

Two notes for a talk delivered at the Art Gallery of Ontario, January 2012, on Jack Chambers paintings and films, the first in the Gallery's "What's Happening" guide, the second to be posted online.

Jack Chambers: Perceptualism, Painting and Cinema (Shorter, print version)

Sometime in the mid-1960s, Chambers' interest in seeing—and in Vision—intensified to the point where he felt compelled to address the issue in a more focussed and systematic manner. He prepared a (successful) application for a Senior Artist Grant, to prepare a book on perception and art; in that application Chambers referred to “the analogous mental space of *perception* and mysticism,” and explicitly related *perception* to “peak” experiences. In that same application, he also described perception as “a synaesthetic unity.” From this exploration, which drew upon Saint Teresa of Avila; the occult, and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, came the articles “Perceptual Realism,” published in *Artscanada* in 1969, “Perceptualism, Painting and Cinema,” published in *Art and Artists* in 1972 and the book *Red and Green*, published by Nancy Poole Gallery in 1978.

In “Perceptual Realism,” he described a working method based on a relationship to the reproduction of perceived reality that has no aesthetic and declared his belief in the possibility of reproducing exactly the perceived external. In “Perception, Painting and Cinema,” Chambers wrote:

Perception in process is like a sound movie. Suddenly the picture freezes and loses focus. The sound goes. The defocusing brightens and becomes white light. Then the focus returns, the sound comes back and the film starts moving again. That's a slow-motion version of what happens. The moment of “white light” is the moment of perception. The frame returning to focus and the first returning sounds are the registration of (object world) objects on the nerves as the senses recover.

For Chambers' perception synthesizes (if I can put the point somewhat technically) immediate *qualia* with memory and imagination. Chambers remarked,

A painting gets put together just like an experience—in particles. Mary and Olga Visiting isn't the description of a visual moment; it's the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus.

and expands on the idea:

you are in a room, then in another room where you see an object being held this way, then you see it in motion, a week later a cup is tilting, the next day finger curves in the air against a background, you hear a little click, you swallow a cheese sandwich, something fragile, a cup touches its saucer, you see white . . . a woman rests one leg over the other, pink . . . the thick rug is buff-orange. Sense combinations complement one another to enrich perception.

Chambers' comments allude to his painting “Olga and Mary Visiting” (1964–65). The constellation of images and image fragments in Chambers' paintings suggest the way that a resonant mental image of a concrete moment is assembled, from “particles” of experiences of the present, some of them almost abstract (pink and the buff-orange of the rug), some more particularized, some of them deriving from the immediately present moment, some from a few instants earlier, and some from yet more distant times. Within the avant-garde, the forms of

cinema generally imitate, reflect, express, embody or provide structural parallels to features of consciousness. This general principle applies to the films Jack Chambers' made. Indeed, a motif runs through Chambers' writings on perception—and, indeed, through Chambers' thinking on painting and creativity: a painting points towards a reality different from that which the painting represents. Conveying the character of perception is the goal of Chambers' painting, and perception simply cannot be represented.

Painting can only be a shadow of the original perception since the experience itself loses truth as it materializes. But it is a model of affirmation, of the way Nature lives in us and of our oneness with it. And it is the intention of the artist that this oneness be glimpsed as the content and subject-matter of his work. That is its reality.

Of course, the unrepresentability of perception (understood in Chambers' sense of the word) was enormously productive. We can trace through Chambers paintings the efforts to allude to, or even to provoke, the experience of perception. In painting, he did this most often by showing the visible world (and often a constellation of particles of the visible world) in a way that would evoke the invisible.

By perceptual vision I don't mean hallucinations or images of the imagination. I mean that faculty of inner vision where the object appears in the splendour of its essential namelessness. This vision cannot be duplicated in painting because for the visual sense there is nothing to see: the names and games of the conceptual mind are inoperative during the perceptual moment. Inspiration has taken over the mind.

