

A Cinema Guild Release



Museum Hours

A film by Jem Cohen

106 minutes / DCP / 1.78:1 / Dolby Digital / Austria/U.S. / Not Rated

In English and German, with English subtitles.

Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/museumhours/

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Synopsis

Acclaimed filmmaker Jem Cohen's new feature, *Museum Hours*, is a mesmerizing tale of two adrift strangers who find refuge in Vienna's grand Kunsthistorisches Art Museum. Johann, a museum guard, spends his days silently observing both the art and the visitors. Anne, suddenly called to Vienna from overseas, has been wandering the city in a state of limbo. A chance meeting sparks a deepening connection that draws them through the halls of the museum and the streets of the city. The exquisitely photographed *Museum Hours* is an ode to the bonds of friendship, an exploration of an unseen Vienna, and the power of art to both mirror and alter our lives.

Director's Statement

by Jem Cohen

The film got its start in the Bruegel room of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. Looking at certain paintings there, all from the 16th Century, I was particularly struck by the fact that the central focus, even the primary subject, was hard to pin down. This was clearly intentional, oddly modern (even radical), and for me, deeply resonant. One such painting, ostensibly depicting the conversion of St. Paul, has a little boy in it, standing beneath a tree, and I became somewhat obsessed with him. He has little or nothing to do with the religious subject at hand, but instead of being peripheral, one's eye goes to him as much as to the saint. He's as important as anything else in the frame.

I recognized a connected sensibility I'd felt when shooting documentary street footage, which I've done for many years. On the street, if there even is such a thing as foreground and background, they're constantly changing places. Anything can rise to prominence or suddenly disappear: light, the shape of a building, a couple arguing, a rainstorm, the sound of coughing, sparrows ... (And it isn't limited to the physical. The street is also made up of history, folklore, politics, economics, and a thousand fragmented narratives).

In life, all of these elements are free to interweave, connect, and then go their separate ways. Films however, especially features, generally walk a much narrower, more predictable path. How then to make movies that don't tell us just where to look and what to feel? How to make films that encourage viewers to make their own connections, to think strange thoughts, to be unsure of what happens next or even 'what kind of movie this is'? How to focus equally on small details and big ideas, and to combine some of the immediacy and openness of documentary with characters and invented stories? These are the things I wanted to tangle with, using the museum as a kind of fulcrum. In making movies, I'm at least as inspired by paintings (and sculpture and books and music) as I am by cinema. Maybe this project would bring all of that together for me, a kind of culmination.

Years later, with limited resources but a small, open-minded crew and access to the museum and city in place, I began to trace a simple story. The figure best positioned to watch it all unfold (and with time on his hands to mull things over) would be a museum guard. He would preferably be played by a non-actor with a calm voice who understood odd jobs. I found him in Bobby Sommer. Almost 25 years ago, I saw Mary Margaret O'Hara perform, and I've wanted to film her ever since. She is equally sublime and funny and knows a thing or two about not being bound by formulas. She would surely channel things through unusual perspectives, especially if dropped into a city she'd never known and given room to move.

Making this movie could not come from finalizing a script and shooting to fill it in. Instead, it came out of creating a set of circumstances, some carefully guided, others entirely unpredictable. It meant not using sets (much less locking them off); it meant

inviting the world in ...

There were other important things found in museums that guided me. In the older ones that are so beautifully lit, the visitors begin to look like artworks – each becomes the other. This transference undoes a false sense of historical remove; we stand in front of a depiction 400 or 3000 years old, and there is a mirroring that works in both directions. (This is one of the things that makes old museums sexy, an inherent eroticism which runs counter to the unfortunate, perhaps prevalent notion that they are archaic, staid and somewhat irrelevant.) The phenomenon underscores for me the way that artworks of any time speak to us of our own conditions. The walls separating the big old art museum in Vienna from the street and the lives outside are thick. We had hopes to make them porous.

Notes on the Production

by Jem Cohen

The crew ranged between 1 and 7 people. I shot in tandem with co-DP Peter Roehsler, who came primarily from a documentary background and knew a great deal about old high speed prime lenses (which we used exclusively). Bruno Pisek was both mixer and boom operator. We had no gaffer or grips, script person, locations manager, catering, etc. I'd worked with my main producer, production manager, and righthand man, Paolo Calamita, once before when he was assigned to help me with a Viennale commission, *Empires of Tin*. (Vic Chesnutt was at the core of that project, and this film is dedicated to him).

We employed only natural light and unnatural but (existing) artificial light. Exteriors were shot in Super 16mm and interiors shot digitally, using both the Red camera and consumer DSLR technology. There was no art director or designer. The intended views of the city were those of a familiar resident and a complete outsider – both decoupled from the usual tourist's viewpoint. Locations were generally found in my random circumnavigations, sometimes guided by artworks in the museum. By chance I took a train to the Josefstadt stop, and by chance turned into a bar to get out of the cold. The owners kindly served me potatoes, cheese, olives, and a liquor from their home country. The walls were covered with thousands of snapshot portraits – it was clearly another museum and it became crucial to the film. Before the main production period I shot for weeks on the street with a wind-up 16mm Bolex. Images I caught would later become things the characters passed, saw, or remembered. We found, for example, a man on a street corner who didn't speak a language we knew but let me take his portrait. Later, I found his face in the Kunsthistorisches, peering from a French portrait of a court jester, from 1442.

