

The Museum of Modern Art

Neelon Crawford, Filmmaker

MoMA Virtual Cinema program

Jun 10–24, 2021

Multimedia artist Neelon Crawford (American, b. 1946) was a member of the experimental filmmaking scenes in Ohio, San Francisco, and New York from the late 1960s through the early '80s. Describing his work at the time as “experiments in the geometry of abstraction made possible by the movie camera,” Crawford uses 16mm films to reflect his interests in light, landscape, and movement. His work was twice presented in the Museum’s prestigious *Cineprobe* series in the 1970s, before he retired from film and withdrew his work from circulation to pursue a successful career as a photographer and painter (like his father, Ralston Crawford). MoMA acquired his complete collection of original elements and viewing prints in 2016. These programs premiere a selection of the Museum’s digital preservation, serving to introduce Crawford’s films to a new generation of viewers, and to restore him to the American avant-garde cinema canon.

Crawford states, “The films in this exhibition are sequences of images in time juxtaposed with each other by my visual intuition. In the 1960s a spring-wound Bolex movie camera and 100 feet of 16mm film put the basics of cinematic production into my hands. The mechanical adjustment of the Bolex shutter, exposure, film transport speed, and image superimposition, allowed me direct access to the control of moving pictures.

Any tool I might employ, a pencil, a brush, a still camera, a movie camera, or, now, an iPhone, has its own particular strengths and weaknesses, which inevitably influences the work I do with it. The ongoing dialogues between the capacity of technical resources and the understanding of how to maximize their potential has always intrigued me.”

All film descriptions were written by Neelon Crawford.

Organized by Ron Magliozzi, Curator, and Brittany Shaw, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Film.

Neelon Crawford Program 1

All film descriptions were written by Neelon Crawford.

Program approx. 52 min.

Freakquently. 1968. 8 min.

I shot my first film on 16 millimeter inside the eight-foot mirrored cube “optical sculpture” I had built in 1966, and on exterior locations, as a blissful celebration of the visual tools and techniques I found at my disposal. Bruce Baillie’s *Castro Street* (1966) confirmed my intuition that making visually defined films was the direction I wanted to pursue.

Skyjacker. 1969. Silent. 9 min.

Mostly animated from 35mm slides, *Skyjacker* slips to a dream world of Ohio woods, British Columbia winter, and New York. A critical aspect to film work that interested me was the second phase effort found in the editing choices. While placing two still photographs next to each other creates a combined effect that neither image transmits alone, the editorial options in cinema are considerably more complicated.

Prison 1. 1969. 8 min.

During the winter of 1968–69, I saw that much of the footage I was shooting was filled with a tension reflecting my own anxieties. Rather than terminate my filmmaking, I chose to shoot a film about self-generating depression. *Prison I* is about the frustration and fear reaching out to others and risking the revelation of one’s self.

Rays. 1969. 9 min.

[...A] tribute to the Sun. It is a celebration of light and water shot in Ohio and while crossing the country to the Northwest during the spring and summer of 1969.

Light Pleasures. 1970. Silent. 4 min.

Visually oriented films presented as moving light paintings enabled me to leave the structures and expectations of dramatic and documentary motion pictures aside.

Saturday Club Meeting. 1971. Silent. 8 min.

On the first and third Saturday of each month, Master Choy Kam-man has a club meeting with all of his students who have completed at least one course in Tai Chi Chuan. Together, the students practice their form and Master Choy helps them to correct their movements....

Needle at Sea Bottom. 1971. 6 min.

Influenced by the early theories of Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), in *Needle at Sea Bottom* I sought to create and implied time and space not found in either of the component images...the power of still awareness is literally depicted.... The film’s title is taken from the name of a specific named movement in the Tai Chi Chuan.

Neelon Crawford Program 2

All film descriptions were written by Neelon Crawford.

Program approx. 50 min.

Window Dance. 1971. Silent. 8 min.

A chance meeting with contemporary dancer Ishi Kamamoto during a visit to London led to the filmmaker shooting the performer's improvised dance in natural light alongside a canal which Crawford later edited when he returned to San Francisco. "With *Window Dance* I explored how any image contains aspects of a "surface" to look at and a "window" to look through."

Mobius. 1971. 18 min.

The material...was shot primarily on the West Coast, some in New York, during 1969–71. Divided into eight sections, *Mobius* defines a motion from downtown San Francisco through a forest in Los Padres National Forest, a student (Michael Anton) practicing Tai Chi Chuan, to the southern Big Sur coast. It pertains to sensing the intensity of the energy that surrounds one.

Sun Dream. 1972. Silent. 1 min.

[...The] first of a series of one-minute films to replace television commercials.

La Selva. 1974. Silent. 11 min.

The films shot during 1973–74 in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia span a range of interests. Some, like *Ship Side Steel Plate Lights* and *Laredo Sugar Mill*, are examinations of visual details. Others, like *La Selva*, which I completed using a number of complicated yellow and green filters, are portraits of places and their energies.

Ship Side Steel Plate Lights. 1974. Silent. 2 min.

Bright sun reflecting off the water's surface onto the black hull of a cargo ship made a fluid painting with light and steel.

Fire Flames. 1975. Silent. 3 min.

Optically printed frames of a flickering candle flame.

Paths of Fire II. 1976. Silent. 8 min.

From two color camera rolls filmmaker Michael Mideke and I shot on July 4, 1969, we began editing many versions, independently and together. I worked running a 16mm Bell & Howell "J" contact printer in San Francisco, which allowed me to make many generations of printing elements not normally available to customers.

Neelon Crawford Program 3

All film descriptions were written by Neelon Crawford.

Program approx. 50 min.

Passing. 1976. Silent. 5 min.

With films such as *Passing*, *Paths of Fire II*, and *Light Pleasures*, the viewer's retinal after-image is enhanced by the dark frames after bright frames. This reveals the complicated relationship between the eye, the retina, and perception.

Laredo Sugar Mill. 1976. Silent. 2 min.

Shot in Peru in 1974, this is an examination of a vintage mechanical mill crushing sugar cane.

Screen Gems. 1977. Silent. 4 min.

I found the pixel structures in extreme close-ups of my Sony Trinitron television's screen surface to be an endless source of colorful kinetics, often more interesting than the presented program.

Untitled Bulb. 1977. Silent. 1 min.

Another energized detail of a filament in a red electric bulb.

Banana Leaves. 1977. Silent. 5 min.

"The series of South American films...shot in Ecuador in 1976, such as *Banana Leaves* and *Lago Agrio Gas Burn*, speak to what one critic had earlier described as "an almost pantheistic reverence for [the] phenomenal world."

KMK Cane. 1977. Silent. 4 min.

Making short, silent, single-subject films allows the specific forms and movements to be savored without the burden of a distracting drama or explanation. Filmed in Hawaii.

Lago Agrio Gas Burn. 1977. 4 min.

A portrait of power as natural gas was vented and burned from an oil field in the jungle of eastern Ecuador.

The Vincent. 1979. Silent. 10 min.

There is nothing like a summer ride on a legendary Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle to "blow the stink off." Driven to a top speed of over 100 miles an hour by computer graphics artist David DiFrancesco on the backroads near Westbury, Long Island, NY.

For the Spider Woman. 1980. Silent. 15 min.

In this film, dancer and choreographer Jane Comfort performs a short dance titled "For the Spider Woman." She intentionally threw herself off balance and then recovered. We filmed the same dance once a month during the term of her pregnancy. As her body grew and her balance changed, successive months were denoted by the change of colors of her leotards.