# Ross Woodman / JACK CHAMBERS AS FILM-MAKER

# INTRODUCTION

In 1962, Jack Chambers published in *Alphabet* a short piece of lyrical prose entitled "Aircraft" which he had written first in 1949. It deals with life in a garden which is at once the garden of Eden and a graveyard where innocence is both celebrated and corrupted, allowed to thrive and buried in the earth. The narrator who inhabits this garden is the prisoner of it. He is an inmate, a convict, who longs to escape but cannot because it is the place where he sows and is sown. It is the place of continuous dying and perpetual rebirth into a series of erotic images which have the nightmare quality of ungratified desire. It is Chambers in London, Ontario before he left for Spain.

In certain respects this garden is the psychic scene or setting of much of Chambers' art up to the advent of "perceptual realism" in 1968-69. It dominates his films, reaching something like an apocalyptic climax in *The Hart of London* (1968-70) in which Chambers finally and fully orchestrates the nightmare vision of his home town that had haunted and pursued him all his life. In *Mosaic* (1966), it is the graveyard where his young wife moves towards her newborn child while an old man moves towards a bench and a male athlete sprints along a road. It is a place, too, where she scatters petals from her womb onto a decaying raccoon. In *Hybrid* (1967), it is a rose garden where roses open



to reveal the deformed faces of napalmed Vietnam children. In R 34 (1967), it is the interior of Greg Curnoe's studio, where the artist-gardener assembles collages from the refuse of garbage cans and holds his child inside the womb-like interior of one of his own art works, a pyramid-like construction. In *Circle* (1968-69), it is the artist's own backyard shot for what Chambers describes as "a couple of seconds" from the same spot every day for a year. In *The Hart of London*, it is the city itself seen as a trap which a deer accidentally enters to be captured and killed, a city that finally narrows to the London Zoo at sunset where a child moves unsteadily towards a deer as the camera revolves in circles from sky to earth and a voice warns, "Diego, you must be very careful."

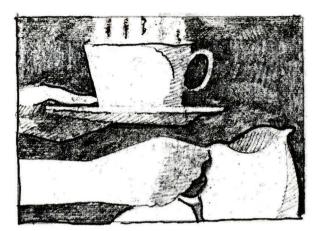


Chambers' films are what he himself called "personal" films. He began making them at a time when he felt the need to escape his professional commitment to painting, which, he believed, was now blocking the flow of his feeling by freezing it into the resolution of purely painterly issues. He was becoming disturbed by the acceptance (not reflected in sales) of his art (partly because it was "realistic") by a society which he still believed was "utilitarian, puritanical, indifferent to anything that was not a 'safe job' and a 'proper way of living,"<sup>1</sup> and therefore fundamentally rejected everything for which he as an artist stood.

How strong this feeling was can best be seen in the silver paintings which were in large part an outgrowth of his increasing interest in the film as an exploration of the perceptual process. In commenting upon them, Chambers made it quite clear that he had grown tired of "painting space through interacting colours"2 because increasingly the concern had become not the subject matter but the space itself.... Chambers believed his art was encouraging people to take up temporary and aesthetic residence in a world of illusion which allowed them to avoid the necessity of "self-awareness." He was playing into the hands of the real enemies of art. In the silver paintings, which he described as "instant movies."3 Chambers attempted in his usual ruthless and uncompromising way to break out of the aesthetic trap into which his training and professionalism had led him. He was determined to destroy the image as a spatial form seducing the viewer into certain illusory notions about the nature of reality. He would for one thing stop mixing colours and use instead aluminum paint directly from the can, spraying directly onto the board. "My use of colour had become too subtle," he commented; "silver is refreshingly neutral from the tense calculating that goes into controlling colour effects."<sup>4</sup> As for painted surface, he would destroy its fixed form, that peculiar stillness which had offered a resting place for minds that did not want to work. "The painted surface changes when you move," Chambers explained of the silver paintings. "It's a light medium-an optical medium." He then continued, drawing out the connection between the silver paintings and the film:

