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Unseen Guide's Silent Journeys to Lyric Nature The Startlingly Beautiful Films of Nathaniel Dorsky

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The filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky's experimental works, including "The Return" (2011) explore the disconnection between humanity and the natural world. Nathaniel Dorsky

For decades Nathaniel Dorsky has been making work of rare and sometimes startling beauty. If you haven't heard of him, it's because he makes short, silent experimental films that feature brightly colored flowers, bursts of sunlight and shifting pools of shadow instead of characters, plots and stories. Mostly he remains unknown to the larger audience because his work is relegated to that ghetto known as American avant-garde cinema. On Monday a program of his recent work will be shown in downtown Los Angeles at Redcat, an exhibition space in Walt Disney Concert Hall; Mr. Dorsky, who talks about his work in accessible, charming fashion, is scheduled to appear in person. On Friday another program of his work will be at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, also in Los Angeles.

Watching Mr. Dorsky's films is a joy. Explaining why they can have such a profound effect on you, however, can present something of a challenge, partly because the films can't be reduced to the old boy-meets-girl or any other kind of plot synopsis. This means you may watch them once or twice,

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perhaps while scribbling notes (and diagrams) in the dark, and then try to consider what you saw. As I recall, the 18 ½-minute “Compline” (2009) opens with glistening bare tree branches that create vertical slashes across the image. What follows initially appears random — pulses of yellow light, flashes of green leaves — but from the vertical lines of purple flowers in one shot and what look like parallel threads of yarn in another, it becomes clear that choices have been made here.



Nathaniel Dorsky

Photo by Jerone Hiler

Although the narratively conditioned brain may attempt to piece together a story from these images (once upon a time in winter there was a tree), Mr. Dorsky’s work requires a different kind of engagement. These are films created for contemplation, and they both invite and resist interpretation. Consider Mr. Dorsky’s fondness for windows that, because of the light, camera angle and his manipulations, turn into mirrors and prisms. In a single image of a restaurant window it’s possible at once to see the interior of the empty space with its set tables, the gleaming glass and the street scene reflected in it, a multiplicity that has a material, concrete aspect (this is a restaurant without patrons) and also room for lyricism (this is a restaurant yearning for patrons).

Because the films are silent and don’t come with explanatory on-screen text, you can luxuriate in the visual complexity of the images. You may, amid all this loveliness, worry about what it all means. Although Mr. Dorsky gestures in certain interpretive directions, notably with his titles — “Compline” is the name of the final prayer of the day in the Roman Catholic Church — he never forces you down this or that path. Then again, what can the image of eye-poppingly purple flowers *mean*? “Interpretation,” as Susan Sontag memorably wrote “is the revenge of the intellect upon art.” A few pages later in the same essay, “Against Interpretation,” she extols transparency in art (and criticism), writing that it “means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.”



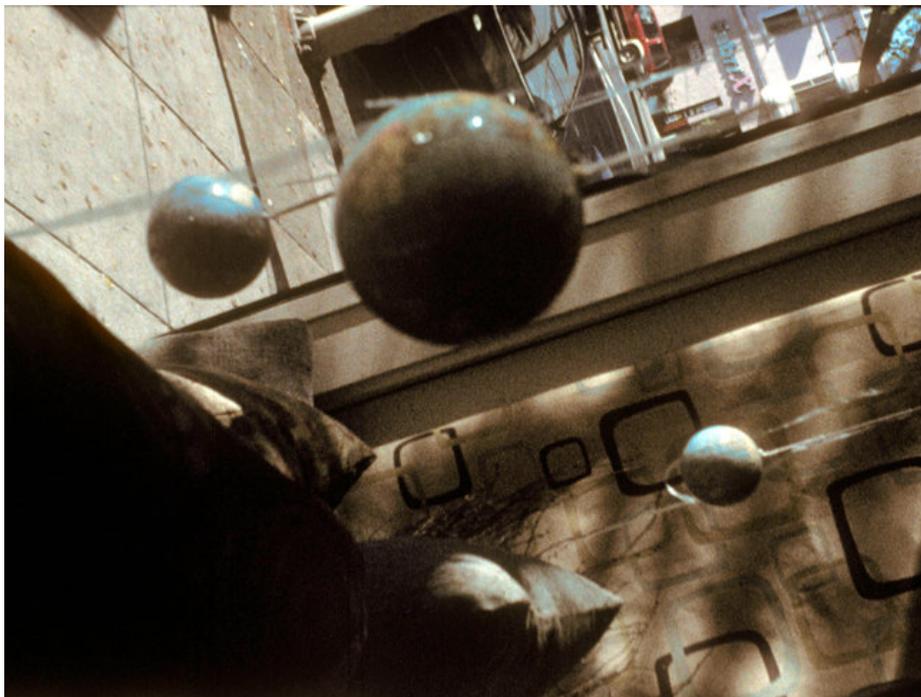
Nathaniel Dorsky's "Compline" (2009) Nathaniel Dorsky/Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Art, as Sontag persuasively argued, doesn't stand for something else but is itself a thing, and while Mr. Dorsky's films can inspire explanatory reveries, they are also beautiful objects. His 2009 "Sarabande" — the name of a slow dance in triple time — opens with what looks like the sun or a bright moon shining behind a tangle of dark, bare tree branches and what may be mesh fencing. The shot lasts for about 30 seconds, during which a black blot (a cloud?) moves left, bringing more light into the frame. What follows in the next 14 or so minutes are gently hovering, sometimes layered and obliquely angled images of windows and reflections, as well as more flowers and trees. The film ends with the sun dipping (or rising) behind trees that stretches across the frame.

