

ARTFORUM

NEWS



Barbara Hammer, *On the Road, Big Sur, California*, 1975, 2017, gelatin silver print, 8 × 12".
March 17, 2019 at 3:00pm

BARBARA HAMMER (1939–2019)

Barbara Hammer, the treasured lesbian filmmaker and New York–based artist, has passed away from ovarian cancer at seventy-nine. Hammer created more than eighty moving-image works throughout her life, but near the end she began making work about her own death: Last October, she performed a lecture on living with advanced cancer titled *The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety)* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Reporting on the event for *Artforum*, Corrine Fitzpatrick wrote that the performance “offers seven precepts—culled from fifty years of artistic practice—as a scripted framework, which she occasionally abandoned at the lectern to set up clips from a handful of her many films, ranging from 1974’s *Dyketactics* to a full screening of the sublime *Evidentiary Bodies* from 2018.”

Hammer's 2017 retrospective at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York, also titled "Evidentiary Bodies," was, as Rachel Churner recently noted in *Artforum*, "a testament to the singular combination of sincerity and irreverent humor that characterizes her sex-positive feminism. Featuring an impressive range of films and videos, early drawings, collages, and rarely seen installations, the show revealed how consistently Hammer has explored perception and pleasure, lesbian sexuality, queer invisibility, aging, and illness." In conjunction with the show, Hammer screened newly restored prints of her 16-mm works at the New York Film Festival, the Anthology Film Archives, Metrograph, and the Museum of the Moving Image.

In 2017, Hammer's film and video collection was acquired for distribution by Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), and ten of her early films—including *Menses*, 1974; *Superdyke*, 1975; and *Double Strength*, 1978—were preserved by EAI and the Academy Film Archive through the National Film Preservation Foundation's Avant-Garde Masters Grant program and the Film Foundation.

Activism was long fundamental to her art. As Churner claims, "Hammer's work reminds us that visibility is a political act. She likes to get close, and, at times, this means showing naked bodies of all ages. Early in *Superdyke Meets Madame X*, for example, Hammer stands before the camera, naked save for a bandanna, headphones, and a necklace. 'Everybody has seen me.' She laughs. 'I'm not going to show my body again in film until I'm eighty!'"

Barbara Jean Hammer was born on May 15, 1939 in Hollywood, California. She attended the University of California, Los Angeles, earning a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1961. Hammer also earned two master's degrees from San Francisco State University, one in English literature in 1963 and the other in film in 1975. Hammer received numerous accolades and awards throughout her career. She was included in Whitney Museum of American Art Biennials in 1985, 1989, and 1993 for her films *Optic Nerve*, *Endangered*, and *Nitrate Kisses*, respectively.

In 2006, Hammer won both the first-ever Shirley Clarke Avant-Garde Filmmaker Award from New York Women in Film and Television, as well as the Women in Film Award from

the Saint Louis International Film Festival. In 2010, the Feminist Press published her autobiography, *HAMMER! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*.

In 2017, she established the annual Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant with funds she received when her vast paper archive was purchased by the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University. The award is administered by the nonprofit Queer|Art and was awarded to Fair Brane in 2017 and Miatta Kawinzi in 2018. Remarking on the grant in 2017, she said:

“[J]ust 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.”

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