

Suzi Nash, Barbara Hammer: Behind the lens of lesbian filmmaking
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BARBARA HAMMER

“Sex is an emotion in motion.”

— *Mae West*

If Ms. West is correct, get ready to be moved as the International House of Philadelphia continues its month-long film series about sex, “Free to Love: The Cinema of the Sexual Revolution,” through Feb. 15. More than 60 commercial and underground films from the 1960s and ’70s will be presented. For those who don’t know (I was a mere tot myself), that was the era of the Stonewall Riots, Andy Warhol and a time when people started thinking differently about gender roles, premarital sex and sexual orientation. The films run the gamut from mainstream cult classics like “Barbarella” to a number of LGBT-themed programs such as an evening of short films by Pat Rocco, an important pioneer of queer cinema, “Boys in the Sand,” arguably the first pornographic film to spoof the title of a mainstream feature and other programs to open your mind and awaken the libido. The series also includes appearances and talks by several of the original filmmakers and influential film historians, including this week’s Portrait, Barbara Hammer — the mother, or perhaps grandmother, of lesbian filmmaking, known for creating groundbreaking experimental films dealing with women’s issues such as gender roles, lesbian relationships and coping with aging and family. She is also responsible for some of the first

lesbian-made films in history, including “Dyketactics” (1974) and ”Women I Love” (1976).

PGN: So you’re a California girl/woman?

BH: Yup, born in Hollywood. My parents came out from Illinois because California was the place where you could make it financially. At the time, Shirley Temple was making more money than any woman in the United States and they thought, This girl likes to talk to people, let’s put her in films, but it didn’t work out. I went for an audition and was told I needed professional training and they didn’t have money for acting lessons. So that was the end of that. Of course I later went on to make films, so that might have been an early influence.

PGN: What did the folks do?

BH: For some time my mother was a secretary for screenwriters in Hollywood and she also worked as a secretary at Northrop, even though she was Mortar Boarded [Mortar Board was the first all-female honor society] and graduated with a degree in journalism. She got her degree in three years too, which was exceptional at that time. Still is. I never asked her but I don’t imagine it was easy at that time for a woman, especially a mother, to get a job in that field. My father graduated with a bachelor’s degree and he ended up working/managing in a gas station. Later on he became an accountant.

PGN: What was your first car?

BH: [Laughs.] Oh, I had terrific cars. I had a 1937 Dodge. It was rounded and the back door wouldn’t close properly. An old LaSalle. We had some interesting cars back then.

PGN: Were you an only child?

BH: No, I have a younger sister. She lives in Northern California and sells real estate.

PGN: Did your sister act or were you the outgoing one?

BH: I don’t know about outgoing, but I enjoy being on the other side of the camera. By the way, I was just filming when you phoned. I’m in Key West and I just filmed an 82-year-old man who has decorated his bicycle with two aquariums — fake fish in one and fake animals in the other — and hoops of light going all around the bicycle. He told me his greatgranddad bought the land we were standing on for \$300 and now it’s worth \$2 million. I asked if he was going to sell it and he

said no, it was going to his grandkids. So for me it's more interesting to meet and film other people than to be in the videos myself. And Key West is full of interesting older people. Tomorrow I'm going to meet a 100-year-old woman. It's fascinating to talk to people.

PGN: That's why I love my job! So as a kid did you have a favorite toy?

BH: Oh my! Well, the first thing that came to mind was my blue Schwinn bike. Maybe because I just drove back from Bahama Village on a balloon-tired bicycle that I've been using to get around here. I love transportation. I kayak, I ride a motorcycle, I love to travel. So my Schwinn or even my tricycle, which was pretty cool too, were my favorites.

PGN: Who was your best friend as a kid?

BH: In sixth grade it was Billy Minyard, then in junior high there were two girls who lived nearby, our backyards abutted, and they had a big fight over me to see who was my number-one girlfriend. An actual fistfight! Judy Buss won so I dumped Billy for her! [Laughs.] What a heel I was!

PGN: Did I read you studied philosophy?

