

Illumination Procured: Steven Arnold and the Body Eclectic



Photograph by Ingeborg Gerdes, 1970

"Art is revolution, or it's nothing." – Steven Arnold

*After completing preservation, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive has readied new prints for the re-emergence of Steven Arnold's *Luminous Procuress*, an elusive example of early seventies mystical queer cinema, known mainly through bootlegged VHS copies and battered prints.*

San Francisco in the late sixties. What can you say? Countercultures of every coloration thrived: collectively organized households, sexually diverse couplings, back-to-the-earth urbanites, flamboyant individualists, ethnic advancers, and artisanal theologians flourished throughout the Bay Area. The overarching sentiment, liberation, whether personal or political, solidified into a glimmering mass that engulfed the arts, in particular more experimental forms of filmmaking that were feverishly practiced in those heady days.

It was in the midst of this cultural tumult that Steven Arnold (1943–1994) [1], an art outlier of prophetic leanings, set out to direct his only feature film, a dreamy journey toward enlightenment cryptically called *Luminous Procuress* (1971). The film is a passage of liberation, in which two hippie lads (Steven Solberg [2] and Ron Farrell) enter a strange mansion where a magic potion, we surmise LSD, promises glimpses of a transformational realm. Led by the mystical "Procuress" (embodied by the ever-sculptural Pandora), the two naïfs are privy to a delirious vision of consciousness unbounded by appetite or convention. Moving through a series of oneiric tableaux in a fashion recalling Fellini *Satyricon* [3], Arnold's film distinguishes itself not just for the excessive decor and the exquisite decadence of the drag ensemble the Cockettes (more about them soon), but for its opening-up of what might be termed the spiritual, a state of transcendence that drags gender and sexual differentiation along with matters of ethereal awe. This cumulative process of transformation unfolds in a lavishly designed series of iconic scenes that meld folk symbology, eroticism, and religious allegory with a soundtrack of varied musics and language ploys by experimental composer Warner Jepson.

Led by the ever-insistent Procuress, the hesitant novices evolve from voyeuristic witnesses to engaged participants in the unfolding drama. The first such passive encounter, viewed through a small peep-like portal, depicts an organ grinder [4] putting a group of human puppets through their paces. These outrageously costumed mimes, many of them the Cockettes, pass before us in a herky-jerky procession. As a young child, Arnold, a somewhat aloof youth, often entertained his friends with elaborate puppet shows. This puppet theater gave him a medium for his emerging stagecraft and at least the temporary emotional control awarded by pulling the strings. In *Luminous Procuress*, the puppets are stand-ins for the inhabitants of the world of convention, where life is set to the staccato rhythm of the grinder.

The straight world is quickly vanquished by the next tableau, an intricate tangle of male bodies recalling Jack Smith's famed *Flaming Creatures*, made almost eight years earlier. An inquisitive slow-moving camera wanders about this jumble of nudity, inspecting thigh and abdomen, crotch and shoulder. Here we gaze upon the Cockettes in their most staid poses, stripped bare of their feathery boas, tie-dyed rags, and riotous headdresses. For the unworldly sojourners, this snarl of unabashed flesh is but the first in the stations of the carnal.

The Cockettes' presence in *Luminous Procuress* comes as no surprise. In early 1969, Arnold had completed the 28-minute film, *Messages, Messages*, that would be his graduate project for the San Francisco Art Institute [5]. Not wanting to merely screen the film at an SFAI auditorium, he and co-creator Michael Wiese looked for a more interesting venue, which they found in the Palace Theater, a failing Chinese movie house in North Beach. On February 27, 1969, *Messages, Messages* [6] was presented alongside "3 full hours of fantastique film," drawing hundreds of adventurous cinemagoers to the scene [7]. Seeing the potential renewal of the Palace, the theater's manager asked Arnold to do midnight programs. As a result, Arnold launched what he called the Nocturnal Dream Shows, programs mixing classic cinema and shorts from the avant-garde [8].

As the nocturnal audience grew, a group of cross-dressing flower children, under the anarchic leadership of Hibiscus (George Harris), came to be Dream Show regulars, finally taking to the stage on December 31, 1969. The psychedelic troupe proceeded to mount a series of progressively more ambitious revues, many being parodies of American musicals. Eventually, they were no longer an opening act for the cinema program but the headliners of a collective nocturnal transmission. The Cockettes' brand of unabashed gender disruption—bearded, brawny men in flouncy dresses and brazen women in hodgepodge rags and grotesque wigs summarized a complete upheaval of sexual roles.