The cinema, I believe, appealed to Chambers because he hoped that it could embody the passage from the visible to vision and back again to the visible. As the luminous light moments in the central section of *Circle* accumulate, we sense ever more strongly the peculiar combination of the warm intimacy of the artist's depiction of his backyard (with the appearance, then disappearance of laundry hanging on a clothes line, a toddler's plastic wading-pool, and a tricycle) and the selflessness and impersonality implied in the conceptual system the film deploys. The film's rigorous temporal form leads us, if we open ourselves sufficiently to the work, towards intimations of the on-going reality that gives rise to this flux of particulars. The superimpositions in long opening passages of *The Hart of London* hover on the verge of being transfigured into visionary forms, as they allude to the reality of light underlying, and giving rise to, what Chambers referred to as consensus reality. As the products of the same *energeia* that maintains the beings of consensus reality in existence, cinema's light-borne images have an ontological privilege in evoking the ultimate reality of light.

Jack Chambers: Perceptualism, Painting and Cinema (Longer, web version)

R. Bruce Elder

As long ago as 1977, Stan Brakhage posed the deep, troubling question that arises in connection with Jack Chambers' films, "Why are they so little known?"

Jack Chambers is one of Canada's most famous AND greatest living painters. Why then have his films been as neglected as they have been? I feel that it is because his films do not arise as an adjunct to his painting (as is true in the case

of most other painter film-makers) but that, rather, Jack Chambers has realized the almost opposed aesthetics of paint and film and has created a body of moving pictures so crucially unique as to fright paint buffery: thus his films have inherited a social position kin to that of the films of Joseph Cornell in this country. The fact is that four films of Jack Chambers have changed the whole history of film, despite their neglect, in a way that isn't possible within the field of painting. There are no "masters" of film in any significant sense whatsoever. There are only "makers" of film in the original, or at least medieval, sense of the word. Jack Chambers is a true 'maker' of films. He needs no stance, or standing, for he dances attendance upon the coming-into-being of something recognizably NEW.

Brakhage is certainly correct in suggesting that if we gauge Chambers' greatness as a filmmaker simply on the basis of what he made, he is a giant of experimental film. He is also correct in asserting that Chambers' films are set deeply into the cinema's unique being. Nonetheless, his films do have profound connections with his paintings.

In 1954, feeling constrained by London's conservative environment and the inadequacies of his local technical school, H.B. Beal, he left London to travel through Europe and, in the end, to study painting there. In his 1978 autobiography, he wrote, "I could only go so far with what I was doing... coming to the same deadend again and again." From 1954 to 1959 he attended Madrid's Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando where he excelled as a student, winning the state prize for painting and the Paular Scholarship for landscape painting. Kathryn Elder summarizes the importance of his experiences in Spain, and of his return to London, Ontario.

Spanish culture exerted a major influence on Chambers, and many aspects of his work reflect this influence: the preoccupation with death and recollection, the surrealist challenge to the normality of surface reality, an appreciation for light's revelatory power and references to Catholic iconography. Other influences include mysticism, especially the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila; the occult and parapsychology All of these ideas contributed to Chambers' belief in the visionary nature of the artistic experience. For him, the moment of individual self-awareness when "our souls and the souls of things become present to one another" encompassed myriad associations, past and present, which took the form of temporal and spatial disruptions in his artwork.

Chambers might have settled permanently in Spain, but he returned home in 1961 because of a family illness. His encounter with the landscapes of his youth and the memories it engendered had a powerful effect on him: "The memory of such places multiplied the longer I remained so near them, and the images wedded to their presence surfaced in me like the faces of long lost friends." He realized his representations of Spanish culture would never possess the same resonance, and so he returned to London.

Sometime in the mid-1960s, Chambers' interest in seeing—and in Vision—intensified to the point he felt compelled to address issues around perception in a more focussed and systematic manner. He prepared a (successful) application for a Senior Artist Grant, to develop a book on perception and art; in that application Chambers referred to "the analogous mental space of *perception* and mysticism," and explicitly related *perception* to "peak" experiences. In that same application, he also described perception as "a synaesthetic unity." From this exploration, which, in addition to the sources Kathryn Elder mentioned, drew ideas from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, came the articles "Perceptual Realism," published in *Artscanada* in 1969, "Perceptualism, Painting and Cinema," published in *Art and Artists* in 1972 and the book *Red and Green*, published by Nancy Poole Gallery in 1978.

