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## VISUAL ARTS: A surrealist's film forays into the avant garde

Catherine Fox - Staff  
Sunday, January 16, 2005

### PREVIEW

The Films of Joseph Cornell. 8 p.m. \$6. Eyedrum, 290 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Atlanta. 404-522-0655; www.eyedrum.org for map.

Joseph Cornell is revered for boxes containing enigmatic arrangements of objects he found in the junk shops and flea markets of New York.

One wouldn't associate his sentimental surrealism, teetering on twee, nurtured by nostalgia, with avant-garde art, and yet he was a pioneer --- some say the defining force --- of the art of assemblage.

Here's a surprise: Cornell, who died in 1973, made experimental films, and he was a pioneer in that medium as well.

In fact, film critic J. Hoberman asserts that Cornell, "as much as Maya Deren, was the progenitor of American avant-garde film."

An evening of Cornell films at Eyedrum on Thursday is an opportunity to see 10 of these little-known works.

Cornell is credited with the invention of found-footage film. Andy Ditzler, who presents the screening as part of his Film Love Series, devotes the first half of the program to this breakthrough.

Using scissors and tape, the artist re-edited footage from the silent films he obsessively collected. He added split-screen, upside-down and backward frames to create quirky, nonlinear films.

His first, the 1936 "Rosa Hobart," consisted entirely of all the silent-film star's reaction shots in a single movie. (This will not be screened.)

His use and reformulation of found footage was parallel to the assemblage process, of course, and some of these themes carried over as well. For instance, his fascination with childhood --- its innocence, its wonder, those little people --- is much in evidence.

The three shorts on the program that comprise his "Children's Trilogy" encompass moments of amused affection --- such as footage of the tyke in a highchair who alternates between lunging at an apple and falling asleep --- and inspired silliness,

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like a kangaroo boxing with a zookeeper.

The second half concentrates on the films of the '50s, in which he had friends Lawrence Jordan, Rudolph Burckhardt and Stan Brakhage (important artists in their own right) shoot the footage for him, which he then edited. They visited parks and other neighborhood haunts, where Cornell would direct the cameramen to the images that interested him.

These pieces are more fluid visually (both in terms of the amount of real time and editing) and more meditative than his earlier works. "Angel" is an unabashed paean to natural and man-made beauty.

"Three Centuries of June," a mournful ode to a soon-to-be-razed Victorian house, speaks to the ephemeral nature of childhood, a period of halcyon days filled with school and joyfully aimless play.

Lawrence Jordan's 1965 film "Cornell," a roving, intentionally fragmented view of the artist's boxes, rounds out this unusual program.

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