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Art on Film, for Free, at Film Forum

Salt and Memory

JG, dir. Tacita Dean, UK, 26 minutes

Visions of Mary Frank, dir. John Cohen, USA, 58 minutes

At Film Forum



In this era of record-breaking auction prices, art for free sounds too good to be true – or is it just the art that no one will pay for?

Starting today, Film Forum will show two films, with free admission, sponsored by a donor, the Ostrovsky Family Foundation.

JG, by Tacita Dean, looks mostly and ruminatively at Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty in Utah. The voice track, watching time go by on a clock, is your clue into the film's title – the words come from the British novelist J. G. Ballard, who, like Dean, was an admirer of Smithson's massive earthwork. The film - the second of two — is inspired by their correspondence.

Sun, salt, spiral," the narrator declares. We watch steam shovels digging up dirt and rock, a lizard darting about, snow melting (is this the new version of painting drying, the knee-jerk derision of any film that doesn't lurch above the speed limit?) and the wide sky. Inset spheres that are meant to resemble planets remind you that Ballard's realm is science fiction, which is what the local Mormons might have thought of Smithson's project when it was first proposed. Dean's film is a reminder that it will be there longer than any of us – before the Mormons got there, and long after they are gone. By the way, there's no mention of the Latter-day Saints here.

"If only one could unwind this spiral, it would play back to us a picture of all the landscapes it's ever seen. It literally sees time," intones the *JG* narration. Other science fiction practitioners might seize on this allusion and say, "It's ALIVE."

If you're looking for something painterly, Dean's quiet shots of Salt Lake with mountains behind rely on a subtle grey on grey composition that makes you think of similar minimal color combinations by Arthur Dove. The tones are mysterious, but soothing and serene.

The theater setting should make *JG* more pleasant viewing than it is in a gallery, where visitors generally stand and the faint-hearted, challenged by 26 minutes of concentration, tend to come and go.

The other half of Film Forum's double bill is *Visions of Mary Frank*. The documentary assembles a series of conversations with the sculptor, now in her later years, whose fragmented terra cotta figures, seemingly drawn and formed from the tortured shapes of Picasso's *Guernica*, evoke pain and longing. The figures have a mournful universality to them, which fit the mood of posters that Frank made for protests of the Iraq War in the much-missed tradition of the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theater. Frank, in talking about her life as an artist in days when women artists weren't noticed for their art, brings specificity to those figures in reflections on people and the past.



Filmmaker John Cohen (also a musician from the New Lost City Ramblers, an inventive old time string band formed in 1958 and still going) structures his film loosely, like a home movie, like Mary Frank's reminiscences. The artist still wears her hair long, the same way that it was when she was married to the photographer Robert Frank. She and Frank were part of a New York scene that was small, argumentative and barely paid – pre-Gagosian, to put it mildly.

Looking at archival photographs in black and white and listening to Mary Frank, you will find that Cohen's film gives nostalgia a reality check. There wasn't much money. Bringing up children as an artist meant neglecting them in favor of working in the studio. Frank would lose two children, she says sadly, looking back.

We see lots of Frank's art, mostly her long melancholy figures, but her molded shapes of fish and birds on slabs of clay suggest fossils and Near Eastern cylinder seals. A glimpse of a collage in a sequence at a gallery opening makes you want to see more. We can assume that many more women artists from that time are out there, with their voices unheard. There's more archaeology to be done.