I observed that silver gives a positive-to-negative image reversal depending on the source of light or where you view it from. As you move, the positive forms become negative and vice versa coming back. The shift is to the physical sensation of seeing—as in seeing double when you don't expect it.... Time as a new dimension has come into view. The temporal insistence (the time it takes to view the variations as a whole or the time spent in waiting for the variations to be revealed) is the real difference here. It's a different realism: space has become time.<sup>5</sup>

In his films, Chambers moved deliberately from space to time in an attempt to liberate the mind from the illusion of rest by forcing it to enter a temporal process in which change or flux is the condition of perception itself. Chambers' films explore the dynamics of the act of perception. They are attempts to wake up an audience which he feared his paintings might now be putting to sleep.



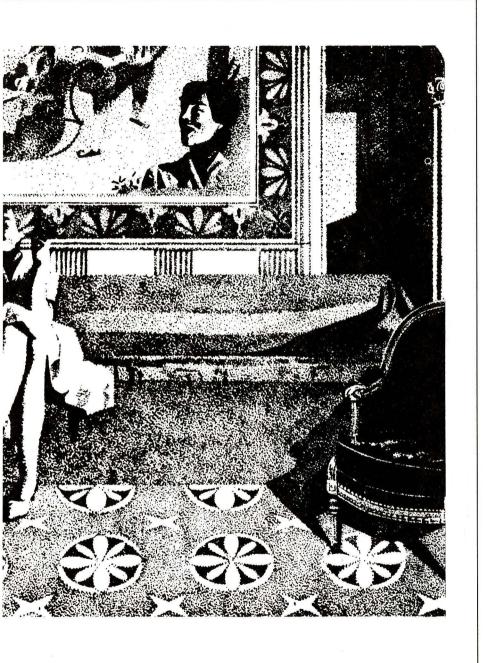
Part of Chambers' initial interest in film-making resided in his attempt to come to grips in a more immediate way with painting as a process rather than painting as a product, with painting less as a revelation of *what* is perceived than with how it is perceived. "A painting gets put together just like an experience-in-particles," he once commented. "Olga and Mary Visiting isn't the description of a visual moment; it's the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus." Chambers then continued, describing the way a painting gets put together as if it were very much like a film:

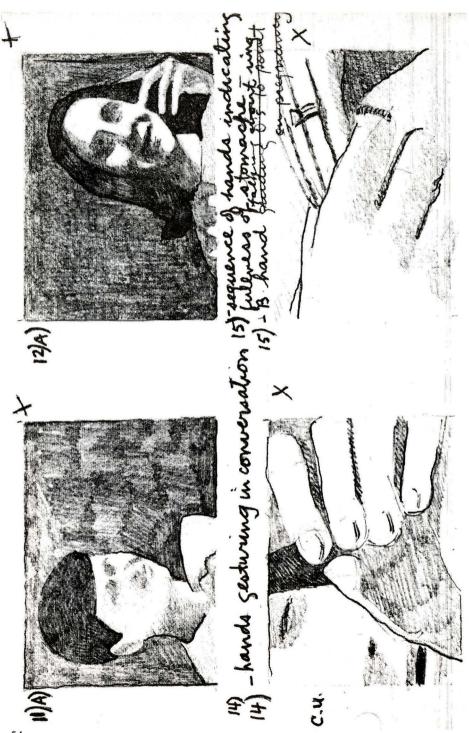
You are in a room, then in another room where you see an object being held this way, then you see it in motion, a week later a cup is tilting, the next day a finger curves in air against a background, you hear a little clink, you swallow a cheese sandwich, something fragile, a cup touches its saucer, you see white... a woman rests one leg over the other, pink... the thick rug is buff-orange. Sense combinations complement one another to enrich perception.<sup>6</sup>

This account of, among other things, the kind of perceptual experience that is brought into arrested focus in Olga and Mary Visiting which he painted in 1964-65 when he was actually at work on his first film, Mosaic, suggests that the painting itself derives from, and is a distillation of, a film-making process. What Chambers describes is really the film-maker editing his own film by splicing and reassembling his footage to produce a certain effect that faithfully records his own complex act of perception. The film, unlike the painting, becomes a collage spread out in time sequence, rather than a collage organized in space. Thus R 34, which concerns itself with Greg Curnoe making collages by pasting images on pieces of paper, is itself a collage. The spatial arrangements in Curnoe's work become the temporal arrangements in Chambers' film. Curnoe, the artist, and Jack Chambers, the film-maker, intersect and interact as Chambers explores the relations between film and an art of a more traditional, spatial kind.

