

# ATLAS & AERIS

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INDEPENDENT FILM

Atlas & Aeris / 25 March 2015 / Documentaries, Features, Reviews

## *Art House (a documentary)*



*Art House* is a documentary film of stunning beauty. Documenting the extraordinary architectural work of some of America’s great artists, it takes the viewer on a journey



from landscape to landscape across North America, from New York to Arizona and from house to house. The film gazes deeply into the artistic and architectural histories of some of these artists' greatest legacies – their homes.

The film's director is American photographer **Don Freeman**, and its subject is the same as that of *Artists' Handmade Houses*, Freeman's recently-published book of photography, co-authored with Michael Gotkin (and well-received by critics). Both works document artists' homes whose beauty and ingenuity deserve to be appreciated, documented, and preserved. The film leaves no doubt as to the significance of its subject, featuring homes by famed artists like **George Nakashima**, **Wharton Esherick**, **Henry Varnum Poor**, and **Russel Wright**.



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Each of the 11 artists featured in the film has left a legacy in the form of a home, built



originally as a personal dwelling, an artists' community, a refuge from the world – and today often made available for public appreciation. Some are nationally recognised landmarks of historical significance. Others are dissipating slowly, falling into disrepair for lack of resources for their preservation. It is in this sense that the film conveys an underlying urgency in its mission of documenting the architectural landmarks that form its subject: for many of these places, there is not much time left. In an interview with *The New York Times*, *Artists' Handmade Houses* co-author Michael Gotkin calls much of their work 'the final documentation'. In one photoshoot, for example, he said that 'as we finished one room, the family took everything out and took it down to the Wellfleet thrift store'. The photography itself becomes its own kind of artefact, capturing a last view of art that has perhaps already disappeared.

Luckily for us, the documentation is exquisitely thorough. Freeman takes each architectural masterpiece in turn, combining beautiful imagery with the intelligent commentary of award-winning art critic **Alastair Gordon** and curators of the various homes. (The film's production designer is **Judy Rhee** – of *Stoning of Soraya M.*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Hours*.) One gets a sense of the history of these places, the energy behind their creation, and their current state. The film will be enjoyed by lovers of architectural history, modern art, interior design, and beautiful photography. It is also a scholarly work. Its scope and tempo, its beautiful imagery and intelligent commentary serve to shed light on an underappreciated subject.

Unsurprisingly, the photography centres the film. And although there is urgency in the mission of documenting these disappearing masterpieces, the work consistently communicates a sense of calm wonder. The film moves slowly, and so does the camera. The cinematography (by **Don Freeman**) is studied and deliberate, documenting each detail of each home, from exterior architectural features to the remarkable idiosyncrasies of each artist's life. Encompassing cinematography combines with a peaceful piano score (composed by **Jamie Rudolph**) that creates just the right tone to match the subject. The film incorporates still photography (presumably from the published book of the same subject – and perhaps because that subject is vanishing so quickly) as well as filmed interviews with experts at the various locations. Freeman appreciates the natural environment of each structure, as well as the details of the interiors, including the beautiful objects that fill them. The result is a satisfyingly complete picture.

Some highlights include the modern **home and studio** of Japanese-American furniture design visionary George Nakashima in New Hope, Pennsylvania (listed in the United





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States National Register of Historic Places); Henry Chapman Mercer's 'Fonthill', a





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magnificent modern castle in Doylestown, Pennsylvania (and also listed in the National Register of Historic Places); and Michael Kahn's and Leda Livant's breathtaking '**Eliphante**', a magical, kaleidoscopic, sprawling structure in Sedona, Arizona made entirely of discarded, repurposed material. One gets the sense that the exploration could go on forever – that there are infinitely more beautiful buildings, and that they are perhaps disappearing at a rate faster than we can appreciate them.

There is no equivocation about the film's purpose. These are 11 distinct stories that meld together because of their significant historical and artistic connexions. There is a steady continuity, but each subject loses none of its uniqueness – and there is no end to the remarkable diversity of these works. Because the film does not depend on an encompassing narrative, one could start watching anywhere without failing to grasp the essence of the film's subject or its unique aesthetic. There is a timeless quality in the





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film's manner of documentation. It floats as if out of time. It is at once intensely

retrospective and passionately forward-looking: the documentation of the past meets the zeal of preservation, but at a relaxed pace of thorough contemplation. It belongs in a museum (the MOMA, perhaps) playing on loop. *Art House* is a documentary of art. It is also a work of art. ■

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10/10

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## Specifications

Runtime: 1 hour 26 minutes | Genre: Documentary, Feature | Country: United States  
| Language: English

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## Find out more

Find out more about this film and the work of independent American filmmaker Don Freeman on the pages for *Art House* and **Don Freeman** in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), from the film's page on **Facebook**, and from the film's **website**. You can follow Don Freeman on Twitter at **@donfreemanphoto**.

Don Freeman is an artist, filmmaker, and photographer based in New York City whose work has appeared in publications such as *Elle Décor*, *Town & Country*, *World of Interiors*, *Architectural Digest*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*. His work has also appeared for companies such as Pottery Barn, Williams-Sonoma, Banana Republic, Ralph Lauren, and Martha Stewart Living. He is the author of four books: *My Familiar Dream*, *The Hotel Book*, *Ted Muehling*, and *Artists' Handmade Houses* – the last of which evolved into the documentary feature film *Art House*. His work has appeared in international galleries and private collections, including the permanent collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.



His films include videos for Japanese musician Tomoyo Harada and Sherwin-Williams as well as *Tires*, *Velvet Paws*, a short film shot on location in Paris and based on André Breton's surrealist novel, *Nadja*. *Art House* is Freeman's first documentary feature film.

A trailer for *Art House* can be viewed below:

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This film is the 2015 recipient of the **Atlas Award for Best Documentary Film**.

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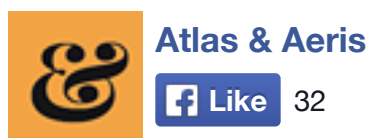
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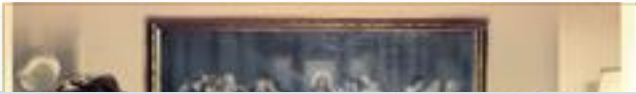
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