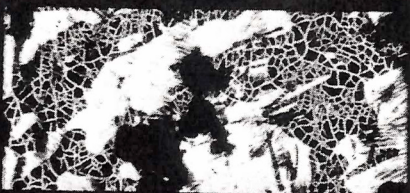


STAN BRAKHAGE:  
CORRESPONDENCES





Argument for the Immediate Sensuous:  
Notes on *Stately Mansions Did Decree* and *Coupling*

Brakhage's films delight and incite with a restless, unadulterated visual magnificence. Expanding the language of light, color, and visual rhythm, he takes film far beyond its usual bondage to representation and story telling. From his stomach-turning yet vital film document of autopsies, *The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes* (1971) to his abstract and sumptuous hand-painted *Persian Series* (1990s), Brakhage's works uproot established and comfortable ways of seeing. In all their manifestations, Brakhage's films call for active participation and openness from viewers, and in turn they teach us about our relation to time and perception, and introduce us to new forms of pleasure.

A few years ago Brakhage put it this way: "Much of my life's work constitutes an attempt to subvert the representational photography IS by creating a sense of constant present tense in each film's every instant of viewing" (*EB*, 210). Brakhage's hand-painted films are a case in point, in that they demand to be experienced in a succession of immediate visual moments. In a five-minute film he paints and projects thousands of 16mm film frames, and though each film has its own palette and a predominant texture (inspiration), every frame is distinct, abstract and separate. Brakhage hints at solid forms, but no particular image is ever animated into coherent motion as in traditional animation. Each painting flies by at a fraction of a second, so the viewer can never "catch up" with seeing and holding all the enlarged single frames Brakhage projects to us from the screen. This multitude of disappearing paintings creates an immediate sensual experience for viewers.

In *Immediate Stages of the Erotic*, a study of music and the sensuous erotic in human nature, Kierkegaard inadvertently illuminates an essential quality of Brakhage's hand-painted films when describing Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*:

The genius of sensuousness is hence the absolute subject of music. In its very essence sensuousness is absolutely lyrical, and in music it breaks forth in all its lyrical impatience. It is, namely, spiritually determined, and is, therefore, force, life, movement, constant unrest, perpetual succession; but this unrest, this succession, does not enrich it, it remains always the same, it does not unfold itself, but it storms uninterruptedly forward as if in a single breath. If I desired to characterize this lyrical quality by a single predicate, I should say: it *sounds*; and this brings me back again to sensuous genius as that which in its immediacy manifests itself in music.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard declared that "sensuous-erotic genius demands expression in all its immediacy," and he concluded that music was the only medium appropriate for the purpose (and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* the most perfect rendering). But many years later Film was born, "step-child of Song and Light," and today Stan Brakhage is making films which "storm uninterruptedly forward" in lush luminescent music. It is the orchestration of colors, painted textures, composition, and visual tempo that constitutes the life of each work. And, though Brakhage's films are technically silent, indeed they "sound" in their "perpetual succession" and "constant unrest."

For all the pleasure Brakhage's painted films can deliver, they also arouse a heightened awareness of color, texture, and detail, and compel the viewer to reflect on her own thought processes. Viewers can become so hyper-aware watching that they can catch themselves spectating—watching the self watch (even at the cost of true engagement with) the film. The films' multi-layered effects can be so overwhelming that viewers, unable to hold onto anything familiar, might seek control through objectifying the process, guessing at technique or content: "Do I see bodies? Thighs? Was that double-exposed

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David F. and Lillian M. Swensen, (Princeton UP, 1959), vol. I, p. 70 (original italics).

or just layers upon layers of paint?" First-time viewers may rebel in frustration. Even seasoned avant-garde film goers can find themselves in that unfortunate place of seeking something know-able to affirm that one's abilities to perceive can contend with the dominant beauty of the film's unfolding. But one must humble oneself to (meet) pleasure. When you think too much, you miss the sensuous beauty of it.

