

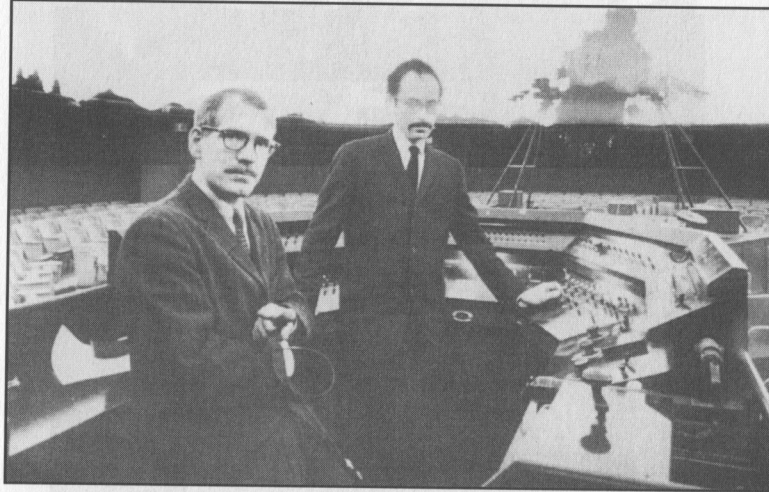
**JORDAN BELSON,  
LAST OF THE GREAT MASTERS**  
by William Moritz

Jordan Belson is the last of the greatmasters of the California Visual Music artists, which included Oskar Fischinger, Harry Smith and James Whitney. Reconsidering his work seems particularly appropriate now because Belson has recently completed a triumphant half-hour new work *Mysterious Journey*, and because Belson is a fascinating example of an animator who no longer works with traditional animation techniques. As Yuri Norstein observed, 'Animation' seems to mean "putting soul into your art," and no one has done that better or more often than Jordan Belson.

Belson was born in 1926 in Chicago, but came to California where he studied painting at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) and the University of California at Berkeley, where he received a Fine Arts B.A. degree in 1946. That same year, the San Francisco Museum of Art sponsored the first "Art in Cinema" festival which showed the classic avant-garde and art films of the past as well as recent experimental film work by such people as Maya Deren, Oskar Fischinger and the Whitney brothers (who traveled to San Francisco to show their films). The great success of this festival continued annually for about ten years, and galvanized a community of film artists in San Francisco, including live-action filmmakers like James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, Sara Arledge, Christopher MacLaine and the festival founder Frank Stauffacher, as well as a large contingent of abstract filmmakers ranging from committed visionaries like Harry Smith to people like the advertising filmmaker Denver Sutton who composed some six brief colorful pleasant abstractions to catchy music, since abstract art seemed to be 'in.'

Jordan Belson knew Harry Smith from Berkeley. Both were painting, and both were eager to explore the realms of mystical experience, from exotic religious disciplines to experiments with drugs that were said to make the soul visible, or in Greek 'psychedelic.' Harry Smith, as a volunteer for the festival, was sent to Los Angeles to talk the Whitney brothers and Oskar Fischinger into coming to San Francisco. He returned to San Francisco with his mission successfully accomplished, and his head full of ideas for abstract films, which he began to paint directly on blank film stock, since he had no camera or expertise with filmmaking (which would be supplied later by veteran cameraman Hy Hirsh).

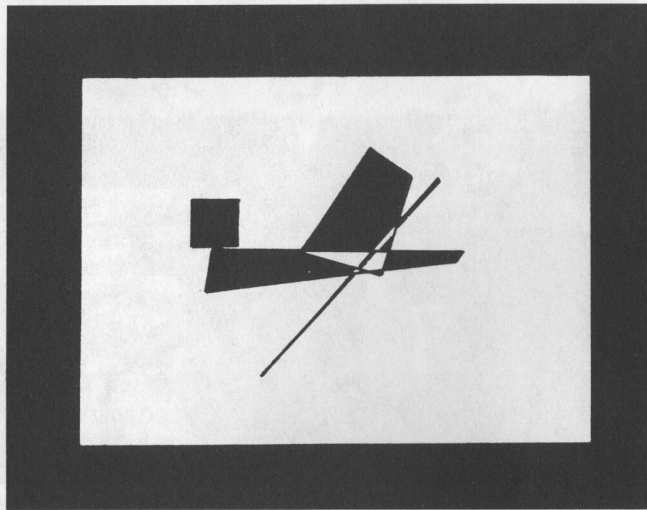
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Henry Jacobs and Jordan Belson at a Vortex Concert, Morrison Planetarium, 1957. Courtesy Bill Moritz.

