

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL

SUNDAY
JANUARY 19, 2020
2 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Henry Darger (1892-1973), a hospital janitor and dishwasher in Chicago, led a secret life, completely unknown until a year before he died, as a massively prolific visual artist and novelist. Since his passing, his work has been collected and showcased by museums around the world as an example of outsider art, and it is Darger's life and work that are the subject of Jessica Yu's 2004 film *IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL*.

Born in Chicago in 1892, Darger was placed in an orphanage at age 8 after his mother died and his father was unable to take care of him. Described by his father as both very intelligent and very "peculiar," Darger was sent to the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Illinois, when he was 12 years old. After escaping from the institution on his third attempt, he began working as a janitor in Chicago in 1909, a profession he remained in for the most part until he retired in the 1960s. As his health began to fail in 1972, Darger asked his landlord to help him move into an assisted living facility, and when the landlord and a tenant began cleaning Darger's two-room apartment, they found more than 350 watercolor, pencil, collage and carbon drawings, seven typewritten hand-stitched books, and thousands of pages of typewritten text.



Darger began writing and illustrating an epic novel in longhand around 1910, and by 1916, began typing it and bundling the pages into bulky volumes, a task that he never finished. The 15,145 page typewritten fantasy novel, titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, is a monumental saga of child innocence and martyrdom that takes place on an imagined planet and features detailed descriptions of Civil War-inspired military battles between the innocent Vivian Girls and evil adults keeping children as slaves.

In the absence of documentary evidence of Darger's life beyond three extant photographs, Yu weaves a kind of documentary fiction, augmenting selections from his writing and recollections of those who knew him with animated scenes from Darger's illustrations and paintings (produced by animator Kara Vallow). Actor Larry Pine, known for his work with Wes Anderson in *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS*, *MOONRISE KINGDOM*, and *THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL*, reads to words of Darger, while Dakota Fanning provides the voice of an innocent, omniscient narrator reminiscent of one of Darger's characters.

After graduating from Yale summa cum laude with a degree in English and honors as an All-American fencer in 1987, Jessica Yu began working as a production assistant on films and commercials. In 1997, Yu received the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short for her film *BREATHING LESSONS*, about Mark O'Brien, a writer who lived in an iron lung due to childhood polio. It was at a Chicago screening of her feature-length documentary, *THE LIVING MUSEUM* (1998), a portrait of an art community at Creedmoor, a New York psychiatric institution, that Yu began to think more about Darger's story, after a filmgoer connected her with Darger's landlady, who allowed her in to Darger's room, which had been untouched in decades.

Yu's film was nominated for an Emmy and a Writers Guild Award, and brought Darger's story to a wider audience. Yu followed the documentary with live action feature, *PING PONG PLAYA*, in 2007, about a Chinese ping pong family in Southern California. Additionally, beginning with "ER" in 2003, Yu has directed episodes of dozens of acclaimed television series, including "The West Wing," "Grey's Anatomy," "Scandal," "Billions," "Fosse/Verdon," and "13 Reasons Why." In 2019, Yu became the first Asian American woman to direct a network drama pilot, with NBC's "Bluff City Law," starring Jimmy Smits, which premiered last September.

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY **JESSICA YU**

WRITTEN BY **JESSICA YU** AND FEATURING
THE WRITINGS OF **HENRY DARGER**

PRODUCED BY **CHERRY SKY FILMS** AND
DIORAMA FILMS

(2004) 81 MINS.

WITH THE VOICES OF **LARRY PINE** AND
DAKOTA FANNING

MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON

DIRECTED BY **MAYA DEREN** AND
ALEXANDER HAMMID

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY **MAYA DEREN**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **ALEXANDER HAMMID**

(1943) 14 MINS., 16MM

STARRING **MAYA DEREN** AND
ALEXANDER HAMMID

DID YOU KNOW: DARGER'S WORK HAS INSPIRED TWO OTHER FILMS: FIRST, *DARGER'S ROOM 1973*, A 21-MINUTE SILENT SHORT FILM BY COLEEN FITZGIBBON & MICHAEL S. THOMPSON, FILMED ON SUPER 8 FILM AT DARGER'S APARTMENT AND CAPTURING DARGER'S BOOKS, ARTWORKS, AND NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH. IN 2012, UK FILMMAKER MARK STOKES DIRECTED *REVOLUTIONS OF THE NIGHT: THE ENIGMA OF HENRY DARGER*, A BIOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION OF DARGER WHICH ALSO CHARTS HIS POSTHUMOUS RISE TO ART WORLD RECOGNITION.

NEXT UP: DIRECTOR LYNNE RAMSAY'S AWARD-WINNING 2011 PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER *WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN*, STARRING TILDA SWINTON, JOHN C. REILLY, AND EZRA MILLER, IS BASED ON LIONEL SHRIVER'S BESTSELLING NOVEL, AND WAS RECENTLY NAMED BY THE *GUARDIAN* AS ONE OF THE 100 BEST FILMS OF THE 21ST CENTURY. SEE THE FILM IN 35MM, **SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, AT 2PM.**