

Jonas Mekas captures one moment at a time

By Molly Glentzer

A child played "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on a violin from one of Jonas Mekas' shaky, hand-held films when I met with the 90-year-old artist recently at Deborah

Colton Gallery.

It's in what he called the "happy room" of his exhibit "Life Goes On ... I Keep Singing."

One wall contains "Elvis," a grid of 40 photographs from the legendary singer's last

performance — and his only show in New York. Most of the other pictures are more personal and close-up stills — each composed of three consecutive film frames — showing Mekas' family and famous friends Jackie Onassis, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. (Many more celebrity pals appear in another room.)

In truth, all of Mekas' rooms are happy. He has no use for ugliness. Even "World Trade Center Haikus," a film composed of pre-9/11 footage with a melodic piano soundtrack, commemorates the iconic buildings in a positive light.

Mekas has traveled almost every day with a camera since he and his brother, Adolfas Mekas, landed in New York in 1949 from their native Lithuania.

Widely regarded as the father of avant-garde film, Mekas was in Houston in part to screen his "Sleepless Nights Stories" at the Houston



Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle
Jonas Mekas

Cinema Arts Festival. He's also been featured or included recently in at least a half-dozen major exhibits around the world — including shows in Brussels, Montreal, Paris, New York, London and St. Petersburg.

Q: Why show three frames of film in these prints?

A: Usually something happens between those three frames because I film by single frames, like

a photographer. In some cases the changes are very slight.

Q: Do you have a favorite John and Yoko moment?

A: So many. I knew them for many years. I brought Yoko Ono to New York and gave her her first job there. I was editing a magazine called Film Culture.

Q: Explain "World Trade Center Haikus."

A: Everybody remembers the disaster. But here you will see the buildings in their beauty. I lived downtown in the Soho area. Whenever you walked any street if you turned south, they were always present. They were part of your life. I looked through my footage and pulled out those moments. It's not just footage of the buildings but people in the surroundings.

Q: Did you go back to the site after 9/11?

A: No. I'm interested

'Jonas Mekas: Life Goes On ... I Keep Singing'

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; through Dec. 28

Where: Deborah Colton Gallery, 2445 North Blvd.

Tickets: Free. Details: 713-869-5151, deborahcoltongallery.com; jonasmekas.com

only in celebrating life. I'm not interested in the depressing aspects; I'm leaving that to others.

Q: What is the music?

A: It's an improvisation by a very good painter and musician friend from Lithuania, August Varkalis.

Q: I think it's wonderful that you're still working at 90.

A: I'm surprised you say that. Are you supposed to stop working at some point? That's not human. If you love what you do, you never stop. Why should I not do what I like to do?

Q: What are you interested in capturing now?

A: Daily life. People don't pay attention until there's some huge disaster or drama. I'm interested in the joys people have that are

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"Black Square." To continue it is senseless.

Q: Has social media changed the way you work?

A: I am very active on the Internet. In 2007 I made one film every day and posted it on my website. That was a 365-day project, really exhausting, but I still put a lot of stuff on — from life, friends, my own life.

Q: You were sent to a forced labor camp during World War II. And yet you've focused on beauty.

A: I lived through a very dark century until I landed in New York. It continued to be dark all over the world. But that doesn't mean I have to embrace it. I have to pose something different, against it. In a meadow full of flowers you cannot walk through and breathe those smells and see all those colors and remain angry. We have to support the beauty, the poetry of life.

Q: Where did you get your optimism?

A: Nature. I grew up on a farm in a small village. I grew up in nature, which is happy even when there's thunder and lightning.

Q: Are you still writing poetry as well?

A: Yes. Now I'm looking to be inspired by Houston.

Q: What inspires you so far about the city?

A: I will tell you when I leave. Every city, every place has something special of its own. It's so much that usually after I stay more than three days I want to remain there.