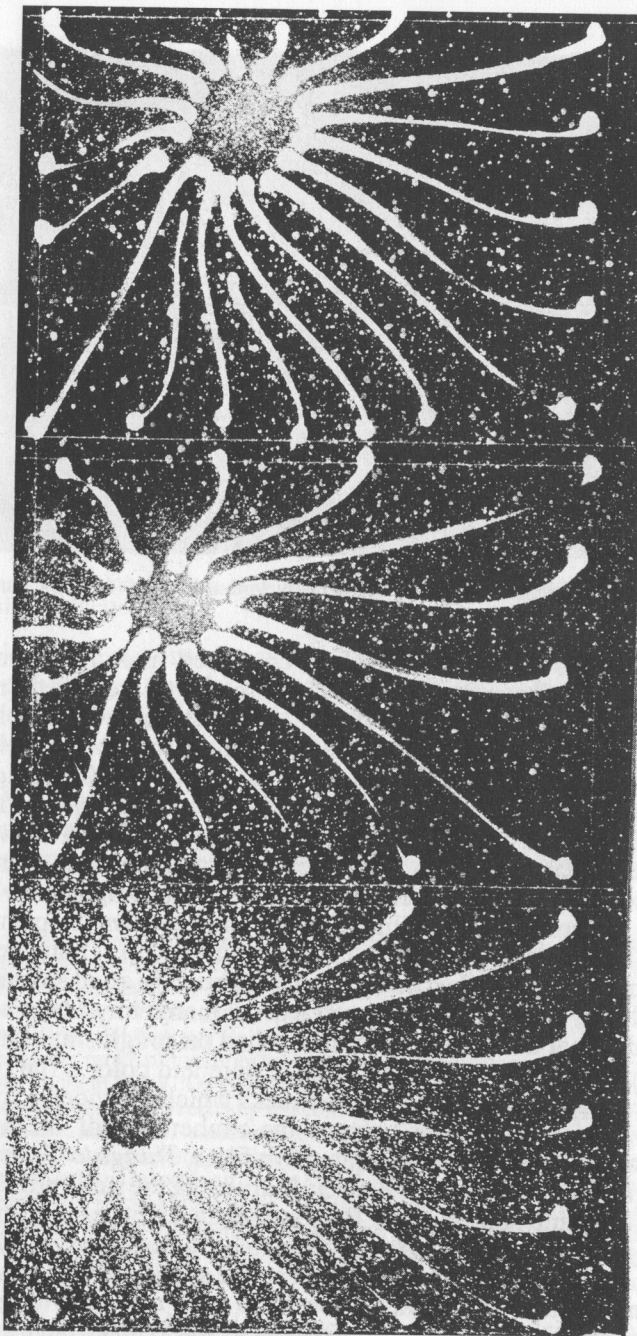
At the first series of Art in Cinema screenings, Jordan Belson was most impressed by the simple black-and-white geometrical films of Hans Richter, and he set about making a film himself on a similar principle. Frank Stauffacher and Hy Hirsh gave him the technical help to animate his black-and-white paintings. His first film, *Transmutation* [already a mystical, alchemical title!], was ready to be shown at the second Art in Cinema in 1947. These early films are lost or withdrawn from circulation so we can not see them, but Belson himself has said that *Transmutation* was “not the least bit Richter-like in appearance” and “unbelievably crude.” Oskar Fischinger, however, was greatly impressed by the film which, although silent, showed a fine musical form and sense of rhythm. Fischinger was convinced that Belson had that elusive, in-born talent and sensibility for the composition of visual music in time and space, and he wrote Hilla Rebay, the curator of the Guggenheim foundation and museum, recommending that she extend a fellowship to Belson which would keep him involved in this difficult discipline. Belson made a second black-and-white film, *Improvisation No. 1*, animating simple geometric figures zooming back and forth in space. Both *Transmutation* and *Improvisation No. 1* were distributed by Cinema 16 for several years, and Belson continued painting, exhibiting his paintings in New York and Paris as well as California.

