

WIDESCREEN

SEEING FILM IN A WIDER CONTEXT

The Last Picture Show



The man who built a movie palace in his own basement and the photographer who told his touching story.

Interview by SAM PRICE Photographs by KENDALL MESSICK



ABOVE
WORKING AND REWORKING
LEFT
ACT I
BACKGROUND
GORDON BRINCKLE C.1941

PAULINE KAEI SAID OF FILM in her famous 1969 essay "Trash, Art and the Movies" that it was a medium made for "displaced persons", "a tawdry corrupt art" that suited this "tawdry corrupt world". And even though we may sometimes find our waking lives dissatisfactory and impermanent, conclude that our collective destinies are forever out of our control whilst looking for a "home" that "no longer exists", Kael assures us that, even when we are at our lowest ebb, there is one constant, one variable humankind can bend to its will in order to take some solace away from the drudgery of day-to-day living. Kael summed it up in five words: "But there are movie houses".

Think of a suicidal Woody Allen grabbing a screening of *Duck Soup* in *Hannah and Her Sisters* to stop himself from blowing his brains out, or a shell-shocked Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* losing herself in a matinee showing of *Top Hat* before she must confront the real world of Depression-era poverty. Think of Bruce Willis hiding out from the end of the world in a repertory cinema showing *Vertigo* at a "24 Hour Hitchcock Fest" in Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*, remarking of its constancy, "The movie never changes - it can't change - but every time you see it, it seems different because you're different." Think of the elegiac, mournful screening of *Red River* at the climax of *The Last Picture Show*, where the shuttering of the town nickelodeon is framed by director Peter Bogdanovich as the loss of a generation's innocence on the eve of the Korean War, the cinema's owner balefully announcing, "Nobody wants to come to shows



LEFT
GORDON BRINCKLE AS A YOUNG MAN
PHOTO TAKEN IN HIS FIRST THEATRE
CONSTRUCTION IN HIS PARENTS
PHILADELPHIA, PA BASEMENT (C.1941)

no more”. Think of even the “cineautistic” protagonist of Steve Erickson’s novel *Zeroville*, Ike Jerome, who’d be a classic literary loner wandering about the City of Angels, if it weren’t for the tattoo of Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* inked on the side of his head. Think of *Sunset Boulevard* and Gloria Swanson driven mad, forever taunted by “those wonderful people out there in the dark” who once littered the movie houses to see her silent pictures. Even in this epoch of soulless corporate multiplexes films, movie stars, and the cinemas that bring them to life, are still sanctuaries, safe havens; spaces where Kael’s “displaced persons” can go to feel alone, and yet still be surrounded by people.

No doubt it was this same impulse – to vanish from the world by inhabiting several new, fictional ones – that drew an otherwise retiring “loner” from Delaware called Gordon Brinckle to construct a shock-pink 1950s-style movie palace in his own basement which he dubbed “The Shalimar”. Built in 1959 and maintained until his death in 2007, Brinckle’s cinema was a personalised, almost otherworldly dreamscape localised entirely under his floorboards. According to the artist, photographer and filmmaker who spent his formative years across the street from Brinckle’s home, Kendall Messick, Gordon was at the heart of an “improbable tale” about “a man who despite numerous obstacles pursued his dream by quietly building it in his basement seems to be at the



LEFT
110 EAST HOFFECKER STREET
BELOW
WATCHING TELEVISION



Central, too, to Messick’s work was capturing “the dichotomy of Gordon’s upstairs and downstairs worlds”; the difference between his everyday ordinariness and the magical transgressions possible in his cinema.

core of people’s feelings of inspiration”. Gordon’s humdrum life in small-town America, in Messick’s words “a mundane 1950s suburban home”, was enlivened by an idealised private bolthole with “four working curtains, an auditorium, a box office, a marquee, an organ alcove and a projection room”. Messick’s commitment to preserving Gordon’s story began in 2001 and he has continued the work for over a decade, first in photographic form and then later, with his creative partner Lida Burris Gibson as a documentary in late 2003.

A tall, stooping, ragged-looking man by the time of his death that would keep good company with any of the oddballs captured on film by Albert and David Maysles, Gordon built his theatre, according to Messick, as “a memorial to the movie palaces of the early twentieth century”. A paean to a cultural space lost, seemingly forever, Gordon states in the

documentary he constructed the theatre in his own home, “Because it’s something beautiful, something I was able to create, God gave me that power and I’ve tried to use it. He told me you can’t have that big picture house. You’ll lose it. But you can build it in your home if you want to.”

Central, too, to Messick’s work was capturing “the dichotomy of Gordon’s upstairs and downstairs worlds”; the difference between his everyday ordinariness and the magical transgressions possible in his cinema. In his book, dubbed *The Projectionist* after the profession Gordon held down for thirty-three years before being turfed out with the coming of the multiplexes, Messick contrasts the black-and-white normality of Gordon’s home-life against the wild, pungent Technicolor delights of The Shalimar. The cinema itself appears not a



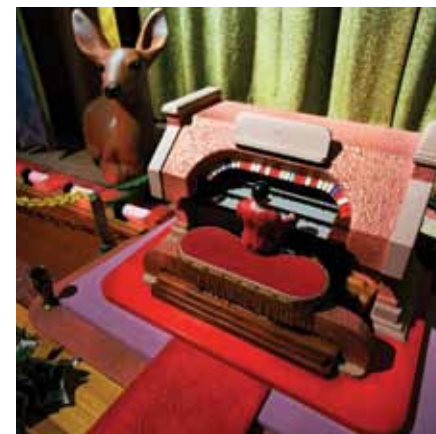
thousand miles removed from David Lynch's ethereal "Club Silencio" in *Mulholland Drive* (ironically a performance space that Lynch is in the process of building for real in Paris), and declares itself to be "Delaware's Last Movie House", either an apocryphal or an apt moniker, depending on which way you look at it, particularly since Delaware was never a state known for its palatial movie houses.

Shortly before his death in 2007, Messick stripped The Shalimar from its natural habitat and reassembled it brick-by-brick. It now tours the length and breadth of the US. It's a fitting tribute to Gordon's legacy, given that at the heat of what Messick calls the "human

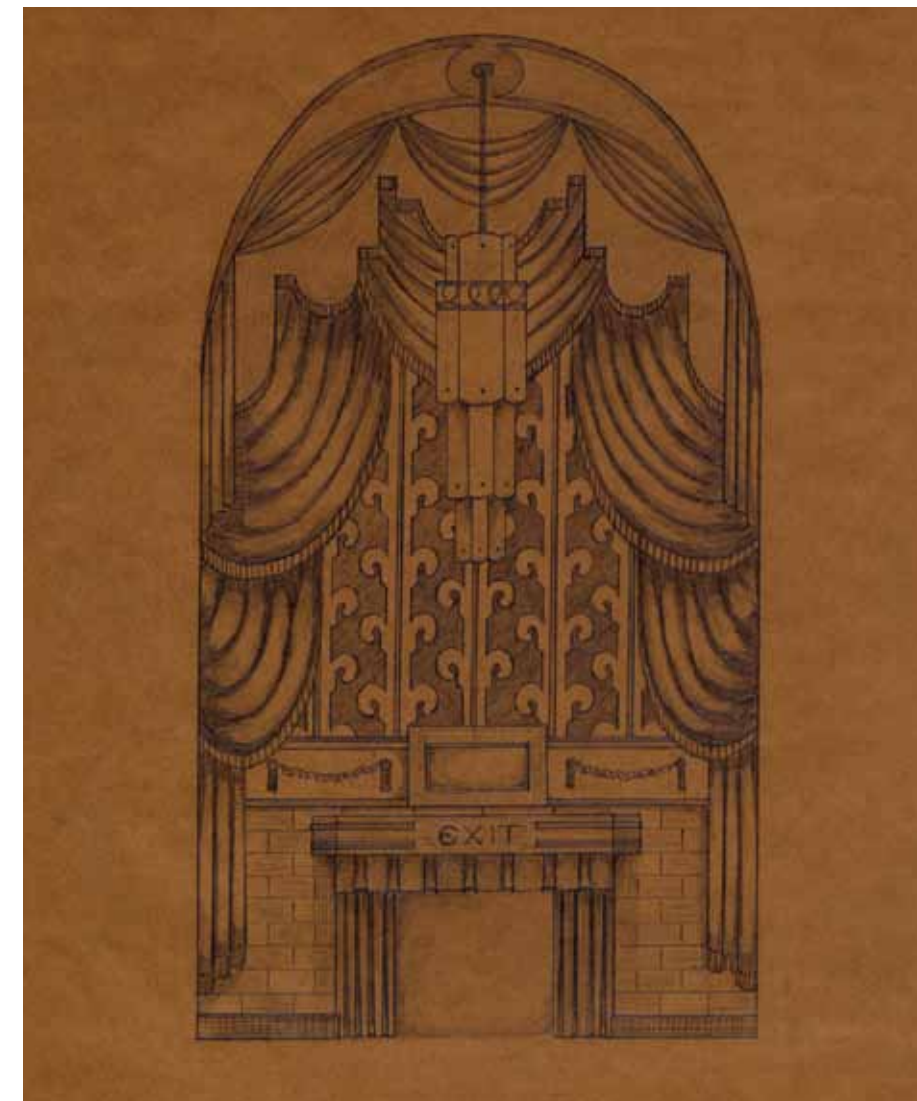
narrative" burbling beneath the surface, was Gordon's dream first to own a movie palace – something now eminently possible with this travelling exhibition. When I ask Messick about Gordon's unique paradoxical preoccupation for a furiously private man not particularly concerned with films themselves, but the paraphernalia surrounding them, he cites the projectionist's perfectionism to a "constructed vision" as what marks him out as "a true artist", relaying Gordon's own words that cinemas today are "cheap looking affairs", the "beauty and graciousness of the past" now lost in the rash of anonymous, utilitarian cinemas designed to run the latest Michael Bay pictures over and over.

"Not unlike a painter that paints over what many would consider to be a finished canvas, he was constantly working and re-working his constructed vision of what the theatre should be throughout his life."

ABOVE
TICKET TAKER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
SHALIMAR EXIT
MARYANN
EXIT TREATMENT C.1941
FULL PROSCENIUM DRAPERY TREATMENT C.1938
LITTLE KIMBALL
(ALL DRAWINGS © GORDON BRINCKLE)





LEFT
THE VIEWING WINDOW

ABOVE
FINAL INSPECTION

BELOW
THE PROJECTIONIST BY KENDALL MESSICK
AVAILABLE FROM WWW.AMAZON.COM



It's easy, perhaps to roll over and accept the tide of gimmicks of the multiplex and become part of the undisciplined, popcorn-munching morass, but there's a universalism about what Messick is capturing in a project like *The Projectionist* that speaks to cinema's abilities to yoke people together. What historian E.P. Thompson sought to do by chronicling the lives of the English working poor in prose (recapturing them from "the enormous condescension of posterity") Messick is realising through pictures, the moving image and the act of physically hauling Gordon's

Shalimar across the country for others to enjoy.

There's a quote attributed to Francois Truffaut that goes, "For me, cinema is not a sad imitation of life. It is an improvement on life." For a man like Gordon Brinckle, it was perhaps the literal truth. But as Kael reminds us, no matter what form we choose to construct them – in our homes, in our repertory cinemas, our own private Shalimars, even our quiet nooks in the multiplex – there are still, and shall always be, movie houses for those wonderful people out there in the dark. [\[tbp\]](#)

go further... An exhibition, book and film by Kendall Messick: www.theprojectionist.net