

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS:

Mon Apr 29 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$12 [members \$9]

JAMES BENNING: Two Films

two moons (42.5 minutes, 2018)

World premiere

Preceded by:

L. COHEN (45 minutes, 2017)

In his prolific career unfolding since the early 1970s, legendary filmmaker and artist James Benning has matched a passionate wanderlust to an exacting formal rigor, mapping out multivalent landscapes. His work 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. REDCAT is proud to present the world premiere of *two moons* (42.5 minutes, 2018), filmed on November 21 and 22, 2018 in Valencia, California. A gibbous and full moon rising. The film will be preceded by *L. COHEN* (45 minutes, 2017, Grand Prix, Cinéma du réel festival in Paris), filmed on August 21, 2017 near Madras, Oregon. A rather unremarkable farm field on a most remarkable day. Mount Jefferson can be seen 40 miles away.

In person: James Benning

"... one of the year's most awe-inspiring and transcendent experiences. Regenerative, contemplative, profoundly moving, and as challenging as it is soothing, Benning's minimalist tour de force captures the ordinary in nature and reveals the extraordinary within. *L. COHEN* is a search for totality, as much as it is a meditation on the beauty and brevity of existence." – Andréa Picard, Cinéma du réel

"... the latest masterwork by this grand figure of the American avant-garde. Filmmaking can find its full force simply 'by looking and listening'. The secret organization of phenomena emerges out of a long-sustained attention in which the landscape is a function of time –

geological, historical and biographical, each new film bringing into play references inherent to the entire oeuvre.”

– Antoine Thirion, Toronto International Film Festival

About James Benning

Benning has been dubbed a structuralist and a minimalist, but these stylistic taxonomies do not adequately describe the filmmaker’s oeuvre that cover almost five decades of art- and filmmaking. Born in 1942 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Benning began making films in 1970, after first studying mathematics at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. 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.

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). In the late ‘90s, he 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* (1991), 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. He switched from 16mm to digital filmmaking with *Ruhr* (2009), commissioned by Werner Ruzicka for the *Duisburger Filmwoche*. Digital filmmaking allowed him to branch out in different directions including re-makes of *Faces* (2011) and *Easy Rider* (2012), as well as the 98 minute, one-shot film, *Nightfall* (2011). Benning’s work has always traversed the film sphere and the art field, finding constituencies in both. He made 16mm installations at Art Park (1977), the Walker Art Center (1978), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1980), and created digital and multi-media installations at Las Cienegas Projects, Los Angeles, (2011), 21er Haus, Museum of Contemporary Art, Vienna (2012), Argos, Centrum Voor Kunst en Media, Brussels (2012), Institute of

Contemporary Art Zagreb (2017), Cinemateca Portuguesa - Museu do Cinema, Lisbon (2016) and FID Marseille (2018), etc...

His work has shown at many international venues, from festivals like Cannes, Hong Kong, Rotterdam, the Berlinale, The Venice Mostra, the Viennale, Sundance, Toronto, Vancouver, Cinéma du Réel, FID Marseille, BAFICI (Buenos Aires), to museums and cinemathèques including la Cinémathèque française, Centre Georges Pompidou, the Austrian Film Museum, neugerriemschneider (Berlin), Harvard Film Archive, the Pacific Film Archive, Kino Arsenal (Berlin), Tate Modern (London), National Gallery of Art (Washington DC), the Walker Art Center, the Museum of the Moving Image, MOCA, Film Society Lincoln Center and Anthology Film Archive, etc. Among his many awards are two National Endowment for the Arts awards, a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship and awards from the American Film Institute, New York State Council on the Arts, the Wisconsin Arts Board, and the University Film Association. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s Werner Deutsch and Cologne-based WDR-TV supported Benning's work with commissions and the purchase of broadcast rights. 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.

On May 16, 2019, a solo show of his work, *Quilts, Cigarettes, and Dirt: An American Portrait* will open at The Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara.

Benning divides his time between Val Verde, California, and a small town in the Sierra Nevada north of Bakersfield. There, in 2007, he built a replica of the cabin Thoreau constructed in 1845 on Walden Pond, and, the following year, a copy of the cabin Unabomber Ted Kaczynski built in 1971 in Montana. He has been teaching at the California Institute of the Arts since 1987.

An interview with James Benning (excerpts)

I thought, okay, I'm in a new medium, the digital, and I can think back to when I first started making films and didn't know what direction I was going in. I experimented, not in the sense of 'experimental films' but real experimentation: what can a camera do with this lens? What can it do with that?..

I've gone through pretty much that same process now with digital filmmaking and became more playful – because I wasn't aware of what this digital technology could actually do, and wanted [to find out]. So in a way there's a circular trajectory, because I'm re-learning

a whole set of variables like I did when I first started...

The biggest manipulation is the frame, and what you leave out and how you take everything else out of context by taking just the small portion of the world. And therefore it's silly to talk about 'complete reality'. It's always your point of view what you leave out and where you point the camera... [My films have] always been a selection, always been color-corrected, always been highly manipulated with sound. They've always taken a real point of view from what I believe in, and I am full of prejudice. And those prejudices are on the screen...

I always believe that any learning comes through concentration and patience, and that you have to train yourself to have that patience and to perceive. That isn't slow to me, that's hard work. It may be slow in the movement of things but it isn't slow in the stuff that's going on in your mind when you watch something for a long time and you see very minimal changes: you start to learn from that. So time is a function of becoming more intelligent, I think; you need to take time. The word 'slow' seems to belittle that process. How can you rush that?..

I've been thinking very much about the computer and what [Unabomber Ted] Kaczynski's written about technology, and that is that the computer offers me complete autonomy in my work; I don't need a lab, I can do these collages, all this stuff by myself. Sometimes I need some help from a few technicians, but basically it's not like I have to buy things to make a film any more. It's all available once I have this equipment..

I can work constantly now, because it doesn't cost. All of a sudden maybe the more important autonomy of control, of what your life is about, has gone. Now I'm the slave to this machine, working and concentrating on what I want to do. Now I like that, but at the same time I'm not sure it's healthy. It's something one has to negotiate... I almost always take my computer with me up there because I edit on it, and get a lot of work done. But [it's in my cabin that] I have it more under control because up there I can work for four hours, get a lot done, it's quiet. Shut it off and then go out and chop wood because I have to get so much wood ready for the winter. And then I can go for a walk, enjoy the outside and have this connection to being in a real place rather than in front of a computer. One you can smell and taste, walk through and be part of. So it's a stronger connection to life. But then I'm happy to go back to work, too, because I like the intellectual connection I have with this machine which helps me solve problems for the art I'm making. Then you have this other weird love relationship with it, because it's so phenomenal in a way. So I'm a contradiction. But I don't want just to go to one side or the other.

(interview by Nick Bradshaw, for *Sight & Sound*, 2013, updated 2018, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/sight-sound-interview-james-benning>)

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)
Stemple Pass (2012)
BNSF (2013)
Double Play: James Benning and Richard Linklater (2013)
Fuck Me (Orange) (2013)

Natural History (2014)
Farocki (2014)
American Dreams (2015)
Last Night (2015)
Concord Woods (2015)
52 Films project (2015)
RED CLOUD (2016)
scorched earth (2016)
Spring Equinox (2016)
Fall Equinox (2016)
measuring change (2016)
L. Cohen (2017)
READERS (2017)
TELEMUNDO (2018)
glory (2018)
TABLE TOP (2018)
proof (2019)

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