Watching *Stately Mansions Did Decree* and *Coupling* during a Brakhage screening at Millennium in New York last year, I just felt lucky to be sitting there, taking them in, and content that I couldn't tell my friends about the films, as my descriptions would be quite futile. When later I was asked if I'd like to write about Brakhage my first reaction was: can I make a film instead? But that would have been cheating since I already had. Shortly after seeing those films I started painting *Fear of Blushing*, responding to the works and affirming Brakhage's talk on permissions. He spoke to the audience at that screening about the essential dialogue between works and between artists. Some quality or light in the work of one filmmaker will inspire and open a door permitting another to continue to push forward with their own work. This was the gift these films gave to me.

STATELY MANSIONS DID DECREE (1999, 7 mins) begins with silvery gray, cloud-like masses, inscribed by paint in black, blue, yellow, turquoise, green, white, red. There are too many colors to pin down a palette, but they have a common vividness and density. Soft and sharp shapes intermix in rapid fluctuating rhythm while colors puncture and punctuate a two-dimensional surface, which burns instantaneously in and out of view. Soon there seems to be a form splitting the picture's center, but it is barely perceptible. Is the viewer simply looking for a backbone for the film—a vertical horizon? Or is this the doorway leading to the interior of this mansion/pleasure-dome/film? (The title refers to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which begins, "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree.")

Bright silvery gray returns and is joined by pinks and blues. The viewer looks for patterns: swirling rectangular currents of painted fire? The texture of brush strokes and fallen bristles are revealed more



clearly as the film progresses (or have the viewer's eyes quickened enough to discern a stray hair?). Emphasized is the two-dimensional surface of film, likening it to the paper upon which great ideas and visions become.

It is entirely satisfying to be lost and found in the barrage of rich colors and evolving rhythm, yet one could get wary trying to behold forms or a compositional structure. Conventional logic, the desire to possess, cannot be imposed on this beauty. The absolute, sensuous splendor here is elusive. And this effect echoes Brakhage's comments on the film (in conversation) where he sees, "a sense of history written in fire on parchment, castles and interiors built up and burnt down, the life of an idea in medieval times." Though *Stately Mansions Did Decree* elucidates its various inspirations (which include Coleridge's poem and J.M.W. Turner's Petworth Park watercolors) Brakhage's film is vital and complete in itself, never illustrating these works concretely. The viewer may not see parchment, though she senses a two-dimensional surface alive with color and movement. Painted images become and dissolve as immediately as the interrupted idea loses its force (just as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" was interrupted by the "man from Porlock").

There is a harmony between improvisation (the magic in Brakhage's action painting) and a mindful scoring of elements (in re-photographing the frames for viewing) in *Stately Mansions*, as in much of his other hand-painted work. Brakhage uses the optical-printer lens to illuminate his film paintings as sharp or soft, three-dimensional pigment or two-dimensional surface, shadow or highlight. And then the printer becomes his instrument for improvising visual music. Painted frames speed by at intricate and varying rhythms (combinations of step-printing rates), so the viewer is invited to sit back and feel each individual moment or burst of light and color without a shadow of anticipation. Floating in a sea of color, we are supported but not forewarned of the next instant of rocking and swelling. The crests of waves are not perfectly matched, but the breathing of the sea and the urging towards voluptuousness has its worth in being, not in meaning. Overall weight and velocity balance, while never being mechanical. During brief periods when a steady visual rhythm is perceptible, the stability in tempo allows the viewer to fo-

cus more carefully on subtle textural change and fleeting color-bursts, which have no other anchor. The waves of images hold the viewer in that continual present tense.

COUPLING (1999, 5 mins [see plates 3-6]) emerges with a black background (the beyond), while in the foreground gray three-dimensional forms engage in a vanishing dance. Vibrant red, green, turquoise, yellow, and orange are all-surrounding and seem to be scraped or as if scrawled with crayon. Frames are primarily filled in red, like blood swollen flesh. Soft focus photographic images come briefly through the painting but never give way to representation. Could this be pixilated film footage of dancers or lovers, buried in the painted oblivion? The mind can wonder but never know.