The Cockettes' formidable demolition of social constructs would have appealed to Arnold, whose own leanings were more towards an ostentatious androgyny. But their riotous energy is unmistakable throughout *Luminous Procuress*, especially in the penultimate scene in which the entire cast assembles for a celebratory banquet. This legendary feast acquires an energy all its own, owing to the LSD supplied to the Cockettes. The cameras roll as the chaos ensues, engulfing the non-medicated lead actors as well. The unruly assembly becomes the fitting send-off for the Procuress and her wards as they prepare for their final spiritual ascension.

Meanwhile back at the raunch: leaving the initial tangle of naked Cockettes behind, *Luminous Procuress* then introduces poet ruth weiss in her first significant persona, here as a beacon of self-reflection, adorned with a mirrored diadem, iridescent dress, and a shiny orb that she manipulates in a prayer-like manner. weiss, an esteemed beat poet [9], had met Arnold in the mid-sixties when she was a model for life drawing at the S.F. Art Institute. She becomes a principal figure of feminine wisdom in *Luminous Procuress*, alongside the pantheon of Pandora, Lilia King, Doro Franco, and Cheryl Fitzpatrick. In this first appearance, weiss's davening motion, further intensified by Jepson's synth track, seems a divining of things to come.

The beacon soon gives way to the deacon as the Procuress and her two followers enter an ecclesiastical realm where ashen personages are dressed in church cassocks and nuns' habits. Amidst much humping, these reps from established religion presage the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, formed in 1979. But where the Sisters lambasted sexual intolerance in their theatrical protests, Arnold's church figures suggest the hypocrisy of established religion. There is no enlightenment to be found here.

What then follows is *Luminous Procuress's* only pastoral retreat, a lengthy scene shot in Golden Gate Park, in which the initiates come upon a sadhu, an ascetic holy man, harbored beneath some trees. While the initiates sit in fascination before him receiving his divination, their female escorts cavort in the woods like nature's nymphs.

Back inside, in the more interiorized terrain of consciousness, yet another motif is tersely introduced, the iconography of Egyptian myth. Here a heavily adorned Egyptian king is slowly reanimated inside a sarcophagus [10]. The richness of Egyptian lore, the primordial chaos, the transmigration of souls, the ornate array of gods, all this captivated Arnold, who had earlier abandoned a co-production with Michael Wiese called *Pyramid*. *Luminous Procuress* was produced inside a former industrial laundry building on Seventeenth Street in San Francisco's Mission District [11]. This old clapboard structure was notable for its enormous Eye of Horus, looming like a protective talisman for the studio's inhabitants.

The sacred soon gives way to the profane in a central departure for Arnold's spiritual phantasmagoria. What unfolds is an erotic encounter between two anonymous lovers, played by Skosh (Sebastian's partner) and Cheryl Fitzpatrick (wife of the first editor) [12].

The year prior to the production of *Luminous Procuress*, a sexually explicit Swedish film, Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious, Yellow*, had a very successful theatrical run after the Supreme Court ruled it was not obscene. Some of Arnold's backers felt this was a market that could be exploited and insisted on a more graphic coupling [13].

When *Luminous Procuress* was accepted into the 1971 San Francisco International Film Festival for its world premiere [14], it was feared that this one graphic scene might deter some viewers. A compromise was reached by literally darkening the liaison, so its graphic nature was subdued. The new restoration prints made by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive have brightened this once obscured lovemaking.

To neutralize the hetero hegemony of the couple coupling, Arnold cuts to a *tableau vivant* of the Cockettes in all their finery; rustic beards and prosthetic breasts abound, mascara, jewelry, and boas adorn the troupe, and in the center of it all, Hibiscus in a tutti frutti hat. Gender atomized in a single shot.

Once the record is set (un)straight, *Luminous Procuress* ventures to an inner sanctum of the female principle, a nesting of yin, in an ironically decorated set—women of diverse eras and backgrounds sitting amidst patchwork quilted walls. This is an eternal karmic poetry klatch, the gathered women at first paying heed to ruth weiss reading from an undisclosed source. Pandora with pre-Princess Leia hair, Cheryl in geisha attire, Lilia in a stylized au pair outfit, and others chat in an indecipherable language.

We soon discover, though, that the two lads are watching, from a distance, yang in search of its complement. The ubiquitous and slippery embrace begins, not a carnal, but a more enlightened embrace, Doro and Steve, Ron and Cheryl, then partners shift and morph, the bodies almost indistinguishable. From above the camera peers down at the four sated souls, smiling in a victory of the polymorphic perverse.

We're now at the penultimate scene, where acid reigns. The banquet in honor of the two spiritual travelers is in full swing when Pandora and entourage arrive. The celebrated vie for attention with the chemically distracted adorants, the Cockettes among others. This scene appears to have visual references to *Fellini Satyricon* in its use of human/food sculptures and the culinary ornateness of the feast [15]. However, the revelry takes on a unique dynamism that is more Timothy Leary than Titus Petronius.