In the temporal collage which constitutes a Chambers film, Chambers was breaking out of the pictorial space of his own paintings in order to release his mind from the frozen moments in which, in his paintings, thoughts or images were arrested.







#### "PERSONAL FILMS"

... in 1961, [Chambers] wrote:

I became aware of de Kooning and Pollock and Klee and Kandinsky. I had never seen their work before and that included whatever had happened since Juan Gris and Picasso.

[He described] the very "eccentric" use he may have made of Pollock's drip method in particular:

I began to texturize the surfaces of my panels with a mixture of rabbit glue and marble dust. Once dry, I could adjust the topography with sandpaper. These surfaces were covered with gesso and then I spilled various colours of house enamels on the gesso surface and sprinkled it with turps to get it running. I then tilted the board this way and that till some interesting effect appeared, and then I laid it flat and let it dry or added more paint and turps. Once the surface was worthy of interrogation, I began to extend and curtail its colours and shapes with a small paint brush. The figures and objects I wanted to appear in the painting gradually took shape within the selected chaos of the splattered surface. They were not painted on the surface—they grew with it.<sup>7</sup>

Chambers, it will be noted, was experimenting not only with surface texture, but with the relationship of images to it. He was transforming the surface into a "motion" picture that functioned as a "pool of energy" out of which images emerged in time rather than in space. The images, that is, became the forms growing out of "the selected chaos of the splattered surface"; they were the "interrogation" that was "worthy" of it.

Chambers, spilling various colours of house enamel on a gesso surface, sprinkling it with turps to get it running, tilting the board this way and that until interesting effects appeared, was deliberately breaking free of methods of painting learned in Spain which were now in Canada making him so tense, because of the concentration they required, that he was reacting physically to the strain. He was trying to find ways of physically as well as mentally loosening up by releasing his mind and imagination into free or spontaneous movement. He began to explore in painting the unconscious body language that had always governed his poems and creative prose. Chambers in the paintings of 1961-62 was trying to adjust his technique to something far closer to his natural way of thinking perhaps best summed up by Paul Klee when he described his drawings as taking a line for a walk.

Chambers interrogating the "selected chaos of the splattered surface" was also Chambers interrogating his life, discovering the memories flowing through his mind (like the seasons flowing through nature), what he called a "fundamental legibility." Thus, when he was asked why he decided to remain in Canada, he replied that:

Over a couple of years the seasons uncovered images of myself still gesturing in the invisible. A few visual appearances possessed a fundamental legibility.



There appeared some boyhood incidents that had a dimension beyond the incidents themselves. Such incidents (diving from a train bridge into the Thames) divided vortex and periphery, the periphery of accompanying memories being absorbed into the centre of the essential gesture. This synthesis, invisible in time, was an experience of an organism within an organism that had accepted me as its centre. That was the basis of my decision to stay in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

The "basis" of that decision to stay in Canada, as Chambers describes it, is essentially cinematic, as if... he decided to stay in Canada to make films about himself, about his own "experience of reality" that had accepted him as its centre....

