

## Nathaniel Dorsky Three Songs

Thursday, March 5, 2009 — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
Introduced by poet and critic Bill Berkson

The films of Nathaniel Dorsky blend a beautiful celebration of the sensual world with a deep sense of introspection and solitude. They are occasions for reflection and meditation on light, landscape, time and the motions of consciousness. Their effulgent photography emphasizes the elemental *frisson* between solidity and luminosity, between spirit and matter, while his uniquely developed montage permits a fluid and flowing experience of time. Dorsky's films reveal the mystery behind everyday existence, providing intimations of eternity. The latest films of this master filmmaker (*Song and Solitude*, *Winter* and *Sarabande*) continue his development of these profound traditions. (*Steve Polta*)

***Sarabande*** (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm, color, silent, 15 minutes, print from the maker  
“Dark and stately is the warm, graceful tenderness of the *Sarabande*.” (Nathaniel Dorsky)

***Song and Solitude*** (2005–06) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm, color, silent, 21 minutes, print from the maker

“*Song and Solitude* was conceived and photographed with the loving collaboration of Susan Vigil during the last year of her life. Its balance is more toward an expression of inner landscape, or what it feels like to be, rather than an exploration of the external visual world as such.” (Nathaniel Dorsky)

***Winter*** (2008) by Nathaniel Dorsky; 16mm, color, silent, 21.5 minutes, print from the maker  
“San Francisco's winter is a season unto itself. Fleeting, rain-soaked, verdant, a brief period of shadows and renewal.” (Nathaniel Dorsky)

*“Breathtaking,” I thought, when I saw the closing sequence of San Francisco filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky's [The] Visitation (2002). It fills the screen with slowly descending skeins of reflected light, shimmering from waves as they wash upon a beach, seemingly shot from a considerable height.*

*But “breath-giving” might say it better, because in his soundless films Dorsky frequently finds liberating visual equivalents for the rhythms of lungs and heart.*

*In Song and Solitude (2005-06), [...] one uninterrupted shot captures sunlight and shadow falling alternately upon a pair of dangling golden chains. The chains appear to hang just behind several people sitting at a restaurant table.*

*The sense of discovery in this simple observation, discovery of something revelatory within the mundane, pervades Dorsky's work.*

(over)

*It does not contribute to a narrative, nor does it build to some climactic summary statement. It simply recurs, rephrased in images of varying legibility and familiarity, incrementally gaining a power of attentive truth that can bring viewers to tears. More than any other diaristic filmmaker, Dorsky presents images of the sufficiency of life—as a condition of plenitude matched with awareness—that occur almost nowhere else in the arts of our time.*

*Dorsky's films frequently pose the challenge of discovering—quickly, before a shot expires—why he has incorporated a passage.*

*Sometimes that discovery follows a cut by a few seconds. In *The Visitation*, we get a flashing glimpse of a man moving in dim light before a dark gray surface. Just before a cut ends the sequence, the viewer can spot the target of Dorsky's interest: a thin, mercurial arc of water trailing from a window washer's squeegee stroke.*

*In other sequences, we get more time to see what transpires: the filmmaker creating a kind of balance between the content and process of observation, as in a passage from *Threnody* (2004) that views distant, rustling golden foliage through a foreground screen of bare branches. The focal distance slowly changes in this shot, shifting the image from one level to another of abstraction and of implicit engagement with life.*

*Bay Area viewers will recognize the equipment of San Francisco civic life in sequences shot through the glass walls of bus shelters, their frosted glass striations providing a ready-made device for scrambling our reading of image space.*

*Foreground and background, information in reflections and events seen straight through the lens jostle for primacy as we watch certain passages of the films. A heightened consciousness of the material in hand results, and of the levels of unthought decision making involved in viewing more conventional films. (Kenneth Baker: "Dorsky Finds Revelation in the Mundane." *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 6, 2006)*

Introducer Bill Berkson is a poet and critic who lives in San Francisco and New York. His latest book is *PORTRAIT AND DREAM: NEW & SELECTED POEMS* (Coffee House Press, 2009).

*Gratitude for their contributions to the success of this program is extended to:*

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