

The Washington Times

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2008

The Washington Times

A SECTION B



Candid images

'Projectionist' views obsession, old age

In 2001, New Jersey artist Kendall Messick paid a visit to the couple across the street from his childhood home in Middletown, Del. He remembered that his elderly neighbor, Gordon Brinckle, had built a vintage-style movie theater in the basement of his ranch house and was eager to take another look.

That visit spurred "The Projectionist," a heartwarming documentary and photography series about Mr. Brinckle's career and passionate interest in movie theater design. Chronicling a long but hidden life, it is a tribute to one man's creativity and the

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Kendall Messick was inspired to create the documentary "The Projectionist" after visiting the home of Gordon Brinckle (top and above), who had built a vintage-style movie theater in his basement.

bygone era of cinema palaces and uniformed ushers that inspired it.

The 2003 film and related photographs are on view at Hemphill Fine Arts along with striking images of drive-in movie theaters by Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto as part of FotoWeekDC, a citywide celebration of photography. (Mr. Messick will speak about his work Saturday at 2 p.m. at FotoWeek Central, 3338 M St. NW.)

Mr. Messick's installation succeeds in creating a portrait of eccentricity, obsession and aging that is both poignant and inspiring. His brightly colored photographs of Mr. Brinckle posing in his basement theater convey the suburban creepiness of a David Lynch movie, while

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In the Hemphill Fine Arts exhibit, Gordon Brinckle (right) is seen at the backstage exit of the movie theater he built in the basement of his home. An image of Mickey Mouse (below) is on the theater's proscenium drapes.



CANDID

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his black-and-white images provide an unflinching look at old age. The more candid shots show the thin, stooped nonagenarian in the plain light of day, wearing his old Army uniform and wearing shorts while shaving.

The highlight of the exhibit is the film, but unfortunately, it is shown on a monitor tucked into an alcove. (Bring your own seat.) The artist prefers to run the film in a re-creation of Mr. Brinckle's basement theater, which he dismantled and owns, but the gallery was too small for the installation.

In the 31-minute documentary, Mr. Brinckle reminisces about his experiences during the Depression and World War II with frankness and humor. The movie theater becomes a metaphor for the backdrop of his life.

The old projectionist credits his interest in theater design to his great-grandfather, who owned the Fulton Theater, an opera house in Lancaster, Pa. While in his teens and early 20s, he apprenticed to a Philadelphia theater decorator and learned to upholster seats, make drapes and draw floor plans. He used those skills in 1936 to build a theater in the basement of his parents' home.

Mr. Brinckle first worked as a movie projectionist in the Army to show training films and, after being



posted to China, designed an outdoor theater for the troops. Returning to civilian life, he worked at Middle-town's Everett Theater for 33 years as a projectionist, doorman and manager.

In 1959, he started building his basement theater, calling it the Alvin Shalimar theater (named in honor of his grandfather and a New Jersey motel) with all the detail of a Depression-era movie house.

It was fitted with authentic seats, a curtained proscenium, a working organ and a projection booth. Mr. Brinckle saw it as a work in progress and constantly changed its decor with homey touches such as figurines and candlesticks. "I like to create beauty," he says in the film. "It's a great feeling."

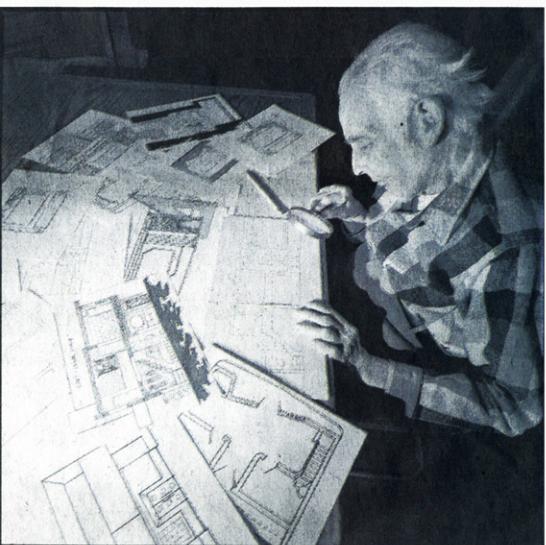
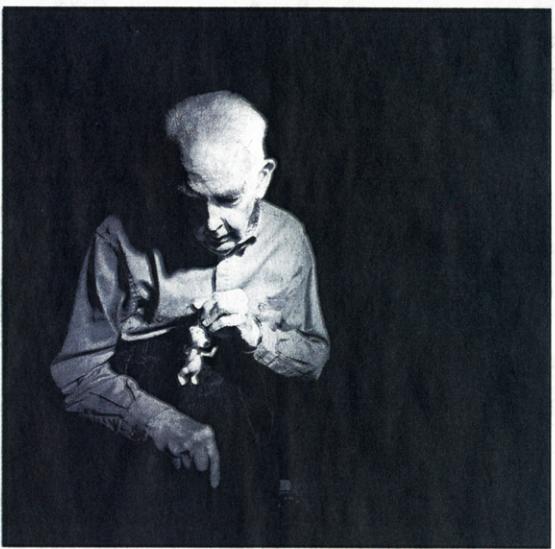
Yet, for all his efforts, the homeowner rarely screened a movie in the space, according to Mr. Messick. "He had every capability of showing films, but it wasn't about that," the 43-year-old filmmaker says by telephone. "It was more about the theaters themselves. He loved being behind the scenes."

In the film, Mr. Brinckle recalls hearing the laughter and applause of the audience but never mentions the movies being screened. (He did get to see "The Projectionist" in his basement theater a few years before he died in 2007 at age 92.)

"Gordon was an active participant in the project," recalls Mr. Messick, who specializes in recording old folks' interesting histories. In 2001, the filmmaker completed "Corapeake," a documentary and photos depicting 70- to 109-year-old residents of a North Carolina town. He is working on "Swann Song," a documentary focused on elderly New York actress Elaine Swann.

"All of my significant projects are about exploring themes of aging," he says. "I'm trying to bring attention to the amazing stories that people of advanced age have if you listen to them."

As evidenced in "The Projectionist," some of them certainly are worth hearing.



WHAT: "The Projectionist"
WHERE: Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th St. NW
WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Through Dec. 20
ADMISSION: Free
PHONE: 202/234-5601
WEB SITE: www.hemphillfinearts.com

Mr. Brinckle (at left) shows off his good luck charm, Snoopy. Trained as a theater decorator, he would work and rework his designs (above).