The "personal" films that Chambers made, eight in all (one incomplete), brought him home to himself in a more immediate and unscripted way than the high professionalism of his painting could. It was a necessary and inherent part of coming to know himself, which in the final analysis was for Chambers always more important than art. Life, for Chambers, was the real form of art, painting itself being the indicators, sign-posts, inventories and probings along a more invisible way that conducted to the Self. Once the act of perception had received the acknowledgement that constituted both a revelation of the world and a revelation of the Self, it could then be forgotten. "Finally," Chambers wrote in his essay on perceptual realism (1969): "perception itself becomes a 'forgotten' awareness that just is with all the common naturalness of those common things seen out the window or inside the house or anyplace."<sup>9</sup>

The great advantage of film over painting is that, being bound to time rather than to space, it is best suited to communicating "a 'forgotten' awareness that just *is*." The very essence of film is the swift passage of fleeting images, one departing as another arrives. It had, therefore, for Chambers that very quality of "forgotten' awareness" that had made his home town a psychic storehouse



of images which in some mysterious way contained and nourished his own identity. That identity his "personal" films share with an audience that he thought of in the first instance as regional, an audience, that is, which could find the fleeting images in time in its own "periphery of accompanying memories...."

In the characteristic Chambers film there is an attempt to escape the concentration on some particular object or image in order to release into action "the periphery things that are going on around it." The immediate, all-at-once spatial presence of a painting that takes it, or tends to take it, right out of time, disallows some of those "subliminal sensations" which images forever disappearing more readily evoke.

The counterpart of frozen or arrested images in space (the "still" life which Chambers first in the silver paintings and then in his films was trying to escape) is narrative. Chambers had seen the way which perspective in painting "confuses self-awareness." He was determined, therefore, not simply to translate perspective in painting to plot narrative in film. What he wanted to avoid in film as much as possible was what he called "descriptive time."<sup>10</sup> He explained the phrase in the following way: "Lawrence on his camel at dawn, equals Lawrence riding his camel all night."11 It was this sense of narrative as linear duration that he believed was the chief characteristic of the commercial movie, the one which above all others conducted to deliberate distraction and wiped out self-awareness. allowing illusion to become all. Narrative as linear duration, locking the mind into chronological time, ruthlessly excluded subliminal activity by keeping the audience in line. Narrative or plot in commercial film, he argued, performed the same illusory function as perspective in painting. "Time," he commented, gets foreshortened by descriptive images. Images again for the sake of the story. You're drawn away from yourself, your own self-awareness, to star in somebody else's fiction. Entertainment equals distraction equals false-life plot."12

### MOSAIC

... The typical Chambers footage is cut and spliced and put together again "just like an experience-in-particles." It is not so much "the description of a visual moment" as "an accumulation of experienced interiors," which... in the films became Chambers' own "interiors" projected in the guise of images that had accepted him as their centre. These images in the editing rooms of his mind followed as closely as possible the inner unfoldings of Chambers to himself, providing him with small epiphanies, experiences of his own reality.

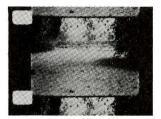
Consider an actual film: Chambers' Mosiac, his first. There is a familiar narrative present in Mosaic.... That familiar narrative strung out in images like clothes on a line would look something like this: Olga on the back stoop taking in the laundry from the line; Olga visiting the doctor's office; Olga at the baby shower; Olga having contractions in the front seat of the Volkswagen; Olga feeding her baby. Strung out this way, the familiar narrative is as insistently and expectedly there as the arrangement of snapshots in the wedding or baby album. To turn the pages is to see what does not even require the turning; it is there as an illusion, drawing the viewer away from himself by placing him in someone else's fiction so numbing in its effect that it barely reminds him of his own. Indeed, it is the very "false life plot"-"safe job" and "proper living" -from which Chambers had fled in setting out for what would become Spain. That "plot" is there, as indeed it is there for everyone. Chambers' task was to dismantle it and put it together again in a form that was uniquely his own. The film is an attempt to remain true to himself while apparently settling down to what would obviously appear to be, or become, a perfectly conventional, middle-class, North London, Lombardo Street life.