Here's some of what else you see in "Sarabande": a woman walking through a glass door while pulling and pushing a carriage, a green blur, a yellow circle, two luminescent red leaves in extreme close-up. As one image gives way to the next, a series of contrasts, even gentle tensions emerge: interior and exterior, bright and opaque, sharp and blurred, a perception of movement and stillness. While some of what you see is readily distinguishable, at other times it's impossible to know what you're looking at beyond shifting blots of black. Among the most striking moments are floaty shots of dense, seemingly impenetrable foliage that suggest a tentative, searching presence behind the camera.

Toward the end of "Sarabande" Mr. Dorsky cuts to the orange flowers of some green aloe plants set against a dark blue sky, the camera panning down from the spearlike blooms along the thin stems. The flowers pop out because of their brightness, the clarity of the image and the emphatic camera movement that insistently announces the human being shooting it. The directness of the image

(behold, the bloom) is in contrast to many of the earlier, partially concealed shots, and this progression from the obscure to the obvious literalizes the experience — from darkness to revelation, unknowing to knowing — of watching the film itself.



A scene from “Sarabande” (2009). Nathaniel Dorsky

“If we do relinquish control,” Mr. Dorsky wrote in his short 2003 book “Devotional Cinema,” “we suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us. In a flash, the uncanny presence of the poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us.”

Not all of Mr. Dorsky’s films unfold in the same way, despite some recurrent motifs and juxtapositions, notably between the natural world and its human-made counterpart. Again and again, in images of trees and plants glimpsed through windows and in shadow, there’s a strong sense in Mr. Dorsky’s work that nature is just out of grasp, intoxicatingly near and unreachable. And then abruptly he will plunge deep into a thicket of branches or a tangle of flowering plants that looks like a Jackson Pollock drip painting, the camera moving through the foliage like a bushwhacker or holding steady on the gently bobbing blossoms. In several shots he brightens and darkens the image, a manipulation that underscores the sense of discovery.

There’s a sense of freedom in these visions of nature. Even so, one of the most stunning images in his recent work is of the flower shop seen briefly in the film “The Return” (2011), a shot that invokes a famous moment in Alfred Hitchcock’s “Vertigo” when James Stewart’s character spies on Kim Novak’s mystery woman. Whether calculated or serendipitous — Mr. Dorsky lives in San Francisco, where “Vertigo” is set — the flower store, like all his images of trees seen through

windows, bridges the natural and human-created worlds. Like “Sarabande,” “The Return” ends with an image of the sun pushing past a cloud, as if insisting on its reappearance. Yet while Mr. Dorsky ends with nature, the image’s moody beauty affirms that this is also very much a representation, a devotional song, art.



A scene from “Winter” (2008). Nathaniel Dorsky

In a post-screening discussion at the 2010 Toronto International Film Festival, Mr. Dorsky said his films were of “the world as it comes through the hole of” his Bolex camera. Thoreau said that “you must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.” There’s a similar imperative, an urgency, about being in the here and the now in Mr. Dorsky’s work, even if the world in his films is of his own making. (Thoreau wrote that it was “necessary to see objects by moonlight — as well as sunlight — to get a complete notion of them,” which nicely fits Mr. Dorsky’s dusky imagery.)

Mr. Dorsky, who is 68 and makes a living as a film editor, has said that he can spend months just shooting material while walking around with his 16-millimeter camera, a pursuit he has continued even after his favorite film stock disappeared. Recently, while speaking on the phone from San Francisco, he told a story about a reluctant visit to a friend’s home. He didn’t want to go, but did, bringing his camera with him, as is his custom. During the visit sunlight poured into the room, bathing his friend’s arm in an ethereal gold. The shot made it into “Pastourelle” (2010) — a type of lyric poetry — and immortalized a moment in time and a friendship. “I went out with a camera,” Mr. Dorsky said, in describing his entry into filmmaking, “and tried to discover things.”