

*“Just think of yourself as frozen and how many snow flakes you’d be and how much, in the synaptic nervous system, you’ve never been at all like anybody else. So in that celebration of uniqueness, particularly at times when the push is to treat people as so much alike, you can be that unique and you can still be intrinsically part of your culture, otherwise, and maybe even in respect to that, art is useless. It is it’s uselessness that’s important.”*

- Stan Brakhage, November 6, 1995. Art Gallery of Ontario.

I first encountered the works of Stan Brakhage many years ago during film school. I first appreciated Brakhage when I collided with lengthy screenings of his fantastic work when he visited Regina in 1988. I finally fell completely in love with his work three years ago when I finally had the opportunity to watch more of his films multiple times, when I attended a series of his newest works, when I finally smartened up and read some of his clever and stimulating books. Now when I see his films, I cannot understand not being completely floored by the images, the speed, the rhythm, the spirit.

Stan Brakhage began creating works of art using film as the medium in 1952. By the sixties he was a master of rhythm and light, constructing poetic visions from thousands of captured glimpses. He also began writing, publishing his first volume, *Metaphors on Vision* in 1962. His later books include *Film Biographies* (1977), *Brakhage Scrapbook (Collected Writings)* (1982) and *Film at Wits End* (1989).

In 1955 in his film *Reflections On Black*, Brakhage began manipulating the surface of the film, pushing the limits of audience perception one more step. Although that film had only scratched eyes, he quickly escalated his emulsion alteration. *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Thigh Line Triangle* (1961) include footage which has been ground and scratched and coloured to begin to simulate what Brakhage called “closed eye vision”, those optical effects you “see” when you rub your eyes.

The use of ink on the film escalated further in the eighties when Brakhage applied his palate to larger gages of film in such works as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981), a densely colourful work which included no photographed images at all. In the past few years, Brakhage has dedicated most of his efforts towards this style of work.

Of Brakhage’s over three hundred films, most of them, including all the films in tonight’s program, are silent. The reasons for this are many. Brakhage feels that his strength lies in the image creation, not in his sound/composition. He also feels that the sound in many films draw considerable attention away from the image and he would rather help people to discover the joys of vision. Cost is also an issue, as Brakhage makes a number of films each year, his output would have to reduce if he added the extra expense of sound. Further, it is rather absurd for every film to be expected to also have sound. As he says, “Who ever expected a brass band with a painting?”

Despite problems with eyesight and a bout with cancer, Brakhage continues to be one of the most prolific filmmakers in America. Hailing from Boulder, Colorado, he is rarely seen without a vest pocketful of magic markers and piece of film clipped to a plastic easel crammed in beside them.

Gerald Saul, programmer

*“What haunts the most is that which is barely noticed in passing and as it’s barely noticed in passing over and over again, day by day, as it moves through life, it becomes the true haunted place”* – Stan Brakhage, November 6, 1995

**Program: Handmade Films by Brakhage**  
**Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative**  
**Friday, November 21, 1997**

Impressions I have had on the films we are showing tonight:

***Mothlight*** (1963, 4 minutes)

This is one of Brakhage's older, and best known films. It is also one of my favourites. It is composed of hundreds of moth wings, collected from the inside of lamps and windows. Brakhage painstakingly collected them up, pressing them together between two layers of tape. The strip of tape then became the film as he had it run through a film printer. The process gnarled the original beyond further use. Luckily none was needed. The resulting film is a magnificent view of moths dancing. In his catalogues, Brakhage calls it "What a moth might see from birth to death if black were white and white were black". However, I suggest it might be described as what a light bulb might see, hanging on the porch all night, the object of this nocturnal insect's desire – a tragic love story.

***I Take These Truths*** (1994, 35 minutes)

What may "be self evident" to Brakhage can also be so for us if "we" open our I/EYES to it. This is one of the most lush of Brakhage's hand painted films, utilizing more brush strokes than magic markers. The images all seem to rise in the frame, pulling our eyes and our spirits up until our minds are at full attention. Other than the title, Brakhage attempted to distance this film as far as possible from the realm of language. The resulting film is full of a sense of well being.

***Black Ice*** (1994, 2.5 minutes)

The invisible surface, a danger that you see too briefly and too late. The mood of this film is darker than most of Brakhage's others. Rather than it being a glorification of what one can see, it is about the fear of what one cannot. As with a number of these handpainted films, Brakhage has had the images optically printed, occasionally step printing and superimposing segments, to further intensify the visual experience. *"I'll just say of black ice that I did slip once on it and I have no memory of falling down – woke up bleeding of the forehead, a block and a half later, walking along. The fall caused a cataract, caused that operation. Now I have intentionally thin blood to keep from making clots. I walk on black ice in a particular sense of its absolute peril. If I were to crash down like that again, that'd be the end".* – Brakhage, November 6, 1995.

***I...*** (1995, 40 minutes)

Another of the handpainted films. This time the paint is a bit thinner, the speckles are like grit with the colours seeming to be washes of diluted opaque paint. As the paint is laid on thicker, the emulsion cracks and is scratched revealing patterns, or at least allowing us to imagine patterns, below the surface. Stare at the open spaces and the whole image seems to spin around you. The title "I..." may also mean "eye" because, as with all Brakhage films, the act of seeing is first and foremost.

*"I can paint where ever I get a chance and I mean, it's no more odd than any other painter except that it's on film. That's the only oddity. So I beg pardon for that and hope that you forgive it and let it sing its song tonight." – Brakhage, November 6, 1995.*