In the later 1940s, at the San Francisco Museum of Art, he saw and was greatly impressed by Thomas Wilfred’s Lumina



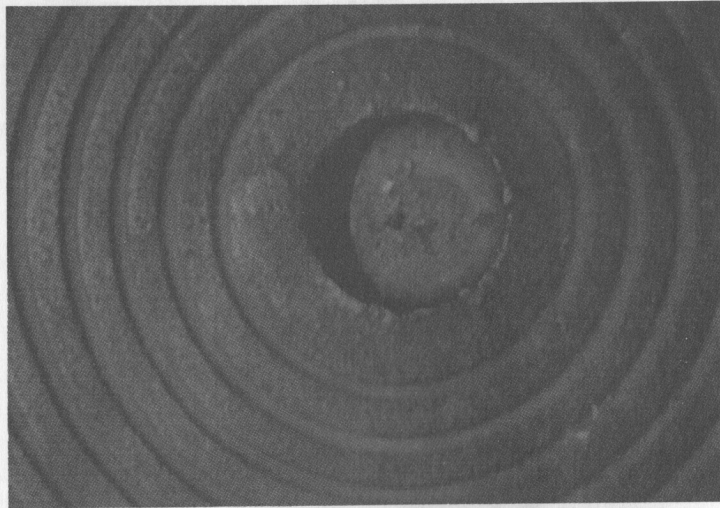
Artwork for *Improvisation*, by Jordan Belson (1948, film lost). Poster paint on an index card. Courtesy Jordan Belson.

compositions. Wilfred performed them regularly in his studio, which he called "The Art Institute of Light." He had begun these performances in the 1920s, and coined the term 'Lumia' to describe an art of pure colored light flowing with a musical fluidity and harmonic complexity. Wilfred built Clavilux instruments that projected these soft sprays and intertwining swirls of colors on large theatre screens, as well as home Lumia boxes, rather like television sets, which could play continuously-changing color patterns for days without repeating, although each composition would have some 'melodic' configurations which might recur with gradual variations each ten minutes or half hour, so that the viewer was encouraged to stare calmly at the elapsing cascades of colors for a long time in rapt concentration. Wilfred produced his moving color imagery not with filmic means, but rather with complex hand-made systems that employed various warped mirrors, jewels, fogged and beveled glass, and cut-out shapes, each with its own motion cycle that would irregularly interact with some of the other elements creating an almost endless set of variations. Although it would take some ten years to emerge in Belson's work, the soft nuances of Wilfred's Lumia would supply him later with a kind of imagery to express more complex spiritual concepts in the 1960s.



Three frames from *Caravan*, by Jordan Belson (1952). Scroll painting on paper. Courtesy Jordan Belson.

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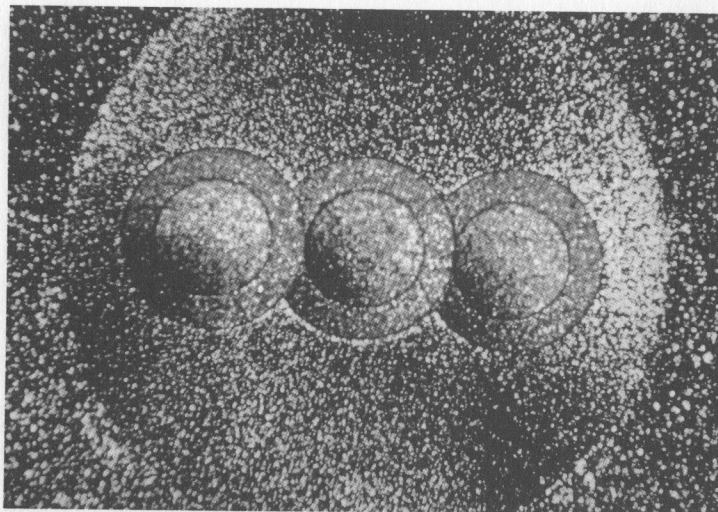


Frame enlargement from *Bop Scotch*, by Jordan Belson (1952). Courtesy William Moritz.

In the early 1950s, Belson continued making animated films out of his paintings. San Francisco was alive with the new Beat Generation and be-bop jazz. North Beach, where Belson lived, was pretty much the center of the Beat world. Belson himself designed and painted the facade of City Lights Bookstore, where Lawrence Ferlinghetti hosted the great writers of the period. Harry Smith painted abstract murals on the walls of Bop City nightclub, and often projected his films there to accompany live jazz performances as a sort of light show.

