

## **Art With Its Own Soundtrack** “Visual Music” at MOCA

“Visual Music” honors revolutionary video and film art more than it does the music played with it. Musical sounds complement the videos, films and even paintings, but the sound always seems obviously secondary to the visual artwork. The only sounds in “Visual Music” are soundtracks to films and inspirational music to paintings.

The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles chose some of the most innovative artwork from the 20<sup>th</sup> century for its latest exhibit. From the experimental black and white 1932 films of artist/ animator Oskar Fischinger to Jennifer Steinkamp’s video projections made only ten years ago, most of the artwork is abstract animation, both traditional and computer-generated.

Not surprisingly many psychedelic films from the 60s occupied the rooms. In James Whitney’s 1963 film *Lapis*, small shapes dance and rotate around each other to create an infinite, mesmerizing pattern moving in sync with the sounds of a sitar performed by Ravi Shankar.

A true gem in this exhibit is an excerpt from the film *Stepping Stones* by Elias Romero. Strikingly grotesque, images in the experimental abstract film slowly ooze, drip, bubble, and burn. Sometimes the film itself is tampered with, but it is difficult to distinguish exactly when and how. The rich colors change with the soundtrack. In the beginning of the film, blood red drips over white, black and browns—an agitated instrumental piece completes the threatening tone. Toward the end of the clip, a bright blue blob filling the frame slowly travels across the screen while an operatic soprano voice sings morosely. The musical component to Romero’s film brings the abstractions to life. The dramatic soprano voice attributes to a grief-stricken, sorrowful quality to the slowly oozing blue liquid. Unexpectedly the viewer begins to empathize with the blue blob as it trudges on its sullen journey. It is unfortunate that the film could not be viewed in its entirety.

Oskar Fischinger’s experimental work from the 1930s, though difficult to watch, is the most historically significant artwork in the exhibit. His rudimentary animation techniques paved the way for revolutionary artists like John and James Whitney in the 1960s. Fischinger is well known in the history of film and animation, but MOCA

confidently labels him as a ground-breaking fine artist as well. Unfortunately his experimental sound is weak and dull compared to his revolutionary animation.

Paying tribute to early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists from the Western world, artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Man Ray and Georgia O'Keefe were featured painters along with many others. Exquisitely colorful, most of the paintings stay true to the emotional and spiritual manifesto attributed to the German Expressionist art group *der Blaue Reiter*. Headphones and iPods stood next to the benches in the centers of these rooms. The inspirational music behind a painting could be heard while looking at it—a rare opportunity.

From the hypnotizing animated patterns of the Whitney brothers to iPods accompanying paintings, MOCA's "Visual Music" recreates the heightened sensations associated with hallucinogenic drugs. The culmination of sound and movement allow the viewer to more easily concentrate on one thing for a long period of time. Instead of walking past five paintings in one minute, the time frame of each musical composition forces the spectator to observe one painting for five minutes. A truly interactive art exhibit, "Visual Music" please multiple senses and offers a refreshing alternative to the traditional painting show.

-Christina Balch