In "Perceptual Realism," he described a working method based on a relationship to the reproduction of perceived reality that has no aesthetic and declared his belief in the possibility of reproducing exactly the perceived external. Only through this transmission of the perceived relationship between the artist and nature, claimed Chambers, could a true spiritual understanding of the energy and life cycle inherent in things be understood. In another article, titled "Perception, Painting and Cinema," Chambers wrote:

Perception in process is like a sound movie. Suddenly the picture freezes and loses focus. The sound goes. The defocusing brightens and becomes white light. Then the focus returns, the sound comes back and the film starts moving again. That's a slow-motion version of what happens. The moment of "white light" is the moment of perception. The frame returning to focus and the first returning sounds are the registration of (object-world) objects on the nerves as the senses recover. What the senses record and how and when they record it is an example of creation projecting its pattern on the world. Creation is the energy which informs sensory reality in the object world as it transcends the object's world in perception. Our encounter with reality is at an appropriate and substantial point along the attenuation of that energy into material form. On recovering the senses after the perceptual impact, one feels the stark wonder of the world and the uniqueness of all its forms. We feel a deep and abiding affection for the physical. What stays with us from day to day more or less consciously is this sense of gentle astonishment at the world is as it is.

And, in a similar vein, in *Red and Green: A Journal*,

Perception is the intelligible brilliance within us, when our soul and the soul of things become present to one another. It is the intuitive unfolding of both the *self* and the *other* in one embrace. The rupture, fading or shadow of this brilliance becomes, at the instant of its fading, the experience of a *what* that lives. The come-down to categories and numbers, to the time of day, returns us and things to the objective world. We are a spiritual centre, surely, but also an object among objects. It is in the immeasurable interval between *oneness* and the emerging, conscious *observer* that the world is glimpsed as unknowable.

In Chambers' idiolect, "Perception" refers to an intensified moment of experience, in which the one sees into reality more deeply, and discovers its nature. But Chambers' theory of perception emphasized, again in a typically Romantic fashion, the reciprocity between the perceiver and the object perceived; accordingly, achieving an insight into nature, one learned more about oneself.

The more we become familiar with the experiences that perception brings the more we become aware of an inherent gentleness in the intercommunion of oneself with things. So gentleness of reception is also a communication that influences the outside world. Finally, perception itself becomes a "forgotten" awareness that just is with all the common naturalness of those common things seen out the window or inside the house or any place.

The passage recalls Goethe's writings on perception. And throughout his writing, Chambers stressed what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe also emphasized: that a perception is synthetic. In *Theory of Colours*, Goethe wrote, "Merely looking at a thing does not allow us to progress. Each

act of looking is a form of meditation, each meditation is a reflection, making connections. We can say that we theorize in the moment we gaze at the world carefully.” For Chambers, perception synthesizes (if I can put the point somewhat technically) immediate *qualia* with memory and imagination. In an interview with one of his first champions, the University of Western Ontario English professor Ross Woodman, Chambers remarked:

A painting gets put together just like an experience—in particles. Mary and Olga Visiting isn’t the description of a visual moment; it’s the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus.

and expands on the idea:

you are in a room, then in another room where you see an object being held this way, then you see it in motion, a week later a cup is tilting, the next day finger curves in the air against a background, you hear a little click, you swallow a cheese sandwich, something fragile, a cup touches its saucer, you see white . . . a woman rests one leg over the other, pink . . . the thick rug is buff-orange. Sense combinations complement one another to enrich perception.

Chambers’ comments allude to his painting “Olga and Mary Visiting” (1964–65). The constellation of images and image fragments in Chambers’ paintings suggest the way that a resonant mental image of a concrete moment is assembled, from “particles” of experiences of the present, some of them almost abstract (pink and the buff-orange of the rug), some more particularized, some of them deriving from to the immediately present moment, some from a few instants earlier, and some from yet more distant times. From the early 1960s on, his paintings evoke consciousness’ synthetic character. Within the avant-garde, the forms of cinema generally imitate, reflect, express, embody or provide structural parallels to features of consciousness. This general principle applies to the films Jack Chambers’ made. Indeed, a motif runs through Chambers’ writings on perception—and, indeed, through Chambers’ thinking on painting and creativity: a painting points towards a different reality from that which the painting represents. Conveying the character of perception is the goal of Chambers’ painting, and perception simply cannot be represented.

