

# CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

ONE OF THE FOUR CARNEGIE MUSEUMS OF PITTSBURGH

## Stan Brakhage interview with Donald Miller

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Stan Brakhage:...is going to be much more of a inspiration than the actual room, than the actual dentist's office in *Song 17* or whatever I have to be photographed. So then very often, I think the prime inspiration becomes that I know what film is in there, know it consciously, usually. Some way I see certain colors in my environment [inaudible 00:00:55] and certain shapes and things that I feel move people, in photographing light in this way. Then, also it happens, that I'm not aware. Sometimes I think I have indoor film and it turns out when I see the footage, I had outdoor film. More often that not, this is still a fine film. Here's why I think the subconscious did all along anyway know what I had in there, after all I put it in there. When I put it in there- [inaudible 00:01:20- 00:02:57]

[00:02:58]...But meaning here, it's not means, any more than they- or I have to say, meaning is not the point. Following along a track of light has means, moving light has means rather than meaning in that intellectual sense. [inaudible 00:03:14] too. Did I get too complicated there? What I mean is, I'm sitting in a dentist's office and from very bad experience as a child extremely nervous and wish to be anywhere else on earth and very disturbed at that moment and I'm looking around and the light seems to be so. I know either consciously or subconsciously what kind of film I have in the camera and I begin moving along the track of light. I get an expression of the room, which is not important to know that it's a dentist's office. That's also interesting, but not important at all to the film, really. The first particular person who saw it thought It must have been the waiting room of a whore house or something-very exotic, off-beat, Lower East Side whore house. Which might equally well have inspired me to make a very similar film. Yes?

Donald Miller: Why do use film as a media? Last night when you were talking, I got the impression that you do a lot of different arts. Sort of a "renaissance man" of music and painting and poetry. Why choose film to work in?

Stan Brakhage: I didn't, it chose me. I'll tell you how literally. My great love is poetry and I wanted since I was 8 or 9 years old to be a poet, more than anything on earth. I was reading poetry constantly through junior high school and high school and thinking of myself as a young poet and wishing to be a poet and in fact-in other words, that means I, knowing I was obsessed to do something all along this line, in fact way back at 3 or 4 years old, when I started staging plays and things of that sort with neighborhood children, I felt a sense of destiny about the arts. Poetry seemed to me and still does, the very greatest art. I'm fondest of it, myself. I really love poetry and I wanted to be a poet, but I made-means that I'm praying to the muse of poetry or in my subconscious, might think poetry, but my prayers are not answered. I struggled along, attempting poetry for many years, but I was fortunate enough to have the experience of some very great poets. Most primarily, starting with Robert Douglas and soon began to realize I was not gifted in these ways. [00:05:59]

Recently, poetry editor of Capitol Magazine was at my house, which by the way I think is the finest literary magazine at the moment in the country. It's catclutter magazine. I've thought so for a long, long time. Clayton was talking about how you plead with muse and I understood that in terms of poetry, but then there came a point where I sort of fell into making my first film and I thought of myself as a poet making film. In fact, the medium- I want to be careful. Robert Duncan reminded the world recently in some conversations that the medium is not an art. This is an important thing to realize in this time that we've had all of the glooms bullshit. Just exactly what I mean, that a medium is not an art, but medium is more appropriate actually, to things like raising the dead, or religions, so to speak, but I felt anyway, at some parts.

I was talking to Clayton, I was agreeing with him and then I would take a bath and I have some of my greatest moments taking baths. I suddenly felt overwhelmingly, this wasn't right. I jumped out of the bathtub and dried myself off and ran out and said, "No." I importuning the muse for years and years and I could write poetry, but I was chosen by another muse, or perhaps the same one, who knows, to make film. From that point on, I've had to be dragged into the film that I'm making. These relationships, whatever they actually mean, are very human and there are many different kinds of relationships of love between people and are not dissimilar in this kind of relationship where the man chooses and pleads with the woman, he's down on his knees and importuning, or standing up and importuning is more the fashion these days. All the same, the drive is the same, then she commits the love because she has it in that way for him, or there is the other relationship where he is chosen by a woman who in fact then saves him. That as a matter of fact, is much more the kind of marriage that I have.

