

Collected works of Stan Brakhage, film pioneer and longtime CU professor, preserved in new center

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Stan Brakhage loved poetry and befriended poets but dubbed himself a failed poet. Many experts disagreed. He was, they said, a consummate poet -- one who spoke in the language of film and measured his meter in frames.

Brakhage, a longtime faculty member at the University of Colorado Boulder, is described by colleagues as the most famous visual artist to hail from Colorado. With the support of the William H. Donner Foundation, the university has established a center in Brakhage's honor and has amassed an archive of Brakhage's 400 films and numerous writings.

Brakhage's friends, colleagues, admirers and former students say the center and its collection is only the beginning of an effort to preserve the work of many avant-garde filmmakers.



In 2004, about a year after Brakhage died at age 70, a New York Times film critic put it this way: "His films, which are mostly without dialogue, text or words of any kind, are more often compared to poetry than are other, presumably nearer forms of visual expression."

Brakhage's work has influenced mainstream filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Oliver Stone, and has even been reflected in television commercials, cartoons and MTV videos, according to Daniel Boord, CU-Boulder professor of film studies and director of the Brakhage Center.

Boord characterizes Brakhage's work as a "radical departure" in film. "It's more like poetry, and it's more like music than the visual arts," he said.

Donald Yannacito, a senior instructor of film studies who knew and worked with Brakhage beginning in the 1960s, said Brakhage was influenced by Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, early modernist poet Ezra Pound and others.

Boord joined the CU-Boulder faculty a year after Brakhage's death and resolved to honor him. "I wanted to take stock in his accomplishments and to build on that legacy by calling attention to this form of filmmaking through a symposium."

On March 11-13, the university will host the seventh annual Stan Brakhage Symposium, the first to be held under the auspices of the Stan Brakhage Center.

The symposium was an extension of a regular salon hosted by Brakhage. In the '70s and '80s, Brakhage would show films at his home or other locations. He wouldn't discuss or explain the films himself, but he would invite his guests to engage in thoughtful critiques.

Brakhage used disparate images without narrative or conventional plot lines. He scratched, colored and wrote on the film itself. He even pasted physical objects perhaps most famously in 1963's "Mothlight," which included the wings of moths and other insects, along with leaves and other matter.

In 1964, Brakhage completed "Dog Star Man," later included in the National Film Registry in the Library of Congress, a distinction bestowed on films of particular importance.

As The New York Times wrote on the occasion of Brakhage's death, "The idea that the physical act of seeing could be separated -- liberated even -- from the shape and nature of the things seen, and from our preconceptions about them, was the basis of much of Mr. Brakhage's art."

Bruce Montgomery, faculty director of the archives at CU-Boulder Libraries and chief curator of the Brakhage Center, emphasized that the collection of Brakhage's work in the archives is both important in itself and a foundation for a larger collection of experimental media by other artists.

With the generous, longtime support of the Donner Foundation in New York, the Brakhage collection was completed in 2007. The collection already is the most heavily used in the CU-Boulder archives, by about a factor of four, Montgomery notes.

Bill Spencer, a former student of Brakhage's, serves on the board of directors of the Donner Foundation. He helped convince the foundation to purchase Brakhage's work, which was being stored by the Museum of Modern Art, and to help establish the Brakhage Center.

Like Montgomery, Spencer noted that the Brakhage Center ultimately aims to preserve significant portions of the genre. In many people's minds, film is the pre-eminent art of the 20th century, Spencer says.

Spencer likened failing to preserve such works of art to "letting something like a Picasso just decay in somebody's attic."

Spencer said the Brakhage Center aims to advance the preservation, research, education and exhibition in experimental media arts. "While it's not a center about Stan Brakhage, it certainly springs from Brakhage and will go on to many other things."

The Seventh Annual Brakhage Symposium, a weekend of short works programs, lectures and discussions that is free and open to the public, will be held March 11, 12 and 13 at the CU Visual Arts Complex, room 1B20. For more information visit www.colorado.edu/FilmStudies/brakhage/symposium_7.shtml

Contact

Daniel Boord, 303-492-2165
daniel.boord@colorado.edu
Donald Yannacito, 303-492-1532
donald.yannacito@colorado.edu
Bruce Montgomery, 303-492-7394
bruce.montgomery@colorado.edu
Clint Talbott, College of Arts and Sciences, 303-492-6111