



*Building a Broken Mousetrap*

## Blessed Are the Dreams of Men

**Jem Cohen**  
USA, 2006  
No dialogue  
10 minutes ■ Colour/Digital Betacam

## NYC Weights and Measures

**Jem Cohen**  
USA, 2006  
English  
7 minutes ■ Colour/Digital Betacam

## Building a Broken Mousetrap

**Jem Cohen**  
USA, 2006  
English  
63 minutes ■ Colour and Black and White/  
Digital Betacam

Production: **Gravity Hill Films,**  
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Jem Cohen's body of work is achingly beautiful and utterly unclassifiable. His justly revered artist portraits combine elements of vérité documentary, agitprop, landscape photography, archival imagery, found footage, staged performance, media critique and disarming interviews with endlessly fascinating subjects. His work also reveals an intense hunger to document contemporary culture, especially the inspiring and disturbing eruptions that occur at its margins.

These three new films, all evocative of Cohen's many quests as an artist, are three quite different "documenting" projects.

*Blessed Are the Dreams of Men* contains languid images of people in half-asleep states on a train, underscored by the literally terrifying music of Andy Moor. It has a palpable sense of inexorable doom. The film's setting is a train, a favoured site for Cohen for both its people-watching possibilities and its symbolic value as a decaying industrial beast. As in many of Cohen's shorter works, he quite consciously confounds the generic idea of a music video. This is a film of images somehow coordinated to a particular piece of music and yet, like his masterful *Nightswimming* collaboration with R.E.M., it could not be farther away from MTV values.

*NYC Weights and Measures* is a small gem that continues Cohen's cycle of poignant and activist street photography. "The Street" is an exalted location for him, a place where democracy, such as it is, has a shot at actually occurring. Cohen's anger at restrictions placed on shooting in New York City, in the

wake of the Patriot Act, are tangibly felt in this haunting footage of a ticker tape parade for astronaut John Glenn.

The music document that ends this programme is in many ways a sister project to *Instrument*, Cohen's much celebrated long-form portrait of D.C. band Fugazi. *Building a Broken Mousetrap*, a collaboration with Matt Boyd, features the Dutch band The Ex, another established but still furiously intense punk outfit, here they are vividly captured in concert. Cohen's delicate touch turns this into the most poetic and unexpectedly political concert film I've seen in some time. The first half, shot in stunning 16mm black and white, is occasionally interrupted by degraded landscapes reminiscent of *Chain*, his 2004 installation and feature film. The second half, shot in DV's saturated, bright colours, cuts away to longer interactions that concern wealth and power on the streets around the concert hall. The music is wild – sophisticated and primitive, angry but totally under control. This is Cohen advocating for a kind of musician, an idea of what music and its makers *could* be. That somehow gets to the core of what his filmmaking practice is and what extraordinary results it can yield.

### ■ Noah Cowan

**Jem Cohen** was born in Kabul and studied at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. His many credits include *This Is a History of New York* (88), *Buried in Light* (94), *Nightswimming* (95), *Lost Book Found* (96), *Instrument* (99), *Benjamin Smoke* (00), *Chain* (04), *Blessed Are the Dreams of Men* (06), *NYC Weights and Measures* (06) and *Building a Broken Mousetrap* (06).

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