The first feet of the film show a woman opening a door, entering a doctor's office and taking a seat among other waiting women, one of whom is leafing through a magazine which Chambers' Rolex closes in on to provide a close-up of a single page on which appears in very large print, "THE SEA." White shoes enter the room and move along the floor. Olga, pregnant, is throwing flowers. She runs in slow motion toward a baby in a field. A muscular runner sprints along a road. A religious statue can be seen. A dead raccoon lies upturned covered with ants and falling daisy petals. Olga now sits in the waiting room. Before she enters, however, she will gather flowers, again the sprinter will run, again she will move towards her baby, again and yet again she will throw daisy petals in the air, again they will fall on the dead raccoon. She will also remove the sheets and towels and ride a bus.

Such words as "before" and "again" are, in the "experience" of the film, the putting together "in particles," entirely misleading. Nothing in the film happens "before," nothing happens "again": we are, despite the crude elements of familiar narrative, not waiting for the next event. Olga, unlike Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, is not going to ride all night. She exists in the "organism" taking shape in the "particles" or footage which cannot be spread out in linear time because Chambers in the cutting and the splicing has destroyed the sequence of time. Olga is being released from time to enter something like the eternal now which Chambers would later describe by the one word, "Wow!" In that eternal now,...Olga about to give birth is also Olga blessing the dead from which all birth arises, the old man in the cemetery being the sprinter in another guise intercepting his path as he comes to take up his station behind a nursing mother.

"Before" returning to the examining room "once more," an old man, as the film "progresses," crosses the road, the sprinter runs down it, a nurse appears in the doorway, Olga rises to go in, runs towards her child in a field, throws petals against a backdrop of sky, rides a bus which stops to let people off. "Then" she is "back" in the doctor's office. "Then" she is at her baby shower, "though" the petals "still" fall on the dead raccoon, the sprinter "still" sprints, Olga "still" scatters petals, "still" picks up her baby. The old man stands behind her as she holds up her child. Tea is poured. A cup is raised. A parcel is opened. "Finally" Olga gives suck. Children watch, sitting in a circle around Olga in a field. The sucking continues until the "end," punctuated by empty footage: suck, void, suck, void, suck, void....



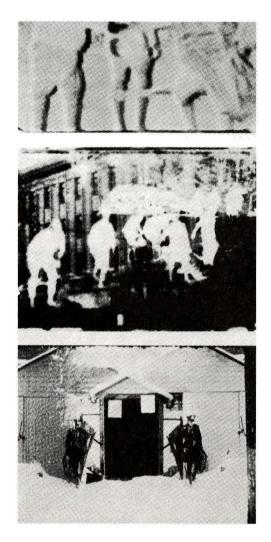


## CIRCLE & THE HART OF LONDON

In 1969, the most momentous year of Chambers' life, he completed a 35 minute film, *Circle*, a film that focuses upon one particular spot in his backyard (for a spot of time, each day at a prescribed time) within which he left nature undisturbed, as one might leave a dreamer, to enact its own life cycle of one complete year, nature returning to its beginning only to begin again. To make sure that nature was indeed undisturbed, Chambers cut a hole in the outer back wall of his house, built a small box to fill it, and left his camera there. Every morning at precisely 10 a.m., he turned the camera on for approximately four seconds without adjusting the aperture to changes of light and colour. By keeping the aperture constant, the changes were naturally rather than aesthetically recorded in a manner that made it apparent that in viewing the finished product there was no sense of nature having performed for an audience. It was neither making up nor touching up like an actor in the dressingroom before curtain time.

When the film is read in the context of its creation, which is the context provided by Chambers' manifesto on perceptual realism written in the same year, it becomes apparent that *Circle* is in the medium of film what Chambers' 401 Towards London is in the medium of painting: an embodiment of theory. More than that, it demonstrates the way in which the medium of film was in certain essential respects better suited to perceptual realism than painting. Chambers in *Circle* was concerned to give the viewer, so far as that was possible, only the objects "out there" in the newly arrived conviction that when one aims at art by submitting to its conventions, one misses the real, though acknowledged object which is life. Art, Chambers argued, should be left to take care of itself in what he now considered the primary pursuit of life, particularly as the long history of art, itself a history of shifting tastes and conventions, placed nearly insurmountable obstacles in the path of that pursuit, aesthetic conventions unconsciously dictating our modes of perception.

