



Robert Breer: 1957

January 27 - February 19, 2012

Hurray for formless film, a non-literary, non-musical, picture film that doesn't tell a story, become an abstract dance, or deliver a message...A film where words are pictures or sounds and skip around the way thoughts do. An experience itself like eating, looking, running, like an object, a tree, buildings, drips, and crashes. A film that instead of making sense is sense...

A film on the level of the artist's imagination which stays there...A film that looks like the man who made it.

— Robert Breer, *Film Culture* magazine No. 27, 1962

In their spirited and fast-paced dance with color, geometric shapes, line drawing, and collage, American artist Robert Breer's films, drawings, paintings, and sculptures remain as fresh and prescient as ever. Over the course of a career spanning more than fifty years, Breer found himself, both critically and personally, aligned with major figures of the twentieth-century avant-garde — across movements from Minimalism to Pop and Fluxus — but he always remained outside of any particular movement or ideology. Instead, he developed his own singular vision that sought to explore the possibilities of abstraction while at the same time infusing his imagery with a distinctly human warmth. Breer also taught film and animation courses at New York City's Cooper Union from 1971-2001. His influence upon his students and, by extension, the landscape of contemporary filmmaking is evident in the proliferation of techniques that he pioneered and which we now see all the time: a combination of still photography and moving imagery, line drawing, fast-paced editing, and an emphasis on archetypal forms.

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Robert Breer: 1957 focuses on two of the artist's earliest significant films, which he created in a single year: the clamorous stop-motion collage, *Jamestown Baloos*, and the elegantly restrained hand-drawn animation, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air*. Both films follow major stylistic shifts precipitated by Breer's move to Paris in 1949. At that time, Breer was painting bold geometric color fields, drawing inspiration from what he called the "absolute" grid-like canvases of artists like Piet Mondrian. After creating several small flipbooks, he began to experiment with film as an exercise in process. In moving images, Breer could break out from the rigidity of his painting, introducing dynamic and even organic elements into his work. By 1958, film had eclipsed painting as the artist's primary medium.

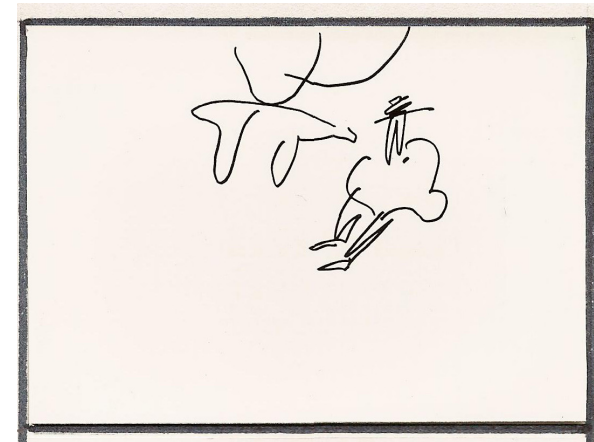
Jamestown Baloos is a frenetic, three-part stop-motion animation that features an army of everyday forms and figures — geometric shapes, a piece of string, newspaper clips, a pin-up girl, even Napoleon Bonaparte — flashing across the screen. Placed in increasingly compromised situations and choreographed to a jingoistic tune, the figures essentially become puppets of their former selves. Such unrelenting visuals recall not only Fernand Léger's early experimental film, *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), as Breer himself has mentioned, but also early twentieth-century Dadaist collage. Dada artists like Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch created witty, unapologetic works that reflected the chaos and violence of modern existence. *Jamestown Baloos* serves, as their works did, as a pointed indictment on the absurdity of war.

Whereas *Jamestown Baloos* relies on a maximalist aesthetic to convey a highly politicized point of view, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air* takes an introspective approach, concentrating on the practice of drawing itself. An ethereal line glides gently across the screen, creating outlines that sharpen and fade in and out of view. Whimsical sounds, mimicking whistling or birds chirping, accompany the images. For most of the film, its ostensible subject is abstract; figures remain absent, and sound and image seem completely arbitrary. Yet in the final seconds, the lines coalesce into the figures anticipated by the title. In its deft evocation of the artist's hand — recalling, for example, Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical studies or Henri Matisse's working sketches — *A Man and His Dog Out for Air* demonstrates how the simplest images are often the most misleading. In fact, they can yield the greatest insights, looking very much, as Breer would say, like the man who made them.

Robert Breer: 1957 is organized as a tribute to the artist, who passed away on August 11, 2011.

Robert Breer was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1926. After studying painting at Stanford University, he lived in Paris from 1949-1959. Upon returning to the United States, he settled in upstate New York and eventually in Tucson, Arizona. Breer's career includes solo exhibitions at the Centre Georges Pompidou and Cinémathèque Française, Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Institute of Contemporary Art, London; The Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum of Art, New York; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. In 2011, the retrospective *Robert Breer* traveled to Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, and Museum Tinguely, Basel. Breer's work has been exhibited extensively in group exhibitions, including the 6th Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2010); SITE Santa Fe Biennial, Santa Fe (2008); the 2004 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2004); and Expo '70, curated by Experiments in Art and Technology, Osaka (1970). Breer was awarded many honors over the course of his long career, among them the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award (1987), Stan Brakhage Vision Award (2005), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1978).

Robert Breer: 1957 is curated by Kelly Shindler, Assistant Curator, and organized by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.



Cover image: Robert Breer, *Jamestown Baloos* (film still), 1957. 16mm film, b&w/color, optical sound, 5 minutes. Courtesy of gb agency, Paris. Above image: Robert Breer, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air* (film still), 1957. 16mm film, b&w, optical sound, 2 minutes. Courtesy of gb agency, Paris.