All at once: tactile colors condense or break apart like lava. Long limb-like forms from one frame leave their touch upon the next. Irregular, highlighted shapes are framed by rhythmic splatters of color and shadow. Painted images, continually replaced by hundreds more, are fluid on top of each other. There is always the past in present at any moment as the dark background holds an afterimage of forms that were there before.

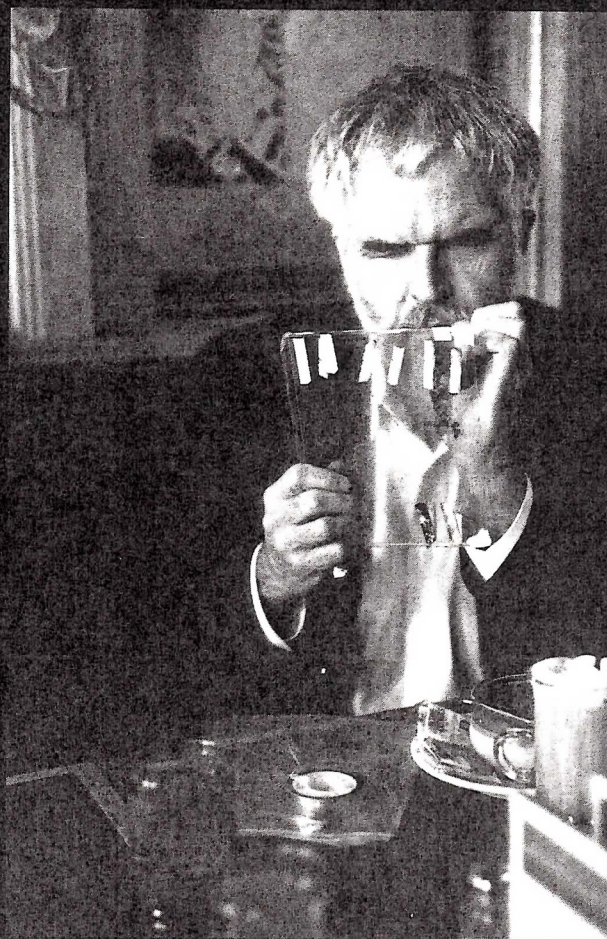
I fear that all this verbiage goes against the film's purpose for existing, but at the same time I realize the desire to absorb its entirety is quite natural. How can a person surrender to this mystical, gorgeous film and not be greedy about it? In introducing *Coupling*, Brakhage had indeed said something about greediness. Part of his inspiration for the film was that wish to see ALL of it, even the insides of organs, moving and flowing in the act of loving and coupling. Brakhage's film is a tender, intimate, and unabashed offering, so its visual phenomena bring to life the inspiration.

After viewing *Coupling* ten times it still makes me crazy, which means that I'm in love with this film, the shameless excess of it. I wonder if other viewers also feel this thrill and I'm almost jealous of them partaking in this cinematic flesh. Reflection, like jealousy, is self-inflicted and spoils the rapture of passion. One moment I look at color and the next I think about shape. I pay attention to texture and



then I focus on rhythm or composition. So much occurs in the immediate, it is absurd to separate all these elements (who tries to taste flour in the cake?). I blink my eyes to capture the single frame after-images on my closed eyelids. But then I'm distressed for missing too much while trying to hold onto one visual moment. So much occurs and disappears instantaneously one should surrender to the pleasure and beauty of the film's unfolding, as with a lover. If you are continuously aware of this arm and that limb (this technique, that touch, this texture) how can you love the being? How can you happen upon bliss? Hesitating to name what you enjoy turns enjoyment into the anxiety of losing what you've named. Abandon is necessary. Viewer, please say, "I surrender."





Brakhage in Boston, 1995.  
Photo by Robert A. Haller.