BH: No, I studied psychology for my bachelor's at UCLA. I got a master's degree 12 years later, wait, no — that was my second master's ... I got the first master's just a few years later in English literature. Then I came out and decided I wanted to be an artist, rather than a teacher, and that's when I got a degree in film.

PGN: Were you married when you first came out?

BH: Yup. I came out in 1970 and got a divorce the same year, but I left him before coming out. I was not living with him at the time. It wasn't like I left him for a woman; I'd wanted my freedom. It was then that I realized I was sexually attracted to women. I didn't know it earlier.

PGN: A late bloomer.

BH: [Laughs.] In art and in love!

PGN: Do you have a partner now?

BH: Yes, we've been together for 25 years. We got married in San Francisco during that brief period when it was possible, pre the repeal of DOMA. Then New York recognized it, then San Francisco repealed it but now the federal government recognizes our marriage. We live in the West Village in New York.

PGN: What's she like?

BH: She's fabulous. Florrie Burke. She's actually well-known in her field as a leader in the fight against human trafficking. She was just given the Presidential Award last October. We were both flown to D.C. for the ceremony and John Kerry put the ribbon around her neck.

PGN: Looking at the film festival you're participating in, it strikes me that we're in an odd sexual time: We're kind of promiscuous and prudish at the same time. There was a lot of freedom and nudity in your films that we wouldn't see now.

BH: That's funny that you're asking me because that's just the sort of thing I've been asking here in Key West. I think in the '70s we were breaking barriers left and right. We didn't have critical theory or lesbian studies, nothing to make us look over our shoulders. There was nothing holding us back. No one to call us intentionalists or constructionists, we – and there weren't many of us – were just doing what we were imagining. How could a lesbian life be? If we thought there was freedom in performance in the nude, we did it. [Laughs.] Or at least I directed it! If I wanted to take over the city of San Francisco for "Superdyke" in 1975, we did, then we made "Superdyke" T-shirts and we went into Macy's and tried out the vibrators. We did everything publicly: We kissed on the streets, we danced in front of City Hall, we went into the erotic art museum and held up our Amazon shields, we masturbated in front of erotic pictures. Whatever I thought of, I would find women who would perform it. I would be in the pictures myself because it didn't seem fair to ask someone else to do something I wouldn't do. That was the spirit of the times. Then there was a backlash during the '80s. It was a very conservative time and I think we all pulled back and in the '90s we came forward again with identity politics. So now we had a theory to go with our motivations. We were more intellectual about our construction of a lesbian body on film or in paintings and writings. With that thoughtfulness I think we developed more complex and philosophical works. I think my generation has been women who came out in the '70s, kept quiet in the '80s, matured into the '90s and roared into the aughts. I find that young people — lesbians, gays, trans, bisexual, asexual and even straight who identify as queer — are very excited now about the spirit of the '70s that comes across in my films. There's a bit of a revival, as evidenced by this film series. That's pretty exciting!

PGN: I wonder if some of it is because we've tried so hard in our generation to assimilate, to show that we're just like everyone else, that we've lost our sense of community.

BH: Yes! That's probably it. I was never interested in assimilating. I was always afraid we'd lose our culture. And lesbian and queer culture was decidedly different from straight culture and we needed to celebrate that. I knew when to keep my mouth closed for safety's sake, but I've generally found that just being open and friendly to people I was able to make friends with people of all classes and races and religions and across borders and identities.

PGN: I'm sure people have told you stories about how your films have affected them. What was a memorable moment?

BH: Oh, back in the mid-'70s we were showing "Dyketatics," a lesbian love-making film at the Lark Theater in San Francisco. I was there with my lover at the time, and this woman behind us was crying and then fled to the lobby, so we went out to see what the problem was. We put our arms around her and asked what was wrong and she said that, watching the film, she realized that she was gay. It was something she hadn't admitted to herself. I don't know if you know the singer Rihanna, but that's who it was. She was very popular in women's music in San Francisco at the time. So that was very emotional for all of us, realizing that a film could have that much impact on our lives.

PGN: It seems in recent years larger queer film festivals have had to program mainstream films to be financially viable, but lately there's been a growing interest in more experimental films.