Belson made two films, *Mambo* and *Caravan*, by painting on long scrolls that approximated the filmstrip. Though each image on the scroll would be shot three times in good animation fashion, changes were not drawn in many tiny steps as in traditional animation, but rather relied on rough similarity of forms and explosive changes of texture and color. The films used Latin and bop jazz soundtracks which provided a lively rhythm to parallel or balance the exuberance of the lively imagery. Belson also animated two films, *Things to Come* and *Obmaru*, for the painter Patricia Marx using the same principle. At the same time, in 1952, Belson animated a little masterpiece *Bop Scotch*, which applied the three-frame exposure of his other animation to objects found on the street. Moving around a manhole cover makes it seem to turn and following the swirling lines in a decorative paving seems to make them sway. Daisies dance and a rock seems to hop about from hollow to

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Frame enlargement from *Mandala*, by Jordan Belson (1953). Courtesy William Moritz.

hollow in a patterned surface. The effect is enchanting and it became a very popular film (traces of its influence can be seen in such diverse films as Hy Hirsh's *Defense d'afficher* and Bruce Conner's *Looking for Mushrooms*).

The great masterpiece of these early films is the last, the 1953 *Mandala*, again a film made from scroll drawings, but this time a calm, meditative imagery of centric arrangements, accompanied by Balinese gamelan music that uncannily mirrors the shimmering textures. Belson explains about the technique:

I originally wanted to make a film painting directly on film, but I wasn't prepared to undertake an effort that involved working on such an unsuitable surface as a long strip of 35mm film. So the [paper] scroll came as a logical solution to the problem, really representing the film[strip] greatly magnified and of a material that was more conducive for what I wanted to do. It gave me a greater range of tonalities to work with and a greater range of materials to work with in terms of pigments, and it also gave me more room to control what was happening. It actually was conceived of as enlarged film[strip]. The scrolls are translucent: when they are actually put on film, the lighting is from behind.... It does impart a special glow to those films that I don't believe I've ever seen in films by other artists. In *Mandala*, I also used a [textured] acetate screen that I incorporated while photographing the scroll, giving it more texture than the drawings originally had, but a texture that was so similar to the drawings themselves that it blended perfectly and gave . . . a kind of shimmering . . . quality.<sup>1</sup>

After *Mandala*, Belson used little animation technique in his films. Part of the reason is ideological. He explains:

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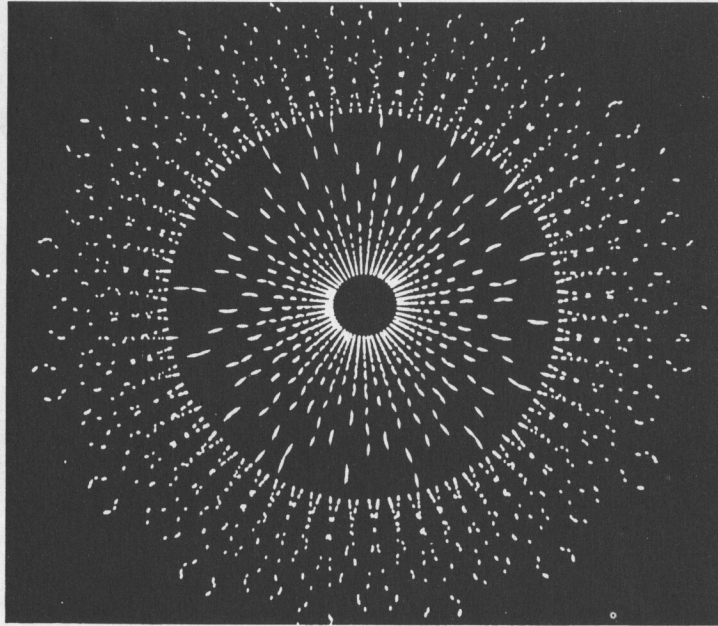


Frame enlargement from *Raga*, by Jordan Belson (1958). Courtesy William Moritz.