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Of course, the unrepresentability of perception (understood in Chambers’ sense of the word) was enormously productive. We can trace through Chambers paintings the efforts to allude to, or even to provoke, the experience of perception. In painting, he did this most often by showing the visible world (and often a constellation of particles of the visible world) in a way that would evoke the invisible.

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In my case, I am convinced that the inspiration always belonged to the object, because the experience of my passage was from the visible object to vision to visible object. I had not turned away from the object. Inspiration or vision occurred between my looking at the object and my continued looking at the object again. It was some moment while I was seeing the thing that it disappeared and I perceived it. Then I was seeing it again. The object is invested then with the experience of inspiration and is seen with the heightened awareness of visionary recall. It is by means of this experience influencing the objective of the thing, that painting seeks to ascend to the excellence of being that is both visible and invisible. The invisible property in the wholeness of vision is the source of unity in the painting. The visible property of the painting describes the act of seeing that occurs after inspiration, while the miracle of the objects appearing still persists.

The cinema, I believe, appealed to Chambers because he hoped that it could embody the passage from the visible to vision and back again to the visible. As the luminous light moments in the central section of *Circle* accumulate, we sense ever more strongly the peculiar combination of the warm intimacy of the artist's depiction of his backyard (with the appearance, then disappearance of laundry hanging on a clothes line, a toddler's plastic wading-pool, and a tricycle) and the selflessness and impersonality implied in the conceptual system the film deploys. The film's rigorous temporal form leads us, if we open ourselves sufficiently to the work, towards intimations of the on-going reality that gives rise to this flux of particulars. The superimpositions in long opening passages of *The Hart of London*—a film Bart Testa describes, with elegant justice as “a wounded great film”—hover on the verge of being transfigured into visionary forms, as they allude to the reality of light underlying, and giving rise to, what Chambers referred to as consensus reality—of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (to use Rudolf Otto's phrase), a mystery that creates fear and yet fascinates. As the products of the same *energeia* that maintains the beings of consensus reality in existence, cinema's light-borne images have an ontological privilege in evoking the ultimate reality of light. Hence, the cinema is privileged in evoking the primal element in experience that, in registering the impact of the object on us, actually carries the object inside us, to intimate to us our participation in the being of circumambient forms.

Experience, like its animator, is also a complete circuit with an in-swing and an out-swing. Its out-swing passes through the mind as through a deciphering which translates the sensory impression into an intentionally structured communication with the external world. As an intentional out-going art, experience in its turn is crafted by means of a discriminating dialogue with what is seen.

Jack Chambers: Filmography

Mosaic, 1966, 9 minutes, black-and-white, sound, 16mm.

Hybrid, 1967, 15 minutes, black-and-white and colour, silent, 16mm.

R34, 1967, 30 minutes, black-and-white and colour, sound, 16mm.

Circle, 1968–1969, 28 minutes, black-and-white and colour, sound, 16mm. *The Hart of*

London, 1968–70, 79 minutes, black-and-white and colour, sound, 16mm.

In addition, Chambers made

(with James Reaney and Greg Curnoe) *Little Red Riding Hood*, 1965, 25 minutes, colour, sound 16mm.

Life-still, unfinished
C.C.C.I., unfinished

Collage artist Greg Curnoe, Chambers' closest friend, recalled that Chambers started using a 16mm camera in 1964 to explore the London landscape. In an interview with arts reporter Lenore Crawford in 1969, Chambers remarked on how film was a liberating influence: "After I shot hundreds of feet of film and then edited it to eliminate the non-essentials, I realized what I needed and what I could leave out of a painting.... A painting doesn't need to tell a story of any kind. It can be appreciated for what's in it. There doesn't even have to be relation of objects." This statement describes his films equally well.

