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For Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, Film Is the Star

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Mr. Dorsky's "Avraham" (2014). Credit Nathaniel Dorsky/Peter Blum Gallery, NY

Every so often while watching the work of Nathaniel Dorsky, I let out a yelp of joy. Mr. Dorsky makes blissfully beautiful films that don't tell stories but instead explore the world, the medium and our relationship with each. They're short, averaging around 20 minutes, and visually dense, with layers of pulsing color, churning film grain, shifting light and mutating form. Their actors, as it were, are the objects, the flowers, trees, animals, people and cars that slip in and out of the frame, although it is film – fragile, alchemical, magical, lush and luminous – that is the star. Like the gold and silver used in illuminated manuscripts, film creates a radiant glow that suggests why Mr. Dorsky calls his art devotional cinema.

[A must-see retrospective](#) of both Mr. Dorsky's films and those of Jerome Hiler opens on Monday, Sept. 28, at the 53rd [New York Film Festival](#). The two have been together in life and in art since the 1960s, and while their work only sometimes directly refers to their partnership, this series is an inherent testimony to their shared hours, homes and visions. They first met at the New York premiere of one of Mr. Dorsky's earliest films, "Ingreen" (1964). Both were immersed in the vibrant avant-garde cinema scene and particularly in thrall to the work of one of its gods, [Stan Brakhage](#), who rejected the limits imposed by industrial moviemaking (including narrative) in favor of what he called the "untutored eye," which "must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception."



A still from Mr. Hiler's "In the Stone House" (1964-70/2012), which includes images made in the house he and Mr. Dorsky rented in New Jersey. Credit Jerome Hiler

Mr. Hiler's output is limited but stunning. For years, he and Mr. Dorsky didn't show their films publicly, preferring to screen them at home for friends. (Mr. Dorsky resumed public presentations in the early 1980s, Mr. Hiler in [1997](#).) And because the same friends kept looking at the same work, as Mr. Hiler explained in an [interview](#) with the writer Max Goldberg, he kept working on the films, cutting and recutting the all-too-delicate physical material. One problem is that Mr. Hiler wasn't working with copies, but instead wearing out his originals with his manipulations. As it does with all living things, time battered and tried to have its way with the films, so it seems faintly miraculous that they look so lovely.

Mr. Hiler's approach to his work adds to its ephemeral quality and explains the different dates (1967-70 and 2012) stamped on "In the Stone House," which he began when he and Mr. Dorsky were about 25 and living in rural New Jersey. On Mr. Dorsky's website, he [recounts](#) in a tender meander down bohemian lane that they rented the house, with its two fireplaces and many windows (each pane a screen onto a world, inside and out), for \$85 a month. They were poor but found work here and there, including New York. (Mr. Hiler, delightfully, was the first [projectionist](#) for Andy Warhol's freak-out, "Chelsea Girls.")

It was in this Waldenesque retreat where they lived with nature, sampled mind-expanding drugs and turned their cameras on each other.



The filmmakers Jerome Hiler, left, and Nathaniel Dorsky.
Credit via Jerome Hiler

Among its virtues, “In the Stone House” is a palpable (and silent) record of specific embodied times and spaces: Here, you soon feel, is where Mr. Hiler lived, here are the paths he walked, the stream he followed. The film takes flight with a series of soft, sepia images of countryside suggestive of 19th-century pastoral landscape photography. These appear and disappear quickly, and are separated by snippets of black that suggest leisurely blinks, as if you (and the cameraman) were closing your eyes on one landscape and opening them on another. This at any rate is what I remember, having summoned these visions from my scrawled notes and memory. Like most movies before home video, most of Mr. Hiler’s films can’t be watched after the lights go up: they’re stored in your memories, not on data files.

These introductory shots also pan and tilt, sometimes with the visible trembling of a hand-held camera, sweeping across snow-covered ground and snow-encrusted tree limbs that introduce the theme of changing seasons and light. In what follows, the camera traces a stream, tours the woods, trails after a pair of men ice skating and hovers around a group of people watching a solar eclipse, some with snippets of film taped to their glasses. (When Mr. Hiler cuts to the occluded sun, it resembles a diluted pupil in an enormous eye.) These country scenes give way to cityscapes with shocks of blue and red, as well as an exquisitely photographed room with an old floral sofa and floral wallpaper, an oppressive bouquet that summons a constellation of ideas about home, family and flight.