It certainly is the relationship that I have with [inaudible 00:08:49] muses, as I understand it. She chose me to make film. I wanted to be a poet, so therefore now the relationship is [inaudible 00:08:57]. I'm sure there's as many varieties these possibilities as there are artists, and in terms of love-making as there are human beings.

Donald Miller: -with the muse that made you feel that making movies was chosen?

Stan Brakhage: It was an obsession, in one way. Just to say it simply, I'm successful at achieving something that I could regard as an art, and that finally others came to regard as such, in film. Whereas, not in poetry. I could have, the sloppiness of attention given to poetry these days, I could have become accepted as a poet very easily, of course, socially, but what I was able to do with language didn't meet my own feelings that that was an art whereas in film, I felt I was quite close, working along in my head at times a clear sense of achievement having accomplished such as a filmmaker. Was obsessed in a particular way, to go back to it again and again. It was dragging me by the short hairs, so to speak because I was naturally very competent with machinery and very disturbed and [inaudible 00:10:14] fussed with the whole paraphernalia of

creating an art through machines and filled with shoddiest art in the sense that it has the shortest history and it inherits the worst social problems and it's up against a whole battery of usage in films and overwhelmed any consideration for a film to be an art. [00:10:31]

Socially it's art, but poetry has a tradition, so people do know the difference between a TV ad that rhymes and tells you how to buy Pepsi-Cola and at least an academic poet, they do know that the TV ad is not art, at least I hope they still do. They do not know that that same visual ad is not art. They do not know that Hollywood- that what's comparable in all. They know that Zane Grey is not a poem, but they do not know that a Hollywood film based on the Zane Grey novel, made by John Ford is not an art. Matter of fact, they're absolutely determined to prove that it is. The Museum of Modern Art shows as the art is filmed, what would be comparable to a college teaching as the art of poetry Agatha Christie. I inherited the worst social spot. Also, it as an art it has a history less than 100 years old. Dating in from George Maze [inaudible 00:11:39], you have really 1890 as the date to say that an [inaudible 00:11:41] had to be an art. Possibilities [inaudible 00:11:44]. Plus it's expensive. I was a very poor man. I still am. Will be so all my life, probably because the expenses of film are horrendous and a poet takes a piece of paper and a pencil and writes and for a filmmaker to do that, he's spent 100 dollars at least you see.

In fact, to do anything of any large scope, you spend thousands of dollars and so for all these reasons, I felt dragged into it, you see. It was just-that I saw that art could come through me and [inaudible 00:12:27] and not with language because I'm very good, I think at speaking, lecturing, or I write poemics, I'm good at writing poemics and that sort of thing, but I don't have intrinsically, or how do you say, I'm not obsessed with [inaudible 00:12:46] like any poet has to be if you really want to achieve anything. Yes?

Donald Miller: Do you feel you have accomplished what you started to actually accomplish in your films? Do you have on film what you started out thinking that you were going to have on film?

Stan Brakhage: Never. If I did I'd be a total failure as an artist.

Donald Miller: You feel that you've accomplished what you wanted to accomplish, expressing what you wanted to express?

Stan Brakhage: How can I answer that [inaudible 00:13:15], let's see. When the film is finished, I'm it's first audience, or in fact, the fact of making it, I'm the first audience, OK? The obsession seems satisfying. By obsession, I mean so simple a thing as like a natural process like fucking, or peeing, shitting, breathing. I feel I can breathe again, which is a particularly good way to put it, as I suffered from asthma all the time. I feel I can breathe again. I'm back in my skin in relationship to whatever it was I was filming. I can live in the world

again. It satisfied that need that brought it into being, just like that need brings, for instance any natural need is in answer to an absolute necessity. At the moment, the necessity is satisfied and the work is finished.

