

## Rose Hobart

by Brian Frye

---

Brian Frye is a filmmaker, curator and writer living in New York City.

---



**Rose Hobart** (1936 USA 17mins)

**Source:** ScreenSound **Prod Co:** ORTF, Albina Films **Prod:** Micheline Rozan **Dir, Scr:** Orson Welles from novella by Isak Dinesen **Phot:** Willy Kurant **Ed:** Yolande Maurette, Marcelle Pluet, Françoise Garnault, Claude Farny **Art Dir:** André Piltant **Mus:** Erik Satie.

**Source:** NLA/CAC **Filmmaker:** Joseph Cornell **With** Rose Hobart

---

The first and greatest American Surrealist, Joseph Cornell is best known for his boxes. The best of his mysterious assemblages of dime-store tchotchkes and paper ephemera in little hand-made cabinets perfectly realize the elusive sublime at the heart of Surrealism, while avoiding the juvenile theatrics of his European colleagues.

However, Cornell was also one of the most original and accomplished filmmakers to emerge from the Surrealist movement, and one of the most peculiar. Just as the ascetic and introverted Cornell himself held Surrealism at arms length, borrowing only those elements that suited his interests and temperament, his films superficially resemble those made by other Surrealists, they are in truth *sui generis*. Only a handful of his contemporaries understood the genius of films like his *Rose Hobart* — an unfortunate situation exacerbated by Cornell's own obstinate resistance to public screenings. No one made films even remotely similar to Cornell's for almost thirty years, and even now the perfect opacity of his montage remains unrivalled.

*Rose Hobart* consists almost entirely of footage taken from *East of Borneo*, a 1931 jungle B-film starring the nearly forgotten actress Rose Hobart. Cornell condensed the 77-minute feature into a 20-minute short, removing virtually every shot that didn't feature Hobart, as well as all of the action sequences. In so doing, he utterly transforms the images, stripping away the awkward construction and stilted drama of the original to reveal the wonderful sense of mystery that saturates the greatest early genre films.

While *East of Borneo* is a sound film, *Rose Hobart* must be projected at silent speed, accompanied by a tape of "Forte Allegre" and "Belem Bayonne" from Nestor Amaral's *Holiday in Brazil*, a kitschy record Cornell found in a Manhattan junk store. As a result, the characters move with a peculiar, lugubrious lassitude, as if mired deep in a dream. In addition, the film should be projected through a deep blue filter, unless the print is already tinted blue. The rich blue tint it imparts is the same hue universally used in the silent era to signify night.

*Rose Hobart* was only one of several mythologized actresses who populated Cornell's

hermetic world. Many of his boxes were homages to the actresses that formed his pantheon: Lauren Bacall, Hedy Lamarr, Greta Garbo and Deanna Durbin, among others. In *Rose Hobart*, Cornell holds Hobart in a state of semi-suspension, turning the film itself into a sort of box. She moves her hands, shifts her gaze, gestures briefly, smiles enigmatically, perhaps steps slightly to the side, and little more. The world appears as a sort of strange theatre, staged for her alone.

But the root of Cornell's genius as a filmmaker is his singular version of montage. Cornell's version of continuity is the continuity of the dream. He does not juxtapose images so much as suggest unlikely — but still vaguely plausible — connections between them. Hobart's clothing may change suddenly between shots, but her gesture is continued or she remains at a similar point in the frame. Unlike most collage filmmakers, Cornell does not rely on cheap irony or *non sequitur*. His films are unsettling because their inexplicable strings of images are like reflections from the deep well of the subconscious. In fact, one of the most arresting images in *Rose Hobart* comes when a solar or lunar eclipse is paired with the image of an object falling into a circular pool of water. Hobart simply gazes bemusedly at this spectacle, as if it were little more than a parlour trick.

*Rose Hobart* premiered in December, 1936 at the Julian Levy Gallery. Cornell included it in a matinee program of short films from his collection, which Levy titled "Goofy Newsreels." The first Surrealist exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art was about to open, and many of the artists were in town, including Salvador Dali, who attended Cornell's film program. During the screening of *Rose Hobart*, Dali became extremely agitated. Halfway through the film he began shouting "Salaud!" — bastard — and overturned the projector. Reportedly, Dali ruefully explained his actions to Levy, "My idea for a film is exactly that, and I was going to propose it to someone who would pay to have it made.... I never wrote it or told anyone, but it is as if he had stolen it (Solomon 89)." Some prefer an apocryphal — but far more poetic — explanation also attributed to Dali: "He stole it from my subconscious."

---

© Brian Frye, November 2001

---

*Works cited:*

Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (London: Pimlico, 1997)

*Further sources:*

Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999)

---

[contents](#) [great directors](#) [cteq annotations](#) [top tens](#) [about us](#) [links](#) [archive](#) [search](#)