The more I continue to work in films the clearer the idea becomes that movement is inherent in graphics, even in still graphics. Many of the means by which I have obtained motion on film, especially in my newer work, is a matter of extracting motion from designs that were not intended for that purpose, but just normally contained motion if one knew how to release it. It almost sounds like atomic physics—it is something like that in a sense. Interference patterns offer an excellent example of a means by which the latent inherent motion in a form or in a composition can be suddenly animated by the simple device of passing a similar pattern over it. Rotation of the sort Duchamp did with his discs is another example of how motion can be derived from [static] material. Zooming in on a perfectly static form makes it seem to grow suddenly, a form of motion. Motion is an inherent part of graphics, whether the artist is aware of it or not. It's almost as if it were an element concealed invisibly within a form, and probably the most important thing I'm doing in films is finding ways of bringing it out, which might be one reason why I don't want to animate anymore—because Animation is imposing motion . . . *Bop Scotch* falls into this concept, because it is a very obvious example of trying to animate the inanimate.

Two other factors in Belson's change included an increased involvement with spiritual experiences that demanded a different kind of film expression, and his participation in the Vortex Concerts from 1957 to 1959, which involved preparing visual imagery for projection on a planetarium dome, to the accompaniment of experimental, ethnic and electronic music. These pioneer 'light shows' made use of the planetarium projectors, as well as specially-built devices to create exotic light effects. Conventional film was also projected on the

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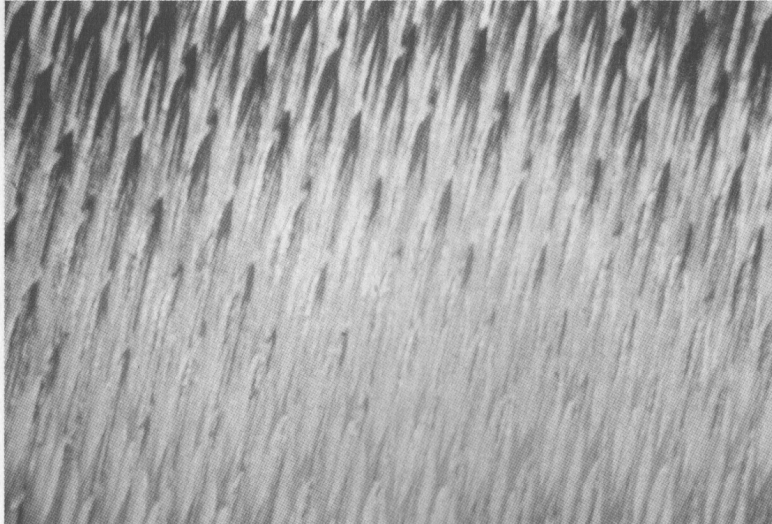
Interference Pattern, design for *Allures*, by Jordan Belson (1961).

dome, including James Whitney's *Yantra* (which acquired its soundtrack, Henk Badings's "Cain and Abel," from these Vortex shows), and Hy Hirsh's oscilloscope imagery (e.g. *Eneri*). Jordan also employed a kaleidoscope projector, which allowed him to roll through one of his painted scrolls and have it projected in a multifaceted version—a technique he documented in the 1959 film *Raga*. Belson also experimented with filming bubbles in such a way that they became free abstractions in motion (*Flight*, 1958). Other experimental effects from Vortex went into a 1959 film *Seance* and some also survive in the 1961 masterpiece *Allures* (the title derives from a Pierre Schaeffer composition that Belson visualized for Vortex but the current soundtrack for the images is by Belson and Henry Jacobs).

*Allures* is a good case in point for arguing that Belson's work is still part of the aesthetic realm of 'Animation' even though the strict frame-by-frame technique is largely lacking. In our tried-and-true Norman McLaren definition, "Animation is what happens between the frames of a film." This seems to apply particularly to Belson's work. Belson himself mentions the use of interference patterns as a liberation of motion from