At the same time, however, Chambers believed that when nature is observed disinterestedly, stripped, as it were, of its aesthetic apparel...something more than nature itself emerges. That something more Chambers described as "a mysterious and unique expression of creative Energy."<sup>13</sup> Precisely here, in the sudden, as yet unnamed confrontation with that Energy, art and nature meet to become one, both of them participating in it, the one (nature) at the unconscious level, the other (art) at the conscious level. The energy discharge emanating



from natural objects when the aesthetic designs upon them have been removed is precisely what the art work should give off, and in precisely the same way that nature gives it off: at a pre-conscious or subliminal level. Chambers initiates a response at this level by his radical method of splicing or editing which turns film into a temporal collage, a collage that becomes incredibly elaborate in his last finished film, *The Hart of London*, where he layers his images, superimposing three and sometimes four images so that none of them remains individually distinct. The struggle between nature and art—as old as nature and as old as art—thus comes full circle, the two joining to become what ultimately for Chambers they are: one. *Circle*, I suggest, is ultimately about that joining.

What Chambers had arrived at in his manifesto on perceptual realism as well as in the painting and the film that seem best to embody it (401 Towards London and Circle) was similar in many respects to what Rilke arrived at in the composition of the Duino Elegies. When it is realized that this arrival took place in the larger context of acute leukemia, of which both artists died, one cannot ignore the largest possible meaning attributed by both Chambers and Rilke to their understanding of the creative process at work in nature and the artist. Both artists, though in individually distinctive ways, stress the seemingly necessary sacrifice in which the life of the artist flows back or forward to what both of them considered some final and imageless source, a source which found its most natural analogue in the processes of nature, particularly their cyclical round. Thus, Chambers suggests in a letter to a friend, when a tree is stripped of its accumulated aesthetic history what remains is a revelation of itself which renders the word or the image or the brush stroke a "fellowship with essence," the artist becoming Adam in Paradise acknowledging in the act of naming or imaging the particulars of a world previously beyond the touch of consciousness.

Chambers continues in that same letter: "When we observe nature disinterestedly inevitably the question rises: What is it? It's called a tree, I know, but what is it? This preliminary attitude of uncertainty opens the door to experience. The outward look which steps toward nature to find the door to beyond it I call *perceptualism*, because it has to do with seeing nature in this way: as a mysterious and unique expression of creative Energy."<sup>14</sup> [Compare this with Rilke's] "Eighth Elegy" as translated by C. F. MacIntyre:

### As when sometimes

a child gets lost in silence and has to be shaken back. Or someone dies and *is it*. For nearing death, one sees death no more and stares *forward*, perhaps with the wide gaze of the animal. Lovers, were it not for the other who blocks the view, are close to it and marvel... as if by carelessness it is open to them behind each other... but neither gets past, and again it's world. Always turned to creation, we see there only the reflection of the free, darkened by us.

In *Circle*, by leaving, so far as he could, nature to itself, Chambers sought to remove the obstacles that block the view in order to marvel "as if by carelessness" at what was almost "open" to him (finding "the door beyond it").

Rilke in this same elegy goes on to describe "reflection on the free, / darkened by us" as a "dumb" beast who "lifts his eyes and looks us calmly through and through." To be "face to face" with that beast calmly looking at us "through and through" is, Rilke suggests, to be face to face with "Destiny," for, as he puts it, "That's what destiny is." In *The Hart of London*, Chambers' last completed film and his undoubted masterpiece, the hart is Rilke's dumb beast in the very "heart" of things, the "Destiny" that Chambers entered when he returned, drawn by the blood necessity of a dying mother to his home town of London, Ontario, the place where he was born and the place where he would die. The crucial frames of the film, which Chambers placed at the centre with approximately equal footage on either side, are given over to the slaughter of two lambs in the slaughterhouse in Chinchon, Spain, the town where Chambers went to live after graduating from the San Fernando Academy in Madrid.

