

Of Heaven and Earth Films of Tom Chomont

Tuesday, September 29, 2009 — San Francisco Art Institute

curated and presented by Kyle Stephen

presented in association with Frameline and the SFAI Department of Film

Like Jordon Belson's spiritual animations, Chomont's films are often reminiscent of mandalas. Unlike Belson, however, Chomont does not see the spiritual as something that develops apart from everyday life. In Chomont's films, the medium of film is a means of bridging the gap between the mundane and the mystical: the strip of celluloid, the image on screen, become a location where the spiritual and the material meet." (Scott McDonald, *A Critical Cinema*)

Tom Chomont—a prominent figure of the New York underground film and leather scenes as well as a longtime HIV and Parkinson's Disease survivor—has created over sixty experimental film and video works which explore the transcendental possibilities of the physical world. Chomont's 16mm films—approximately forty created between 1961 and 1989—might best be described as lyrical diary films or impressionistic portraits. With rapid montage of variations on small moments, he transforms fleeting encounters with friends and lovers into short, densely layered film meditations, often homoerotic in nature. The superimposition of color positive and high-contrast black-and-white negative creates the signature glow of his mesmerizing films.

In 1990, Chomont began working exclusively in video. While extending his filmic visual sensibility to the new medium, he also exploits the hard-edged qualities and crude special effects of video. Much of the later work contains explicit sadomasochistic imagery and features the artist himself. Yet, as with his entire body of work, the formal composition manifests the transcendent aspects of physical experience and ritual—in this case, pain, bondage, domination and humiliation.

Of Heaven and Earth: Films of Tom Chomont is a partial survey of Chomont's films and videos with work ranging from 1967–2000. It features nine 16mm films (1967-1971) restored in 2009 by the Outfest Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation, a collaboration between Outfest and the UCLA Film & Television Archive, with funding in part by the National Film Preservation's Avant-Garde Masters Grant. A special thanks to Tom Chomont, Jim Hubbard, Ross Lipman, the UCLA Film & Television Archive and the Outfest Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation for their contributions and assistance. (Kyle Stephan)

Newly Restored Films

Ophelia/The Cat Lady (1969) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, b&w/color, sound, 3 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Paired film portraits inspired by reading about John Millais' painting *Ophelia* and the horror films of Chomont's childhood.

Love Objects (1971) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 11 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

A portrait of polymorphous lovers that references the Medieval parable of *Les Noces du Roi et Reine* and the marriage of opposites... dichotomy resolved in unity.

The Mirror Garden (1967) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

A romantic and lyric study of a young friend and readings he encouraged, especially Mallarmé.

Epilog/Siam (1968) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 6 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Two portraits paired, one warm, one cold.

Jabbok (1967) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, b&w, silent, 3 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

The story of Jacob wrestling the angel at the stream called Jabbok.

Phases of the Moon: The Parapsychology of Everyday Life (1968) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 5 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

"I usually avoid the term 'film poem,' because it was overused in the '40s and '50s. But somehow it fits *Phases of The Moon*; it is a film poem and nothing else. A small, miniature film poem, a jewel, if the word masterpiece is too stuffy." (Jonas Mekas, 1973)

Oblivion (1969) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 5 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

A luminous erotic portrait of a young neighborhood hustler.

Other Non-Restored Film and Video Work

The Heavens/Earth (Paired Films) (1977/1978) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes and 5 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Paired films.

Chaos envelops a lone, topless man, whose symmetrical abstractions conjure up a psychedelic version of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (*The Heavens*). Flashing lights illuminate black faces and dark eyes, oscillating between darkness and inverted lightness (*Earth*).

Razor Head (1984) by Tom Chomont; 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes, print from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

One man shaves another in a private erotic ritual. Chomont's older brother is the barber.

Slash Portrait for Clark (1994) by Tom Chomont; video, color, sound, 7 minutes, tape from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

A kaleidoscopic portrait of Chomont's lover, Clark, in leather with his obedient slave.

Sadistic Self Portrait (1994) by Tom Chomont, video, color, sound, 4 minutes, tape from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

The filmmaker explores the self as sadist.

[Self] [Portrait] (2000) by Tom Chomont with Mike Hoolboom; video, color, sound, 4 minutes, tape from the UCLA Film & Television Archive

A portrait of Chomont shot by Mike Hoolboom.

Program Notes by Kyle Stephan

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