Donald Miller: Then why show it?

Stan Brakhage: I wouldn't have to. That's my social graciousness.

Donald Miller: OK.

Stan Brakhage : That's the wish- no it's more than that, it's loving. That's like why do you love, you could masturbate. No reason on earth. Masturbating is much simpler. Can be a lot of fun. Can [inaudible 00:14:35] total woman of the imagination breathes, "Why fuck? Why risk anything?" The risk really is also to live in the world and in a lot of senses to give out, to share. Why not call your children your own and make them be just exactly as you want them to be? Because they must have a life of their own, go out in the world and must suffer all the risks and anyone who tries to hedge on that ends up with disaster and power terms of their whole personal life. The whole impulse is to free everything that you make or create or discover, to give it out to everybody. That's a loving impulse and why share anything with anyone else is the answer to that question. [00:15:28]

In terms of satisfaction, [inaudible 00:15:30] either because then once the film gets given out, once I've seen it and it satisfied that need to make it and it gets moving out in the world, so to speak, then I come to it as an audience again and again, hoping to hear it in different company. I see the films today differently because of the gathering and the occasion and because of my time and life and I've never seen them before. These films we just looked at, I suppose I've seen upwards of around 50 times. Somewhere between 40 and 50 times, depending on which or whom you're talking about. I've seen them that often, so why sit here and look at them again? Because I wish to share, well this second part is satisfaction. As I really begin to be aware that the thing is what begins to satisfy the first demands as an art is I can see them over and over and they show me more than when I was making them. They have a life of their own that teaches me. They have a life in essence, they grow as I grow.

If you don't grow, no one allows you to grow because you cannot see them grow, cannot share. As I change and grow and expect more and more of my work, I'm amazed that some very early works hold tremendous interest for me. Others do not. There are some that I've seen 100 times or 50 times or a few that I've seen 10 times that don't interest me anymore. That's another satisfaction, then there's another yet which is that other people then also find that they see 20, 30, 50, some people have seen some of my films very much more often than I have. They say that they hold up and grow for them, so then

we share that in the world. The work I've made operates as an art for other people which makes it then social art.

It could remain just personal art. I have works which I look at over and over again which no one else I know does. I do remain the first and finally last audience of those works. I'm the first and last audience for many of my works in the sense that that's always my proper business really is to lead my own life, and the like. To do that and not get stilted and cracked and ingrown, one must go out, or I feel the need to go out and share in the general air of other peoples' consideration, which is often very hard. I mean, I've been attacked viciously for showing certain films. Whole audiences rioting, things of that sort, which is unbearable to me. It is as unbearably painful, for instance, when I make a work and give it out to whomever, to have that company, the average New York criticism on it is to me as painful as say, when a woman has just given birth to a baby, she hurt, exhausted and ready to receive the child with all of it's labor, and found the doctors shaking their heads and saying, "No. It will never live." or "It's deformed." It's just painful. It's not easy to give things out because in fact, what's the irony here, god-willing doctors never come to this, but what's the irony here is that they call for century all new works in progress that come out, the average critic. That critic and every person has to regard the deformed because they are [inaudible 00:19:16]. [inaudible 00:19:18] process is the same, say, in teaching. If children begin to be different, then everyone regards them as deformed and to some extent this happens again and again at every push of a new generation. That's very hard. It's very painful to take, as a matter of fact.

Donald Miller: You said that metaphors that compare rage and Jane-

Stan Brakhage: Yes, 13 years ago I was ready to die. I was very ill and ready to kill myself. In fact, that was true of her also, which is often the case. We saved each other so to speak, from

Donald Miller: [inaudible 00:20:13] or your wife, how do you [inaudible 00:20:36]

Stan Brakhage: I don't understand what you mean.

Donald Miller: With the family and manage to keep yourself from suffocating?

Stan Brakhage: I think the same way any other one who has a family-

Donald Miller: [inaudible 00:20:50]

Stan Brakhage: I find only and again the social sense that art is-[end of recording 00:20:51]

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