This slaughter, which he himself flew to Spain to film, is located within a surrounding sequence of approximately the same length which offers an equally graphic or literal presentation of a difficult birth, requiring the use of forceps and the cutting of the vulva. Locating both footages, which many viewers find impossible to watch, within the total context of his 90 minute film built up upon the television news footage of the capture and killing of a deer that had lost its way and wandered into a residential area of London West, it becomes clear that The Hart of London is about the artist confronting and finally accepting his own "Destiny," a destiny involving not simply the sacrifice inherent in submitting to the trap of an enclosure (one thinks of the legend of the Unicorn), but the recognition that in that submission resides the emergence of what it finally means to be human. If blood permeates this film-and it does-it is the blood of life flowing into art without being congealed into a crystallized ruby, which is to say an aesthetic object. Thus, in the final sequence of the film made from footage Chambers shot himself, Chambers turns for the last time to his young children. This time they are in the zoo at Springbank Park feeding the deer. The children are tentative at first as they approach the deer; in the end the deer feed out of their hands. And, after they are fed, lick their hands. That some ultimate resolution or coming together is here suggested without being directly stated is reinforced by the film's final footage. The camera, moving away from Springbank Park to Gibbons Park (across from where Chambers lived), makes a series of circular revolutions from sky to earth and from earth to sky, repeating an image that, as in Circle and his unfinished film C.C.C.I., Chambers equates with totality or wholeness, a wholeness continuously enacted in nature's life, but only experienced in fragments in the human sphere.

That the slaughter of the lambs set within the footage of a painful, forcepsassisted birth had, for Chambers, religious overtones going back to a Baptist summer school in his childhood and ritually extended to his conversion in Spain to Catholicism is a dimension of the film that is never permitted to obtrude. If it is there, as surely it is, it operates largely at a subliminal level which, for Chambers, is what film can perhaps do best as one image gives way to another in a time sequence that dictates a continuous process of dissolution that painting *as* painting arrests. A letter written from Spain to his future wife (11 September, 1959) describing the slaughterhouse in Chinchon gives, I think a genuine sense of the quality of the film he was later to make about it:

The butchers are butchers of three meals, the necks thick, strong and purplish, the hands and feet wet with blood....

A small light illuminates a big store room; the light is sticky. The bare-chested butchers stab in silence. The blood runs red and luminous onto the black floor. The air is hot and humid. After leaving one smells like blood and sweat.<sup>15</sup>

After leaving *The Hart of London*, one smells the same way. The "blood and sweat" of the slaughterhouse are, in this film, a metaphor that Chambers alone could transplant from Chinchon, Spain to London, Ontario. If there appears to be little or no connection between a lost deer wandering into West London and the slaughterhouse in Chinchon, this film fully and richly dissolves that appearance. London and Canada and the world are able both to view and to absorb it.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ross Woodman, Chambers: John Chambers Interviewed by Ross G. Woodman (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1967).
- <sup>2</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>3</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>4</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>5</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>6</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>7</sup> Jack Chambers, edited and published by Nancy Poole, 1978, pp. 93-94. The actual process for preparing his ground was learned at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. The spilling or "dripping" may have been suggested by Pollock. Thus when asked in a taped interview for The Coach House Press book if he were influenced by Pollock, Chambers replied: "very much. I was influenced by his slopped-on texture."
- <sup>8</sup> Woodman.
- <sup>9</sup> Artscanada, October, 1969.
- 10 Woodman.
- 11 Woodman.
- 12 Woodman.
- 13 Woodman.
- <sup>14</sup> "Dear Simon," Sept. 26, 1972.
- <sup>15</sup> The letter is quoted by courtesy of the Jack Chambers Estate.

NOTE: This article is an edited version of "Jack Chambers as Film-Maker," which appeared first in *Jack Chambers: The Last Decade*, an exhibition catalogue (London Regional Art Gallery, November, 1980). Ross Woodman wrote a new ending for TCR #33.—A.R.