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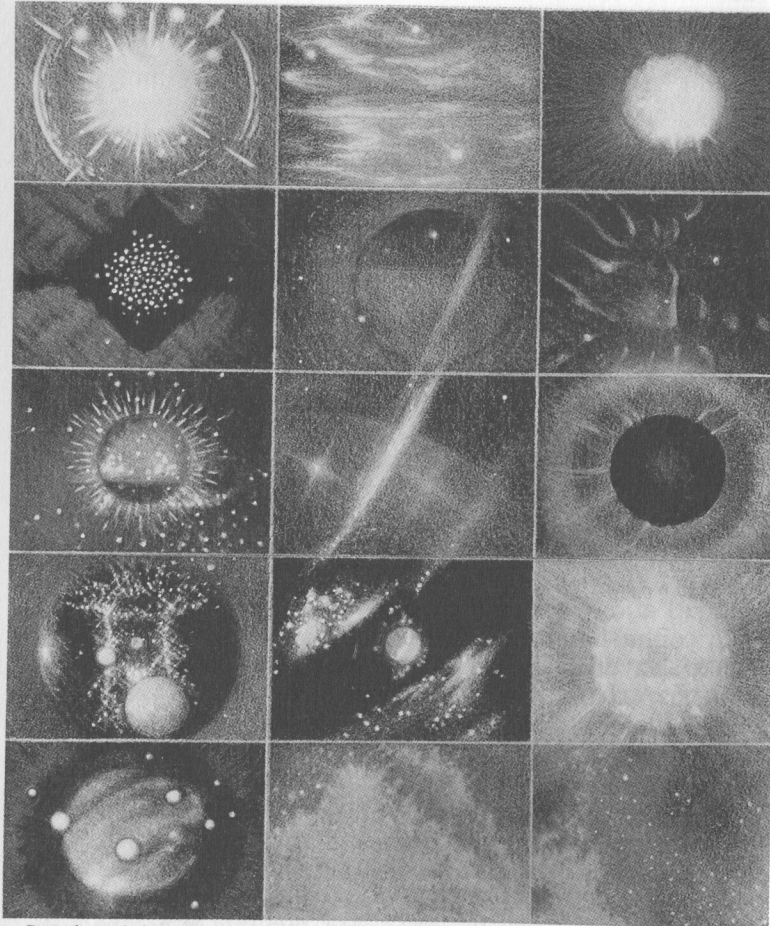




Frame enlargement from *Phenomenon*, by Jordan Belson (1965). Courtesy William Moritz.

still graphics. In *Allures* Belson creates some spectacular sequences using this technique, sequences that are not just a simple use of any random pair of grids, but rather carefully-prepared interference patterns that create complex and sensitive effects—things that required the animator's skills, even if they were finally shot in 'real time' after the careful construction was over. In one case this involves the exquisite taste to start the sequence with simple dots that begin at the bottom of the frame, rise, swell in number and motion, and then close again to the two dots exiting from the top of the frame. In another case the sequence shows simultaneous pairs of circular cluster motions (with some tinting) which must involve some matting to give the illusion that one set of trajectories bounce off the other and are deflected back. Quite aside from the fact that 'live-action' cinema has no place for such artistry [except, of course, for special effects and science fiction], the planning skills and sensitivities belong to the animator's sphere. These sequences could have been animated by hand. In fact, James Whitney in his 1955 *Yantra* did actually draw somewhat comparable dot patterns on 5" x 7" cards and shoot them as conventional frame-by-frame animation, adding some color effects by optical printing and textures in some cases by solarizing the film. And James Whitney would also draw dot patterns for *Lapis*, which were shot on a computerized camera 'motion control' set-up that mechanically multiplied each drawn pattern into a staggering

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Storyboard for *Music of the Spheres*, by Jordan Belson (1977). Courtesy William Moritz.

multiplicity of forms. These, too, are 'Animation,' as much spiritually as mechanically.

