

## FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

**Mon Oct 1 | 8:30 pm |**

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$10 [members \$8]

### **James Benning: The Second Cabin. *Stemple Pass***

(USA, 121 mins, video)

*World Premiere*

Composed of four static shots of the same landscape, each taken from the same angle but during different seasons, *Stemple Pass* is the last installment in a series of films by James Benning—following *Two Cabins* (2011) and *Nightfall* (2011) – made in relation to cabins he built in the Sierra Nevada. His two cabins are replicas: one of the retreat described by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* and the other of the hideout of Ted Kaczynski, the notorious Unabomber, where he fabricated explosive devices from the early 1970s to 1995. The Kaczynski cabin is seen at a distance, with smoke from the chimney indicating an unseen human presence; on the soundtrack, in between moments of pregnant silence (inhabited by natural sounds), Benning's voice can be heard struggling with Kaczynski's texts— including a very disturbing diary.

#### **In person: James Benning**

"Over the past thirty-five years James Benning has played a central role in the history of American independent cinema by offering his rigorously structured yet wonderfully graceful films as extended meditations on the American landscape and its social and environmental histories." - Harvard Film Archive

"The artist is someone who pays attention and reports back."  
- James Benning.

"The Cabins Project, James Benning's tribute to the American vernacular yard art tradition, is equal parts design-build demonstration project, historical echo chamber, political statement, conceptual-outsider art installation, living museum, artists' retreat and secessionist compound. It remains, at its core, stubbornly recalcitrant and singular." - Dick Hebdige

"Apparitions of embodied autonomy populate the cabins: America as infinite producer of hope and despair and agitation." - Julie Ault

"Benning's long-standing fascination with place and steadfast commitment to exacting formal organization have increasingly served an understated, indeed largely implicit, environmental politics."  
- Scott McDonald

### **About James Benning**

Benning has been dubbed a structuralist and a minimalist, but these stylistic taxonomies do not adequately describe the filmmaker's oeuvre over 30-plus years. His early collaborations with filmmaker Bette Gordon gave way in the 1980s and '90s to portrait films that often embraced explicitly autobiographical elements, for example, *Used Innocence* (1988); and to experimentations with image and text, such as *Landscape Suicide* (1986) and *Deseret* (1995). Since the late '90s, he has embarked on a majestic series of "portraits of place," including his hallmark "California Trilogy" (*El Valley Centro*, 1999; *Los*, 2000; and *Sogobi*, 2001), *13 Lakes* (2004) and *Ten Skies* (2004). Throughout, Benning has matched a passionate wanderlust to an exacting formal rigor, mapping a multivalent American landscape that is as awe-inspiring as it is desecrated, wild as it is laden with political and historical memory. His is a cinema of attentiveness, of long takes that invite the viewer to look and listen and consider the consonances of space and time, onscreen and off.

"After completing *North on Evers*, I decided I would need only two criteria to keep making work. One, make films that would take me to places where I wanted to be. And two, make work that would put my life in a larger context. Both somewhat selfish reasons, but very workable," says the filmmaker.

Born in 1942 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Benning began making films in 1970, after first studying mathematics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This "master framer of landscapes," in the words of film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, has worked in small-gauge film – producing, shooting and editing the films himself. With *Ruhr* (2009), he switched from 16mm to digital filmmaking.

His work has shown at many international venues, from festivals like Cannes, Hong Kong, Rotterdam and Sundance to museums and cinematheques including Centre Georges Pompidou, Harvard Film

Archive, the Pacific Film Archive, Tate Modern and the Walker Art Center. Among his many awards are two National Endowment for the Arts awards, two Rockefeller Foundation fellowships and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. In 2007, he was the subject of a career retrospective at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna. In addition, the Museum has been endeavoring to digitally restore and preserve his work, and published *James Benning*, a collection of essays about his work, in 2008. He is the subject of a documentary by Reinhard Wulf called *James Benning: Circling the Image* (2003). Benning lives in Val Verde, outside of Los Angeles, and has taught film and mathematics at CalArts since 1987.

### **Selected Filmography**

*did you ever hear that cricket sound* (1971)  
*Time and a Half* (1972)  
*Ode to Muzak* (1972)  
*Michigan Avenue* (1973, by Bette Gordon & James Benning)  
*I-94* (1974, by Bette Gordon & James Benning)  
*8 1/2 x 11* (1974)  
*The United States of America* (1975, by James Benning & Bette Gordon)  
*11 x 14* (1976)  
*One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977)  
*Grand Opera* (1979)  
*American Dreams (lost and found)* (1984)  
*O Panama* (1985)  
*Landscape Suicide* (1986)  
*Used Innocence* (1988)  
*North on Evers* (1991)  
*Deseret* (1995)  
*Four Corners* (1997)  
*Utopia* (1998)  
*El Valley Centro* (1999)  
*Los* (2000)  
*Sogobi* (2001)  
*13 Lakes* (2004)  
*Ten Skies* (2004)  
*27 Years Later* (2004)  
*casting a glance* (2007)  
*RR* (2007)  
*Ruhr* (2009)  
*Pig Iron* (2010)  
*John Krieg Exiting the Falk Corporation in 1971* (2010)

*Twenty Cigarettes* (2011)  
*Small Roads* (2011)  
*the war* (2012)

"[E]arlier... I was doing political work at a grassroots level. It became very apparent to me that this was something I could exhaust my life with, and I hadn't even begun to define who I was. So I stopped doing that kind of work, and I started making films to look at my own life. At first I thought I had to make really apolitical films... but I quickly realized that my aesthetics developed forms that were somewhat radical, and that's political in itself. To make people look at a screen different[ly] I think is a really radical position to take.... And as I made more and more films, I became much more interested in looking at different histories, and putting my life in a larger context and then politics came back into the films in a more direct way.... I still try not to be completely dogmatic with my politics, even though I think it's quite evident that they're fairly leftwing."

– James Benning, interviewed by Neil Young at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival

"With his mathematics background, his structuralism manifests in the invocation of rigorous compositional logic – the films of the California Trilogy, for example, being composed of 35 shots of 2.5 minutes length – [that] "pose questions" and "solve problems." Benning's long takes therefore become understandable as an authorial strategy for the organization of documentary materials and for interrogating the act of seeing. After several minutes of looking at a single shot, the effect on the viewer is powerful. The formal elegance of the compositions somehow becomes surreal over time, as we look *into*, instead of *at*, the place. This tendency locates Benning in the history of experimental filmmakers concerned with interrogating visual perception." – Danni Zuvela, *Senses of Cinema*

*Funded in part with generous support from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.*

*Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud*