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## Galleries »

### A Subterranean Shangri-La

By JESSICA DAWSON  
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In large-scale photographs and a documentary film on view at Hemphill, artist Kendall Messick introduces us to Gordon Brinckle, a nonagenarian who had a decades-long passion for the Alvin Shalimar — a fully functioning nine-seat movie house that he built into his Delaware basement.

Films? Brinckle (pronounced "Brinkley"), who died in 2007 at age 92 — could take 'em or leave 'em. The Shalimar never screened one all the way through. Instead, Brinckle's ardor centered on 1930s-era "movie palaces," as he called them, and the escape that their plush interiors offered.

In these pictures, Messick shows us two Brinckles. One, the aged former film projectionist (he held the job several times) hunched to a nearly 90-degree angle, who putters around the house. The other Brinckle lives downstairs, in Technicolor. He poses on the Shalimar proscenium in front of vaudeville-bright curtains, dwarfing the screen beyond. Elsewhere, he's lighted so bright that his shadows conjure a genial Bela Lugosi.

The "Alice in Wonderland" effect of Messick's camera creates scenes that register both claustrophobic and bigger than life. His series serves as metaphor for the confinements of old age and the deliverance offered by imagination.

Watching Messick's half-hour biopic devoted to Brinckle's life, you can practically smell the mothballs. Here Brinckle wears loud jackets — spiffy, he might say — while leading us around the projection room and ticket booth. Gesturing with his long fingers, Brinckle talks about his underground utopia.

Of his projectors, which Brinckle calls "the girls," he says: "I couldn't ask for sweeter machines than these two." Of today's multiplex: "It's such a cheap looking affair." Of changing times: "The beauty and the graciousness of the past is just something that isn't anymore."

We could dismiss Brinckle's words as an oldster's lament, yet there is a truth there: the truth of watching your life pass, and the years along with it — the inability to stop time and the shock of its speed.

In the 1990s, Messick's sympathy for the elderly prompted him to document the aging population of a North Carolina town. Now 43, Messick rediscovered Brinckle — he was his neighbor growing up — about seven

» Kendall Messick's "The Projectionist" is at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th St. NW, 202-234-5601, to Jan. 24. Gallery hours Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Closed today and tomorrow. [www.hemphillfinearts.com](http://www.hemphillfinearts.com).

years ago. When Brinckle died, he bequeathed the theater to Messick.

In an interview with The Post, Messick talked about "The Projectionist" and the weight of his inheritance:

#### How did you discover Brinckle's theater?

Gordon had one daughter, Sandy, who died of cancer in December of 2001. The day she died, I was visiting my mother across the street and upon learning of her death, we immediately visited Gordon and his wife to pay our respects. It was during that visit that I saw the Shalimar for the first time as an adult (I had seen it once as a boy) and realized that this would be my next project.

#### You chose black-and-white film to document Brinckle's quotidian, street-level world and saturated color for his basement theater. Could you walk us through the journey from upstairs to downstairs and discuss your approach to shooting these realms?

The profound difference between Gordon's upstairs environment and his constructed reality downstairs is what led me to make images upstairs in black-and-white and downstairs in color. Upstairs, the 1950s-era, three-bedroom house was furnished in a cluttered, modest fashion with numerous items amassed over a lifetime. Due to Gordon and his wife Dot's failing health in recent years, it had been impossible for them to maintain the upstairs. The downstairs theater, on the other hand, was orderly, pristine and clearly preserved with the utmost care.

In this project, I question how we choose to see what we want to see — whether it's the Gordon upstairs or the one downstairs. The black-and-white images depict what a casual visitor would see in the home of any elderly person. They can be hard images to look at, and we tend to brush past them. The color images of Gordon's downstairs fantasy world are an unexpected



Gordon Brinckle in a photo from "The Projectionist," artist Kendall Messick's exhibit on Brinckle and his basement theater.

window into a world that we might never have seen.

#### In your pictures, Brinckle appears a giant in cramped quarters. How did it feel to walk around the Shalimar?

Although the theater was small in scale, it was not miniature. I didn't ever feel like a giant when I was there. On the contrary, while it was a bit cramped in certain areas, the overall feeling I always had was one of warmth. In fact, it was rather womblike.

#### In "The Projectionist" video, Brinckle's skin tones have a strong pink cast, as if you didn't color-correct for the light. Why?

The vibrant pink hues of Gordon's theater struck me from the beginning, particularly in contrast to the blandness

of the living areas above. There were rosy hues and pink lights throughout the theater, and I made the conscious choice to play up that otherworldly ambience. I also consider it a visual representation of the way that the theater literally "colored" Gordon's life.

#### How, finally, did Brinckle's Shalimar Theater arrive in your care?

The future of the theater was highly uncertain, and the possibility that it could have ended up in a dumpster somewhere would have been an utter tragedy. In 2006, I committed to save it and had it removed piece by piece and reconstructed to travel. The theater is currently crated and in storage, ready to be transported to future exhibition venues. How could I not preserve his life's work?

*Kendall Messick's series serves as metaphor for the confinements of old age and the deliverance offered by imagination.*