

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

BARBARA HAMMER

October 03, 2017 • Barbara Hammer talks about her retrospective, films, and legacy



Barbara Hammer, *Faucet Head* (detail), 1969, acrylic on paper, 42 x 24".

*Barbara Hammer, a beloved icon of lesbian and experimental filmmaking, has a very full season ahead of her: the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York is hosting "Evidentiary Bodies," a retrospective spanning fifty years and featuring her never-before-seen artworks, which opens October 7, 2017 and runs until January 28, 2018; the New York Film Festival is screening five of Hammer's 16-mm works, made between 1975 and 1989, on October 9, 2017; the gallery Company in New York is presenting an exhibition of her work, "Truant: Photographs, 1970–1979" from October 22, 2017 to November 26, 2017; and, finally, a newly restored version of her film *Sisters!* (1974) is being shown at the Metrograph in New York for a program titled "Mischief and Play" on December 17, 2017. To top it all off, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University just acquired the artist's massive archive.*

THE SHOW AT LESLIE-LOHMAN is going to be a very different kind of retrospective. Most people know me as a filmmaker, and there have been a number of surveys of my films. But this exhibition is going to go beyond the moving image. Two great young women, Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis, have curated it. They're going to show work I've made over the last fifty years that has never been seen before. You know, I'm not in the closet, but a lot of my artwork is! So there will be installations, photographs, collages, and recently unearthed Super 8 films that have been digitized. Among the older works is a costume from 1984 called *Lesbian Hands*. It's a performance outfit made from gloves that covers the entire body. It's a piece that talks about how hands are sexual organs for lesbians. There's also going to be a new three-screen work about mortality, something I might project into coffins. It's called *Transition Screen*, 2017.

Some artists become agitated about putting together a big survey. Perhaps they're afraid of seeing the entirety of their lives laid out in a certain way. Or maybe they're just embarrassed by old work. But I don't cringe at any of it—I *rejoice*. I became an artist so I could put who I am out into the world. Art is the only channel for it, at least for me. Hopefully, in addition to the youth and naïveté, people will see the growth and maturity in the show, too, along with everything I'm facing now as I approach late age. If I share, the audience will share back—that's what I believe.

The Company show is going to feature twenty-nine photographs that were made during the '70s—pictures of lovers, motorcycle trips, landscapes, and film stills, among other things. Andrew Durbin, the gallery's director, selected the works from thousands of black-and-white negatives. The process took *months*. He is very patient! A beautiful—and affordable—book is going to come out for the exhibition, too. Hannah Black and A.L. Steiner are contributing essays, and Andrew has written the introduction.

[video]

Excerpts from an interview with Barbara Hammer.

At the New York Film Festival, five older works are going to be screened: *Psychosynthesis* (1975), *Women I Love* (1976), *Audience* (1983), *No No Nooky TV* (1987), and *Still Point* (1989). I am especially excited about the new print of *Still Point*! It is a major experimental film of mine and has rarely been seen. It never went to festivals or venues. The 16-mm frame is cut into four equal parts, each with a different image. When I made it, I wanted to start a new language where the viewer could read images rapidly from one part of the screen to the other. The subject is also a breakthrough for me: the film asks how a middle-class lesbian couple can be a part of public space. It features my lover Florrie Burke—we've been together twenty-nine years now—and myself along with the streets and people of New York.

Oh, and my film *Sisters!* has been restored with a grant from New York Women in Film and Television and will be re-premiered at the Metrograph movie theater in December. It hasn't been screened since it was first made, back in 1974. It's about women taking over the world: women driving trucks, changing Volkswagen engines, and leading the police in new revolutions! It also has footage of women topless, dancing, sweating—with babies on their

shoulders!—to the music of the Family of Woman band at the second National Lesbian Conference that took place at UCLA, where Audre Lorde and Kate Millett spoke.

Another wonderful thing that's happened is that the Beinecke Library at Yale has acquired my paper archive. Fifty boxes of my drawings, journals, manuscripts, and ephemera get to sit alongside the rare letters and papers of Gertrude Stein and Georgia O'Keeffe. It took about one solid year to organize everything for the library. And what's even better is that the money from the sale of the archive funds the annual Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant that's given out by the nonprofit Queer|Art. The first one, a prize of \$5,000, will be awarded this year. But just to be clear: the grant is a *lesbian* filmmaking award, because lesbians have been disappeared once again into the word *queer*, as they were before with the word *gay*. It's so important to acknowledge the multitude of different sexual identities and not collapse everything into one term. Lesbians need to be recognized. And the sale of the archive is going to ensure that this award exists for a long, long time. Aren't I lucky? I'm so grateful that I get to leave this kind of legacy. It's astonishing.

— *As told to Alex Jovanovich*

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