his own art philosophy entitled “Perceptual Realism”, he describes a relationship to the reproduction of perceived reality that has no aesthetic; a belief in the possibility of reproducing exactly the perceived external. Only through this transmission of the perceived relationship between the artist and nature, claimed Chambers, could a true spiritual understanding of the energy and life cycle inherent in things be understood.

One problem in Chambers’ writings on philosophy of art and his own work, is that he excludes from his ideas of life, death, and renewal—that spiritual cycle which he claims as his work’s focus-- elements of terror, anxiety, and an ambivalence. All of which emerge with force in the work itself.

Chambers began filmmaking partly in response to a growing feeling that as his paintings gained more critical acclaim and commercial success, they were beginning to put his audience to sleep. He described the camera as the ultimate device for capturing and displaying that kind of perception that must result in an integrated spiritual connection with place and nature.

But what he deemed the “life-death-life” cycle inherent in all experience, is not always so balanced in these films. Death lingers longer than it might. Present not only in the horrifying images of napalm victims in *Hybrid* and the slaughter of the lamb in *Hart of London*, death, confusion, and dread are there in the slowed rites of waiting in a doctor’s office and walking through a park in his first film *Mosaic*, in the peripheral aspect of human presence in *Circle*, and even in the consideration of another artist-at-work through repetition in *R34*.

If a version of London Regionalism can be found in Chambers films it is of a detailed space, not just in the sense of detail which exists as it would in his almost photographic “perceptual realist” paintings, but a detailed way of knowing objects, exploring their connections and attempting to formulate a meaning for their position within a formless chaotic space.

Hart of London

“The houses were unlit and, without their orange banners of human warmth, the street looked abandoned of life. My feet became numb with the cold as the day darkened, and tough little grey flakes began falling from the sky. I looked around to find what it was that had hurt me, and all I saw were the dumb houses, the glitter of steel through a crack in the closing sky, and the hard snow” – Jack Chambers

Recounting one of his earliest recollections of his hometown, as a child walking home from school, Chambers reveals an early impression London that he would carry with him throughout his life. London, or the “truth” of London, became a kind of obsession for him. Close friend and historian Ross Woodman explains that Hart of London represents an “apocalyptic climax [...] in which Chambers finally and fully orchestrates the nightmare vision of his hometown that had haunted and pursued him all his life”

The question of seeing in the perceptualist sense is, for Chambers, the question of finding ways to see, of using art as a practical tool for vision. Hart of London challenges suppositions not only about human behavior but about the very act of seeing. Those elements that can serve to heighten sight and therefore perception are shown to be just as capable of obscuring – primarily through the use of white light. In the film’s first brilliant section, the light of the projector literally absorbs the layers of photographs, flipping a tool of illumination into one of obscurity.

Historically speaking, Hart of London can be understood as microcosmically revisionist --a personal history based in the public using public materials-- that makes no claims of authenticity, but instead claims the right to a creative reworking of its parts. The film is crafted from Chambers own footage of his family, footage taken in an abattoir that he went back to Spain specifically to attain, newsreel footage from London’s CFPL news archives from the 1930s and 1940s, and photographs which he culled from an open call to Londoners in the London Free Press.

It is difficult even for a Londoner to pinpoint where we are geographically at any point in the densely layered first section of the film. Moreover, the many places presented in an instant obscure each other’s precise location. We are lost here in the heart of London, within its architecture constantly appearing and disappearing, and very deliberately made strange.

In the jarring middle section of the Hart of London, a stretch of images of the slaughter of a lamb become the first instance of colour footage in the film, intensifying concentration on the death itself rather than human response to it. It is the literal importation of a visceral and catastrophic event into banal London, giving the city the picture of violence that it needs to grasp its own horror. This is the London that could not understand (that made news out of) the killing of its own hart - -the deer that wandered into the city limits, became confused and trapped and was

eventually shot dead by Londoners. The connection between these two and the film's ecstatic conclusion form a crucial axis. It is a historical reality where Chambers identifies for those who will see it the dreadful human potential to do great harm without realizing it, and the need, as the film begs us, to be "very careful".

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