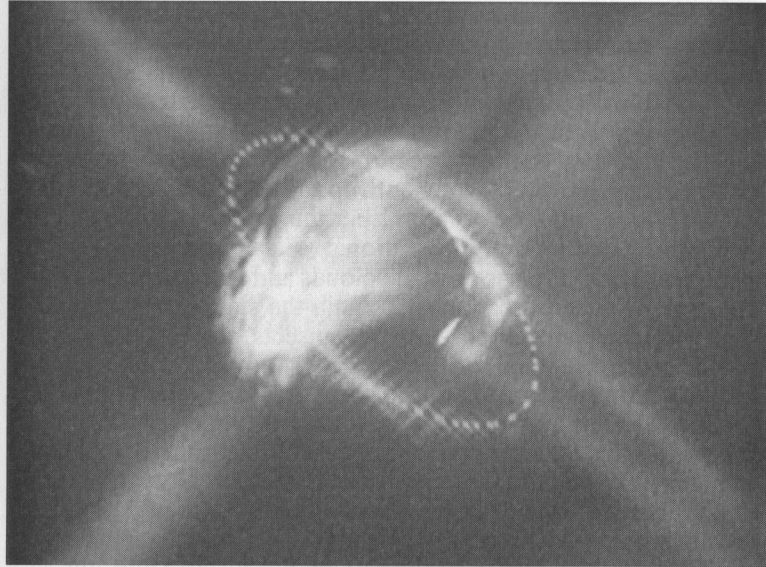
For that wonderful cycle of twelve films that Belson made between 1964 and 1980, we really know precious little about the techniques he actually used. Even if the titles—*Samadhi*, *Chakra*, *Meditation*—did not suggest a spiritual matrix for each film, the compelling flow of stunning visual manifestations helps to make those sacred pursuits a living experience for us. The subtle, nuanced configurations melt one into another, and occasionally some hard geometric shape performs a hard-edged action. Rarely, a glimpse of a recognizable object will float through. How did Belson create these illusions? We know

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that they were basically made by himself, single-handedly, at home, using modest low-tech equipment (a simple optical bench), and employing a great sensitivity and ingenuity. We know Belson continues to paint, so is a given sequence built from a painted original or a modified colander? Does it matter? Each one of the films abounds with a fabulous painterly balance of colors, with compelling musical structure—with all the sensitivity that Oskar Fischinger perceived back at *Transmutation* some twenty or thirty years before.

During the last 10 years, despite extreme difficulties with archiving prints of the older films to preserve the colors—which has meant that most of the films have disappeared from distribution, and consequently the income from them—Belson has persisted in creating two longer films, a symphonic variations on *Samadhi* from the mid-1980s and *Mysterious Journey* completed in 1997. Both of these, the *Samadhi Symphony* at more than twenty minutes and *Mysterious Journey* at thirty minutes, show no signs of weakening in the great artist's sensibility nor in the vitality of his vision. The larger symphonic structure (he had worked earlier with a similar string quartet format) allows a measured comparison of four movements, four contrasting moods that culminate in a more compelling finale as a result. Always a master of color, Belson creates in *Mysterious Journey* a rich palette of hues in subtle metamorphosis which leaves the critic grasping at exotic fruit analogies (mango, papaya, etc.) to describe them. Also the imagery seems constantly in change, layered with rarely less than three actions transpiring at the same time, often melting into one another or transforming into something else quite different—and evoking a central spiritual mystery: is it being, the cosmos, that changes? Or the individual mind that wields an unstable perception? In either case, this flux is compelling, fascinating, fluid as auditory music that impells you forward, and like music yielding fresh perceptions and emotions with each subsequent viewing. In the first movement, accompanied by gentle sounds of harps, an orange sunburst explodes through a blue field, which mirrors, translucently, a landscape with water seen from a moving vessel. Abstract forms flow in and out, revealing once a gnarled branch piercing a purple sky. Dots of white light seem to be falling leaves or blossoms but their direction of motion remains ambiguous—are they fireflies? Or stars seen from our unstable wandering point of view? This fundamental ambiguity, an equivocal identity, an enigmatic balance or destination, remains a major theme throughout the work. Golden circles waver between soft and hard-edged manifestations. Orange sprays seem sometimes water,

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Frame enlargement from *Mysterious Journey*, by Jordan Belson (1997).  
Courtesy Ying Tan.

sometimes fire; swirling mists seem sometimes sprays of water, sometimes swirls of incense smoke, sometimes dust of earth. The suggestion of a towering vault of a cathedral approximates a tapered skyscraper or a golden mountain in the country which metamorphoses into lavender and green, and a gentle interaction between center and edges. We seem to be leaving the solid perception of everyday reality behind.

The second movement, accompanied by an ethereal voice, seems to float in a skyscape, where blue showers and nuances of clouds yield to strong centric imagery which seems to mirror the pulses of the voice—a burst like an opening flower, hard circles dissolving to afterimages, and a suggestion of yoni that becomes writhing loops of color melting from red to magenta, from gold to custard to peach, while a bombardment of light circles races past on both sides like echoes racing into the oblivion of space.