BH: Yes, there's a real resurgence of filmmakers going back to using 8- and 16-mm film and doing truly experimental work. I think it's in response to the commercialism of the art and film worlds. There are some real underground festivals and showcases popping up. In New York, the New York Film Festival tried to stop their weekend of experimental films and there was such an outcry they had to put it back. And of course programs like this film series are great in helping keep the experimental spirit alive.

PGN: Switching gears, I was watching some of your videos with some friends and they wanted me to ask where you get your glasses?

BH: Ha ha! The red ones or the purple ones? Red? My lover found this great store on Madison Avenue between 51st and 53rd that only had red glasses in the window. They had the weirdest, most wonderful glasses. One pair was round on one side and square on the other. I thought that was cool but a little much for me. They had case after case of red-hued glasses with different plaids and stripes and I kept asking my friends which ones they liked. We couldn't decide and they left the store. Then the guy pulled out one last case and I found these. I put them on and ran down the street and shouted, "What about these?" Everyone said, "Yes!" And that's how I got them.

PGN: What's a conversation piece in your home?

BH: Oh my God, there's a sculptor in San Francisco named Jann Nunn, and my lover has been collecting her work for ages. About 10 years ago, she bought a life-sized brassiere made out of lead. We recently got the girdle that goes with the bra and have had them installed in our new place. They're hanging as if a body were inside of them. You wouldn't believe how big they are!

PGN: You narrate a lot of your films. Did you cringe the first time you heard yourself?

BH: [Laughs.] Yes, it's so strange, isn't it? We just don't sound the same way inside our heads as we do when listening to it from the outside.

PGN: What's the most outrageous thing you've heard about yourself?

BH: Hmmn, I did a film called "Diving Women of Jeju-do." Jeju-do lies between Korea and Japan and is the largest of the Korean islands. Since the 11th century only the women are allowed to dive and collect shellfish, octopus and urchins for sale at the markets. They dive all the way to the floor of the ocean without a breathing apparatus. The first day I showed up for filming there was a woman coming out of the water. I was there with a woman anthropologist from Korea who stopped her and said, "This filmmaker wants to talk to you." She lifted her mask and said, "Is this the American grandpa?" Later in the week I was in the changing room, where the women get into their wet suits, and they didn't believe I was a woman so I had to show them my breasts and let them grope me through my bathing suit to prove it! I think they just weren't used to seeing a woman with a camera, taking a dominant role.

PGN: I saw that film, I forgot that was you! So what movie could you watch over and over?

BH: Oh that's easy. Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera," 1928.

PGN: I noticed that you do a lot of traveling. Your films are shot all over the world. What was a memorable travel moment?

BH: Oh boy, I guess crossing the Sahara south of Morocco. It was 1972 and my lover and I were hitchhiking through Europe and Africa. She was a biologist and we were going across the desert in Africa to see a 3-foot giant white toad. We were on a truck and there were about 25 of us in the back. We'd eat camel soup and follow the sand tracks. There were no buildings or anything around. At night we'd stop and sleep in the back under the stars. One night there was an

attempted rape on my girlfriend in the truck. We would sleep in our clothes and she was wearing these big heavy boots so she stomped on the guy and that diffused the situation, but from then on we'd sleep in the desert. We'd wait until it got dark and hide behind a bush so no one knew where we were. That was an early adventure, but I've had lots of them since then.

PGN: Sometime I'll have to tell you about my trek through Greece to see the cliff where Sappho killed herself.

BH: Oh, how cool. I taught filmmaking on the island of Lesbos with the Aegean Woman's Study Institute in 1981 and we made a film called "The Lesbos Film."

PGN: Do you collect things from your travels?

BH: We're trying to scale down so I'm trying not to bring things home. I do take a sketchpad with me and I make my own postcards and scenes. I used to keep really good journals.

PGN: And now you're traveling to Philadelphia.

BH: Yes, I love screening films at I-Hop. They have a great projectionist, I've known him for many years, and the curator Jesse Pires has really put together a good program. The audiences in Philadelphia are always very vocal, not shy at all, so I'm really looking forward to it. I'm sure I'll enjoy their questions as much as I've enjoyed yours.

PGN: Thanks so much, now go enjoy the weather there before you have to head back North!

BH: That I will.