

**Stan VanDerBeek: *See Saw Seems***

May 4–June 17, 2023

Lower Level

Magenta Plains is pleased to present *See Saw Seems*, a solo exhibition of historical collage-animation films from 1960–65 by Stan VanDerBeek. On view will be three films: *A La Mode* (1960), *Breathdeath* (1963), and *See Saw Seems* (1965), all of which are characteristic examples of VanDerBeek's early filmmaking practice. VanDerBeek created these films using a collection of collaged elements from newspapers, magazines, and found footage, animated together to expose the fundamental illusion of motion at the heart of filmmaking. Building on Surrealist compositional strategies, the films in *See Saw Seems* eschew narrative coherence for a collection of discrete, intertextual moments which collectively present a pointed commentary on social mores and political questions of the early 1960s.

*A La Mode*, the first of the three films included in the exhibition, montages together a wide range of imagery showing women, female bodies, beauty products, and other tropes associated with a stereotypical imagination of femininity. The near-adolescent fervor with which this film obsesses over these images points to the irony at its heart; VanDerBeek is satirizing the idealization of the female form, and indeed emphasizing the degree to which this toxic idealization is central to American culture. Meanwhile, *Breathdeath* engages with a wider range of topics and is less overtly coherent. 15th century woodcuts of the "Danse Macabre," resembling Mexican calaveras, are the primary consistent element throughout the film. Death, and the multitude of ways in which humanity has become capable of inflicting it, is ever-present in this film, but it is treated with equal degrees humor and seriousness. VanDerBeek moves from scene to scene in rapid succession, assaulting the viewer's senses with an overwhelming load of information. Finally *See Saw Seems*, from which this exhibition takes its title, leans the most intensely on the illusory quality of the animation at his disposal. The cadence of shifting images is slower, as a contiguous flow of different subjects transform into new compositions in a series of long, seemingly uninterrupted takes. What something is and what it can appear to be are conflated in *See Saw Seems*, as VanDerBeek proposes a collapse of memory and perception in the technological age.

The films in this exhibition represent significant early efforts by Stan VanDerBeek and the beginning of his widely celebrated contributions to experimental filmmaking and the avant-garde in visual art.. In many ways, the radical approach VanDerBeek utilized in his collage-films is consistent with the larger shift occurring in the avant-garde in the 1950s and 60s. In his essay on VanDerBeek "From the Ivory Tower to the Control Room," film historian Jacob Proctor links the style of these films to Leo Steinberg's characterization of this period as focused on the "flatbed picture plane," i.e. "any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed...it had to become whatever a billboard or dashboard is, and whatever a projector screen is." In linking VanDerBeek to Steinberg, Proctor aligns VanDerBeek's collage practice conceptually with similar work from notable contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg or Jim Dine. Despite these linkages, VanDerBeek's specific blend of the surreal and the pointedly political give an edge to these early films, as distillations of the complex and raucous zeitgeist of the early 1960s.

Stan VanDerBeek (1927-1984) was a prolific multimedia artist known for his pioneering work in experimental film and computer art. He studied at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York (1948-1952), and at Black Mountain College, Asheville, North Carolina (1949-1950). Recent exhibitions that have featured VanDerBeek's work include *Signals: How Video Transformed the World*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2023); *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA (2023); *CONSOLAS: Democracia para la imagen digital (1972-2003)*, ETOPIA\_Centre for Art and Technology, Zaragoza, ES (2020); *VanDerBeek + VanDerBeek* at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Asheville, NC (2019); *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2018); *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950-1980* at the Met Breuer, New York, NY (2017); *Merce Cunningham: Common Time* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2017); *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2016); *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2015); the 55th Venice Biennale, IT (2013); and *Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, and at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, TX (2011).