My main producer and production manager, Paolo Calamita, shared in every aspect of Museum Hours, from its conception and funding to the crucial casting of Ela Piplits to the grind of lab work and translations. He was not a hired administrator but my comrade and co-conspirator, without whom the film would not exist. I have also benefited from the experience and support of my Austrian partner KGP Kranzelbinder Gabriele Production, which provided a solid anchor for securing Austrian funding and stood by to back the work throughout the process. As with my earlier feature, *Chain*, Guy Picciotto served as sounding board, reader, and viewer of rough-cuts. I began to edit along with Marc Vives, who made some crucial contributions before I had to let him go due to financial and scheduling constraints. I then edited on my own at home, off and on for almost a year.

Jem Cohen

New-York based, Cohen's feature-length films include *Chain*, *Benjamin Smoke*, *Instrument*, and *Evening's Civil Twilight in Empires of Tin*. Shorts include *Lost Book Found*, *Amber City*, *Little Flags*, and *Anne Truitt – Working*. His films are in the collections of NYC's Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum and have been broadcast by PBS, Arte, and the Sundance Channel. He's had retrospectives at London's NFT, BAFICI, Oberhausen, Gijon, and Spain's Punto de Vista. Recent projects include the *Gravity Hill Newsreels* (about Occupy Wall Street) and *We Have an Anchor*, a portrait of Cape Breton.

He has collaborated with musicians including Fugazi, Patti Smith, Terry Riley, Godspeed You Black Emperor!, Gil Shaham/Orpheus Orchestra, R.E.M., Vic Chesnutt, and the Ex, as well as writer Luc Sante.

Filmography

(projects 60 min. and over)

2012 *MUSEUM HOURS*

2012 *GRAVITY HILL NEWSREELS*

(Series of 12 linked documentary shorts about Occupy Wall Street, 64 min. total, HD)

2008 *EVENING'S CIVIL TWILIGHT IN EMPIRES OF TIN*

(100 min., 16mm and dv)

2006 *BUILDING A BROKEN MOUSETRAP*

(62 min., 16mm/dv)

2004 *CHAIN*

(99 min., 16mm)

2000 *BENJAMIN SMOKE*

(75 min., 16mm, Co-directed by Peter Sillen)

1999 *INSTRUMENT*

(115 min., 16mm, Super 8, video)

1994 *BURIED IN LIGHT*

(60 min., Super 8)

Cast

Mary Margaret O'Hara

Undisciplinarian artist, Mary Margaret O'Hara is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design who typecast herself with her 1988 album *Miss America*. All over the creative map, if there is such a map, she loves drawing, painting, her original calligraphy, free improvisation, hosting her brother's annual St. Patrick's day bash, making people laugh and cry, acting in and composing for theatre and film, doing wordless backup for singers and musicians, making noises on the fly, off the cuff and out of the ballpark and being with her brothers and sisters. You know who you are.

Robert "Bobby" Sommer

Born in Vienna, Sommer apprenticed as a typesetter, was roadie for various late 60's rock groups in London and afterwards worked as production assistant for international guest performances and festivals in Austria. From 1979 to 1992 he lived in the punk metropolis of West Berlin, working as concert promoter, tour manager and in artist's relations. He is head of the music group Bobby Sommer & Onkel Lou in Vienna, and since 2000, has worked in guest's relations for the Viennale. Since 1998, he regularly visits South China collaborating with his life partner, Evelyne Egerer, on her artistic projects.

Ela Piplits

Born in 1961 in Vienna, Ela Piplits started her career as a member of the ensemble of Vienna's Serapionstheater from 1981 to 1990. Following the founding of the Drama Wien theater group, she performed and coauthored numerous plays for more than 10 years. Furthermore, she was an actress in several films and television productions including 1995's *Charms Zwischenfälle* by Michael Kreihsl, *Kino im Kopf* in 1996 by Michael Glawogger and *Natur im Garten – Die nackte Wahrheit* by Barbara Puskas in 2005.

Credits

Producers Paolo Calamita, Jem Cohen,
Gabriele Kranzelbinder

Executive Producers Guy Picciotto, Patti Smith

Written & Directed by Jem Cohen

Principle Cast Mary Margaret O'Hara, Bobby Sommer, Ela Piplits

Cinematography Jem Cohen, Peter Roehsler

Sound Bruno Pisek

Edit Jem Cohen, Marc Vives

Production Manager Paolo Calamita

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KGP Kranzelbinder Gabriele Production

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