The third movement, with sounds of nature and a ghostly piano solo, begins with a black-and-white waterfall that comes alive in color as a giant sun rises on the illusion of a tiny landscape, which is absorbed in rich, burnished, enameled emanations of color. Other colors implode through an imaginary 'eye of a needle' in the center of the screen and explode again into sprays of color on the other side. Green grids with a strong diagonal structure describe an oval that sparkles like light

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glancing off water, while random flashes scatter from unknown sources, currents flow parallel in opposite directions—and a single bird floats calmly through this writhing cosmos.

The fourth movement, accompanied by strings reminiscent of Mahler's 10th symphony, begins with cascades of color moving in several contrary directions, as if weightless waterfalls or urgent clouds were flowing both up and down, back and forth at the same time—perhaps like the serene floating of weightlessness in non-gravitational space, but with some unknown goal. Whisps of white clouds and an occasional star enhance a space evocation, but again the stars take flight in extraordinary trajectories—are they insects, cinders, the souls of Francesca da Rimini and her consorts? A rush of soft mango-colored clouds descends from above, causing the thrilling sensation of the viewer flying upwards. A shaft of light, like Jacob's ladder, delineates a twisting sea of clouds, then cascades of color again, churning in opposite directions, flowing in the same direction, closing down into a 'sunset,' a sea of darkness in which one white hawk flies his tours. How little words can say about this complex, symphonic experience. And how lucky we are to have one of the great masters of the absolute film still working among us, releasing visions such as this.

This paper was delivered at the Tenth Annual Society for Animation Studies Conference at Chapman University, in August 1998.

<sup>1</sup> This quotation and others from Jordan Belson derive from a 1959 interview that Robert Pike made with him while preparing his Master's Thesis on "Experimental Film on the West Coast" for the University of California at Los Angeles. Small clarifications were made by Belson in January 1999, for publication in *Animation Journal*.

William Moritz received his doctorate from the University of Southern California. He has written on animation extensively and, in 1993, was awarded a lifetime achievement trophy for service to Visual Music from the Royal Academy of the Netherlands. His 34 films have screened worldwide, his poems are published in a variety of journals, and two of his plays have been produced professionally. He is past president of the Society for Animation Studies and currently a Professor at California Institute of the Arts. ©1999 William Moritz

#### JORDAN BELSON'S *MYSTERIOUS JOURNEY*

*Mysterious Journey* is available on VHS video for \$25 from Great Media, P.O. Box 750517, Petaluma, CA 94975 USA. Tel: 1-800-882-8284.

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**Jordan Belson Filmography**

Transmutation, 1947 (lost)  
 Improvisation #1, 1948 (lost)  
 Bop Scotch, 1952  
 Mambo, 1951 (scroll technique)  
 Caravan, 1952 (scroll technique)  
 Mandala, 1953 (scroll technique)  
 Raga, 1958  
 Séance, 1959  
 Allures, 9 min., 1961 (6 min. 1962)  
 Re-entry, 6 min., 1964 (Ford Foundation Fellowship)  
 Phenomena, 6 min., 1965  
 Samadhi, 6 min., 1967 (Guggenheim Fellowship)  
 Momentum, 7 min., 1968 (AFI Grant)  
 Cosmos, 7 min., 1968  
 World, 7 min., 1970  
 Meditation, 8 min., 1971  
 Chakra, 8 min., 1972  
 Light, 8 min., 1973  
 Cycles, 10 min., 1975 (Collaboration with Stephen Beck, AFI Grant)  
 Music of the Spheres, 10 min., 1977  
 Infinity, 8 min., 1979  
 Pisces / Blues, 12 min., 1980  
 Apollo's Lyre, 10 min., 1980  
 Seapeace, 11 min., 1980  
 Eleusis / Crotona, 10 min., 1980  
 Astronaut's Dream, 7 min., 1981  
 Moonlight, 6 min., 1981  
 Fireflies, 6 min., 1981  
 Apollo, 10 min., 1982  
 Quartet, 11 min., 1983  
 Fountain of Dreams, 12 min., 1984  
 Northern Lights, 7 min., 1985  
 Thoughtforms, 10 min., 1987  
 Samadhi and Other Films, 22 min., 1989  
 Mysterious Journey, 30 min. 1997; available on VHS video for \$25 from  
 Great Media, P.O.Box 750517, Petaluma, CA 94975. Tel: 1-800-882-8284.

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