

VISUAL ARTS MARCH 19, 2016 5:44 PM

Obsolete Media Miami bringing Jonas Mekas to South Florida

HIGHLIGHTS

Co-founders Kevin Arrow and Barron Sherer are established Miami artists and historians

The studio helps filmmakers, photographers and other visual artists with their work

Renowned avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas will attend a screening of his classic 'Walden' on March 26.



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BY RENE RODRIGUEZ
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For 15 years, Kevin Arrow popped into North Miami's Red White and Blue Thrift Shop every day, eager to sift through the store's latest acquisitions. The staff at the store knew him as the "slide guy," because 35mm film slides — personal photos, stills from home movies, abstract art, sunsets, landscapes, anything — were Arrow's chief obsession.

One day, a clerk pointed Arrow toward a pile of 12 metal boxes that had just arrived containing a slew of slides. They were all pictures of silver Airstream trailers, taken during the 1950s, showing people and their mobile homes at various locales around the world: on highways and mountainsides; parked in front of a Mayan pyramid in Mexico; lined up in formation in various countries across Europe.

The photos were strange and bizarre and fascinating. The only clue to their origin was a piece of masking tape on one of the steel containers with the name "Dr. Eugene Birchwood" written on it.

"I did some digging and I found out he was an official member of the Airstream community," Arrow says. "They had major convoys and they would go on big tours. One of the slides showed him loading his Airstream trailer onto the back of a freighter ship. It was an amazing collection, but it was also kind of sad that this guy's life work ended up for sale in a thrift shop."

Today, those intriguing slides — along with more than 100,000 others — are part of the collection of Obsolete Media Miami, a film and photo archive, A/V equipment repository and studio. Tucked away on the second floor of a nondescript building at North Miami Avenue in the Miami Design District, the 1,100-square-foot climate-controlled space is crammed with forgotten treasures. In one corner s

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pile of film cans containing late 1960s Greek softcore and exploitation movies O.M.M. that co-founder Barron Sherer calls “orphans” because they are so obscure and have been out of circulation for so long, practically no one knows they exist.

Other shelves hold rare VHS tapes and laserdiscs, reels of industrial how-to films, books stuffed with slides donated by planetariums that no longer had use for them, Super 8 cameras, projectors and reel-to-reel tape machines. Think of O.M.M. as the world’s coolest fascinating storage garage: Everywhere you look, there’s some kind of contraption or machine or visual that piques your curiosity.

And Arrow and Sherer are happy to talk about anything you point to: They are enthusiastic about their work, and their excitement is contagious. Since launching O.M.M. in May 2015, the studio has hosted a series of events, such as a Locust Projects’ Locust Art for teenagers to teach them how to work with and manipulate 35mm film or a screening of original 16mm prints of films by six S&W artists from the 1970s through the 1990s.

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Filmmaker Jonas Mekas

On March 26, O.M.M. will host its biggest event to date: the city’s first public screening of *Walden*, the seminal video diary made by the renowned avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who will attend the showing and participate in a Q&A with the audience.

“It’s a film that sums up best what my work is all about — what the diaristic form of cinema is all about,” Mekas, 93, said via email from his home in Brooklyn. “I think institutions such as O.M.M. are very important today, because they enable us to see works which were made on formats and media [that] are no longer available. To see on video a movie which was made on film is like seeing a reproduction of a painting in a book. You see [it], you get the idea what’s all about, but the experience is very different. Places that preserve the older formats of equipment — that create occasions for us to see films or videos the way they were originally made to be presented — are a very special gift today in any city. Miami is very lucky, in that respect, to have O.M.M..”

Arrow and Sherer started working together in the 1990s at the Alliance Cinema on Lincoln Road, where Sherer worked as a projectionist and programmer and Arrow curated several exhibits shown in the theater’s art space. Both have deep roots in Miami’s art scene: Arrow worked at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami for 15 years before joining the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science as their art and collections manager. Sherer is a filmmaker and a former longtime curator at the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives. He also programmed periodic “Cinema Vortex” film festivals at various Miami venues comprised of experimental works, classic film noirs and 1950s melodramas.

“Our interests intersected nicely,” Arrow says. “I’ve been doing all of the work here I was doing before in a one-car garage at home. For the work Barron does, you need to be able to set up a screen and a projector, so this studio space was a blessing.”

MERGING COLLECTIONS

The two were able to merge their massive collections of audiovisual materials and equipment after winning a \$5,000 Wavemaker grant from the Cannonball Miami arts organization. In November, they won a \$30,000 prize in the Knight Foundation’s Knight Arts Challenge.

Sherer says that ever since O.M.M. launched, news of their mission has spread quickly among other arts institutions, who have been eager to donate unwanted materials gathering dust in their collections.

“If it fits our very loose collection policy, it comes in,” he says. “If it seems like it’s more appropriate as a historical document of history of Miami, then we send them to Wolfson Archives or UM special collections. I’m not going to hack up someone’s home movies to make an art piece out of it. But this ephemeral, educational and industrial stuff is up for use. Now institutions are also calling us when they have extra equipment because they don’t have to throw it out. Maybe it has to do with the fact that Kevin and I have been around for so long, but the response has been nice.”

O.M.M.’s first official invitational collaboration with other artists, titled *Document 001*, is a publication that comes inside a clear plastic bag and contains an audiocassette tape, a foldout glossy zine that can stand upright on a tabletop or be hung on the wall like a poster, a sticker and a digital download code.

“That was done by David Brieske and Richard Vergez,” Arrow says. “They selected a cassette recording from 1987 of someone speaking into a Dictaphone and explaining what the first day of summer in 1987 felt like. He’s describing the sky as the sun is coming up, and he’s like, ‘The sky is a deep azure blue and the crows are out.’ It became this kind of found poetry. They recorded it and turned it into a musical piece. Then Vergez selected some of my slides and created collages.”

*Patients may save up to \$421 per month. Subject to eligibility. Restrictions apply. Not available for government-insured patients.

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In addition to the Mekas event, O.M.M. is working with the Pérez Art Museum Miami for a May 5 program of experimental films by Stan Brakhage with musical entr'actes performed by Gustavo Matamoros. They are also collaborating with Danny Clapp and Juan Gonzalez, who produce music under the moniker Das Sad, for *Document 002*. The final format has not yet been decided.

“There is no other studio quite like it in Miami,” says Tiffany Chestler, director of cultural programming for Dacra, which facilitated the studio space for O.M.M. “Their idea of being a resource for other artists across a spectrum of media is what was most appealing and why I think what they are doing is important and warranted support. When you visit O.M.M. there is such a wonderful energy. It’s a place of discovery peppered with nostalgia.”

As the current wave of retro-boom nostalgia sweeping the popular culture continues to grow — VHS tapes are now starting to gain as much cachet as vinyl records — O.M.M. is an example of a great idea at precisely the right time. But Sherer knows not everyone will share their enthusiasm.

“Some of the teens who participated in the Locust lab with us have started an Obsolete Media club at Beach High,” he says. “It’s kind of like an A/V club, which is really cool. But both my kid and Kevin’s kid go to that school, and they’re not in the club.”

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IF YOU GO

What: ‘Jonas Mekas in Miami,’ the first public screening in Miami of the avant-garde filmmaker’s seminal 1969 video diary ‘Walden’ with Mekas in attendance, presented by Obsolete Media Miami and the Miami Design District

When: Saturday, March 26, at 7 p.m.

Where: Palm Court Event Space, 140 NE 39th St., Miami

Tickets: \$15 in advance via eventbrite.com; \$20 at the door.

Info: <http://omm305.org/>



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