Chambers' reputation as a film artist is based on the five works he completed between 1966 and 1970: *Mosaic* (1964–1966), *Hybrid* (1967), *R34* (1967), *Circle* (1968–1969) and *The Hart of London* (1968–1970). Mixtures of newsreel footage, home movies and photographs, these films reject the notion of linear time, characteristic of popular cinema, because Chambers thought the narrative illusions that resulted misrepresented the true character of human perception.

Using various forms of montage—semantic and formal—his films invest the viewing experience with a sense of "presentness," so that individuals undergo the same process of self-awareness as Chambers (confrontation of the fragility of domestic happiness, the brutality of human nature, the challenges of artistic ambition, the inevitability of death).

Mosaic's form balances images evoking the life-force (which pre-occupied Chambers and formed one of the bases of his conception of art) and the death-drive: shots depicting the exuberance of new motherhood (and artistic rebirth) are juxtaposed with images of age and death; *Hybrid* draws an analogy between human imposition on nature and the brutal American intervention in Vietnam, to suggest the fragility of life; *R34* employs the collage principles of the film's subject, Greg Curnoe, to highlight the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, which underpins the creative act; *Circle* is a year-long meditation on Chambers' backyard in which nature's cyclical rituals, unaffected by human presence, elicit both terror and awe.

Of this group of films, *Circle* (and *C.C.C.I.*, which cannot be presented) are the masterworks.

The long, central part of *Circle* uses a single image that undergoes continual metamorphosis to convey the sense of a metaphysical reality. Mounting a camera to overlook a portion of his backyard, Jack Chambers exposed four seconds of film at 10am every day for a year. The aperture and camera position were never varied; as a result, the only "action" in the film is natural—the daily changes in light and colour become the protagonists, free from any intervention by the filmmaker. Light also serves as the film's subject—light as contained within a space, and as the arbiter of change within that space. This central section of the film is bracketed by a prologue and epilogue. The epilogue illustrates how different particles of experience, remembered or perceived, become fused in moment of recognition, of perception.

The Hart of London

The Hart of London (1970) extends Chambers concerns with light, time, perception and the relation of the visible to Vision. It is a sprawling work that conjoins the public and the personal, history and memory, man and nature, self and other. The city of London, Ontario, haunted Chambers (as his friend Ross Woodman explained). It was for him a daily reality that was at once gently fascinating and terrifying. Chambers generally managed to balance the gentle fascination and the terror, but this work is overwhelmed with terror. Throughout it we see (in images like the slaughter of the lamb—alluding to the Lamb whose suffering took away the sins of the world and to nature's unfeeling destruction of innocents) Chambers struggling, but without ultimate resolution, to bring forth a theodicy through which to understand his own suffering.

The effect of the superimpositions is utterly remarkable. As the long montage section that opens the film goes on, we come to realize that Chambers' articulation of light suggests that objects we

see are only a shadow of what is disclosed in true perception; as experience loses truth, its object becomes more material. As Brakhage notes, "Sometimes, it's totally a white, white world, where almost everything is wiped out by superimposing a lot of light shot again with another light shot. We approach at this point almost a break with the world."

Bio Blurb (feel free to edit, especially from the list of museums/film centres)

R. Bruce Elder is a filmmaker and writer. His film work has been screened in one-person shows at New York's Museum of Modern Art and Millennium Film Workshop, Berlin's Kino Arsenal, Paris' Centre Pompidou, the San Francisco Cinematheque, Atlanta's High Museum, Los Angeles' Film Forum, Stadtfilmmuseum München, and Hamburg's Kino Metropolis. In announcing their "Tribute to R. Bruce Elder" Cinematheque Ontario proclaimed: "R. Bruce Elder is not only one of Canada's foremost experimental filmmakers, he's one of our greatest artists, thinkers, critics, and filmmakers, period." In 2007, Bruce Elder was awarded the Governor General's Award in Media Arts and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His most recent book, *Harmony & Dissent*, received the Robert Motherwell Book Prize (for writing on modernism) in 2009, was named a "Choice Outstanding Academic book," and short-listed for the Raymond Kilbansky (now Canada Humanities) Prize.