The unscripted group grope seems to purge the things of the flesh, preparing the initiates for their final head trip. What we find next is a glass chamber within which sits enthroned a man-being from some transcendental dimension, another spiritual plane, another possible future [16]. A series of dancers, representing different cultural epochs, course around the chamber in an evocation of the coming transformation. The novices enter the chamber and are acknowledged. The Procuress, now more priestess-like, bids a conjuration, transporting herself and her wards to a darkened void in which all materiality is bygone. Fade to blackness.

Luminous Procuress relies on an episodic surrealism for its allegory of spiritual ascension. But the hybrid mix of mystical beliefs and sexual reinvention can't be separated from Arnold's sumptuous sense of style. He produced a visual pastiche that drew on Jungian archetypes, the foundational cinema of Georges Méliès, the decadent woodblocks of Aubrey Beardsley, Egyptian iconography, the dream-worlds of Jean Cocteau, the lurid eroticism of Camille Clovis Trouille, and, of course, dapper Salvador Dali, who brought Arnold to Spain when his museum was being completed.

The surround that Arnold designed for *Luminous Procuress* was unabashedly baroque in its effusion of colliding decor and props [17]. Steve Solberg recalled seeing when first entering Arnold's creative abode, "crusty East Indian puppets hanging from tattered screens—an old Chinese mannequin from the 1930's—masks galore—baubles and beaded curtains—Tibetan Tankas—baskets and chests promised treasures within—trays of glass eyes—even a plaster skull with a candle on top! And altars. Lots of altars devoted to the world's varying religions and mythologies." [18]

But the costumery can be traced to Arnold's own pronounced dress, accents of Edwardian rags and Flower Child rusticity, and the finery of his close friend Kaisik Wong, a leading proponent of wearable art [19]. Wong's collectible attire made remarkable use of dense fabric textures, fantastical folk motifs, and an architecture that was at odds with simple human form, much of which we see as homage in Arnold's designs [20].

The apotheosis of this artful wearability rests on the shoulders of Pandora, whose statuesque androgyny bears both goddess and grotesque. Pandora was Arnold's kindred spirit, and their close bond goes back to high school, where they found in each other a safe haven of eccentricity. Her stylized visage and stork-like elegance support the film's mystical **mise en scene** with unassuming dignity.

Outrageous wiggery by hair stylist Nikki Nichols and sequined make-up by Koelle sit atop Pandora's willowy frame, draped in all manner of outlandish attire. Gliding through the preternatural space of Arnold's narrative, Pandora is inseparable from her luminous role.

If visual surfeit is a signature aspect of Arnold's work, language is not [21]. For instance, in the earlier *Messages*, *Messages*, a sojourn through awareness, starring Joseph Zaccarella, a vast interior space is traversed by a hero looking very much like Dr. Caligari's somnambulist [22]. Again, meaningful encounters occur, all under the spell of William Spencer's string-plucked, percussive score. But meaning is gleaned from the pictorial and emotive context, not language-born understanding.

In *Luminous Procuress*, Arnold goes one further, adding language but in an alienated and otherworldly way. This particular mode was actually the invention of Warner Jepson, a composer who had previously scored *The Bed* (1968), arguably James Broughton's best film [23]. The LP score is an eclectic mix of acoustic and melodic compositions playing off of a more hard-edged series of early Buchla synthesizer works. From romantic interludes to spacey drones, Jepson's music sets the aural tempos for this symbolic journey [24].

To address several scenes that have actors in seeming conversation, Jepson constructed an intangible language, snippets of Asian and Indo-European speech [25]. The meaning is irretrievable, the synchronization between speakers, irrelevant. Language exists as an incantation, a sharing of ordered breath, but nothing more. Arnold's is a cinema for the eyes, an ocular event rife with a conveyed consciousness. In this sense, *Luminous Procuress* is pure illumination—a spiritual investigation that shines upon the soul with no interceding verbiage.

A prescient act of gender deconstruction in confluence with the mystical ascension of consciousness, both housed within an overflowing cabinet of wonders: Arnold's endeavor here is to construct from an amalgam of spiritual reference points, pictorial clues, and muted discourse a counter (and perhaps subversive) reality. "The film's power, like that of *Performance* or *Flaming Creatures*, or *Chant d'Amour* by Genet," stated critic Bill Nichols, "is in its creation of an alternative world, a new way of seeing and living that alters experience itself, including the film viewing experience." [26]

Luminous Procuress is not a mere film but a path worth traveling, led by a stately Procuress, and a high priest of visual pleasure, Steven Arnold. Behold its re-emergence.

Steve Seid was a curator at BAMPFA for twenty-five years and spearheaded the effort to preserve Luminous Procuress.



Steven Arnold. Photo: Nacio Jan Brown, 1974



All three photographs by Ingeborg Gerdes, 1970