Mr. Hiler's "Words of Mercury" (2011). Credit Jerome Hiler

These ideas don't overwhelm the film, turning it into a narrative about how Mr. Hiler couldn't go home again; rather, they drift into your consciousness, becoming part of the overall field of meaning. "In the Stone House" is non-narrative, in the sense that it doesn't tell a fictional story with performers and the usual cinematic cues. And, crucially, Mr. Hiler doesn't force connections through his editing, marshaling his images in the service of a story. Rather, each image of a tree, stream and snake has its own integrity and resonates with meanings that at times feel specific to Mr. Hiler (this is the house in which he once lived) and sometimes very familiar (the sofa that might have belonged to your grandmother or the blizzardy New York street that looks like the one you played in as a child).

Mr. Hiler's editing helped Mr. Dorsky find a new way of seeing. In an [interview](#) with the online journal *Lumière*, Mr. Dorsky spoke about his early influences and epiphanies. It was when he was 19 or 20, he said, while he was "smoking weed, and reading poetry very slowly," that he realized that reading a great poet was similar to listening to Mozart in that every word, like every note, was equally important. "Each note had a psychological and emotional progression to the psyche, each step in itself is completely profound, and that's when I began to wonder could you do that with film," he said. Around that time, Mr. Dorsky asked Mr. Hiler if it was possible to "make a film where each shot kept opening up without any other obligation?" Mr. Hiler, Mr. Dorsky added, had already started down that path.



Mr. Dorsky's "December" (2014). Credit Nathaniel Dorsky/Peter Blum Gallery, NY

Mr. Dorsky has been busy since he resumed public screenings. The retrospective includes more than 30 of his films, including some early sound shorts and the silent, two-part "[Hours for Jerome](#)," which he shot while Mr. Hiler was filming "In the Stone House." The title of "Hours for Jerome" is a reference to "The Book of Hours," the medieval prayer book, and while it's tethered to a person, it is also an exultation of the sacred. Mr. Dorsky's work contains some direct references to religion; another film, "Compline," for instance, shares its name with the final prayer service of the day in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet as Mr. Dorsky writes in his book "Devotional Cinema," devotion need not be about a specific religion. Rather, it is about the opening that allows us "to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation."

This may sound squishy to some (stirring to others of us), and classically Californian; in 1971, Mr. Dorsky and Mr. Hiler moved to San Francisco, where they still live. Yet, like other open-minded seekers who came of age when he did, Mr. Dorsky read "On the Road" and he also accompanied his father to Buddhist study groups.

The academic [Cameron McLain](#) has underscored the influence of the 14th-century Tibetan mystic Longchenpa on Mr. Dorsky. This influence surfaces in "Devotional Cinema," when Mr. Dorsky writes that "aggressive" editing can mask the "primal reality" of the shots, which "as moments of luminous accommodation, ripen and expand and are popped like soap bubbles by the cut." He also refers to the "emptiness of the view," which I take as a nod to the Buddhist idea that the real world is beyond human understanding.

Central to Mr. Dorsky's films is how he plays with the world of appearances, especially in how he closes the divide between binaries like interior and exterior, human and nature, shadow and light, focus and blur, movement and stasis. In his 2015 "Prelude," one of several films that will have world premieres in the retrospective, Mr. Dorsky includes

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images of a blossoming fruit tree, people's shadows sliding across a floor, the undulations of a fig tree's soft green leaves. At one point, he cuts to someone's hand writing at a table behind a puzzling crosshatch of black lines that are only gradually shown to be some sort of window or door screen. The reality of the image, Mr. Dorsky seems to suggest with shots like this, can be revealed only with an open mind, eye and heart.

There are moments in Mr. Dorsky's work where you may not be sure what you're looking at (a flower, a light, a person?) and you find yourself leaning toward the image. To a degree, this searching encapsulates the very experience of movie-watching itself and how we piece together cinematic images to create meaning. For decades, Mr. Dorsky has been on a great search, going out with his 16-millimeter film camera and astonishing eye and bringing back the kinds of humble, rapturous images that many of us forget to see: a beam of light tracing a man's profile, a crimson flower gently bobbing in the wind, a bit of tape flapping in the wind, a mote of dust, a glimmer, a sparkle, a color, a shape. A mystic of a type, he has found new ways of seeing and thinking not just about film, but also the world.