

IN MEMORIAM

# Barbara Hammer Maintained Her Curious Eye Until the End

The legendary lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer has died at age 79.

BY A.M. HOMES

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BY MICKALENE THOMAS.

**B**arbara Hammer was ebullient even as she was dying. After five decades as a cult figure in the art world and a fearless icon in the LGBTQ community, the experimental filmmaker spent the last years of her life putting her affairs in order. While dying she used her own life and work as a creative force, demonstrating that the art of death and the art of life are one and the same.

She also, for the first time, entered the global consciousness. She has shown work at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. At the Whitney she performed a spoken meditation on living with advanced cancer. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is restoring more than 80 of her films, including her groundbreaking and inescapably explicit *Dyketactics* (1974), the first lesbian erotic film made by a lesbian. There is a lesbian experimental filmmaking grant in her name, and her archives have been deposited at Yale's Beinecke library for others to explore. This April her work will be shown at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, and the following month Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts opens *Barbara Hammer: In This Body*, an exhibition centered around Evidentiary Bodies, Hammer's first multi-

channel, multi-screen video installation highlighting her ongoing and intimate exploration of the female form. “The camera becomes part of my body when I am letting it express how my movement feels, how my sightlines change direction, how passionate I am about texture and the body,” Hammer told me last November.

“In a culture that obsesses over beauty, health and youth, we are reluctant to confront aging, illness and dying,” says Wexner Center curator **Jennifer Lange**. “Barbara’s representations of every stage of corporeal becoming and potential—from menses, to the sexual exuberance of youth, to the pleasures of lesbian love and sexuality, to the realities of aging and living in a body that is designed to evolve and not intended to last forever—are unapologetically honest and undeniably political.”

“The sense of joy Barbara takes in publicly posing questions and pushing against obstructions is totally apparent in the films she makes,” says Houston curator **Dean Daderko**. “She delivers inspiring doses of curiosity, optimism, and the sense of profound joy that comes from being defiant.” Her conceptual sophistication pushes the boundaries of celluloid while asking the big questions about who makes history and who is left out. “What the ‘new queer cinema’ era took from works by experimental queer filmmakers like Barbara,” says *Paris is Burning* filmmaker **Jennie Livingston**, “is a sense that people who have experiences that are different from other peoples’, as queer people do, may in fact want to tell stories differently.”

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“Her films are collectively a narrative history of Barbara as well as the culture that she is intimately a part of, both in reaction against the dominating forces of that culture, and also celebrating the possibility that artists have to re-define those boundaries and norms,” says writer/director **Ira Sachs**. “When I’m with Barbara, personally, I feel like I’m inside one of her films—she’s challenging, rigorous, fearless, and warm and tough in equal measure.”

Born in Hollywood in 1939, the grandchild of DW Griffith’s cook, Hammer grew up in the West, married, and began studying painting before coming out. “I am a creature of the time, both with the benefits—the lesbian revolution in the 1970’s—and the obstacles—the continual glass ceiling for women,” Hammer said. “I fell in love with film when I saw



that it could be projected light with nothing more, when I could hand paint colors on clear 16 mm film, thread them into a projector and manifest the changing brilliance on a canvas. I was a painter before a filmmaker. I was a poet before a painter. I was an infant adoring the world from my little reign in a baby pen in the backyard of a working-class Inglewood neighborhood. Everything is important.”

**A.M. Homes: Have you always hoped to have a place in history?**

*Barbara Hammer:* When asked as a child what I wanted to be when I grew up, I right away said “president”. After high school and college when the prescribed role was “vice president” I changed direction. I wanted to do something big. I wanted to have influence.

**Do artists have any kind of unique social or political obligation?**

Every person has a unique social and political obligation. “Use your Talent” says a woven basket I was given in South Africa and that never leaves my side. We are part of a social whole and this privilege implies giving back to the best of our ability and with our unique and different talents.

**You have always put yourself out there, being public with what many would describe as deeply private, sexuality, the body, illness, and now death. I’m curious to know what it means to you—to be out there, talking about and showing us how one dies . . .**

I’ve never understood why experiences need be separated into categories. And, so, I don’t. Making pie is as natural as making love and one could argue equally important though I don’t know I’d go that far. In a way I’m lucky that there is so much forbidden unexplored life areas that it is rich fodder for an artist intent on shining light on the hidden. If I don’t share what’s deeply personal then I don’t learn the deeply personal of others, and we live in these strange contiguous landscapes bent on surface reflection only. How do we move without engagement with others?

**What are your thoughts on the gap, the spaces, between one’s public and private self?**

Make them as small as possible. Try to avoid having any.

**What’s the importance of risk taking in your work?**

Since a child I’ve enjoyed danger, the beneficent danger that accompanies running away from home in diapers when you know your only going around the block and will be sure to be found. Then running around the world on a lambretta motorscooter for a year didn’t seem that scary either as I had the cover of a male companion. Put the two together – motorcycles in Africa with a lesbian lover – and I had ‘real’ risk. It challenges me into seeing new or at the least being acutely aware of my surroundings, the nuances of acquaintances, the tones language is spoken, the spatial layout of the environment. All critical challenges and lessons for the burgeoning artist.

**Thoughts on a “female” or “lesbian gaze”?**

You look, you see, you are gay, you look back.

**Is there anything that’s taboo for you?**

I respect the requests of others.

**I’m curious about what being experimental means to you, and how it’s changed over time.**

It’s simple – an experiment is to make something that has never been made, and I would add that it is for your own pleasure. That is why a background in art history or film studies can be an attribute so you are not remaking the wheel. At the same time it can be intimidating and maybe if you started on that time-worn wheel it would truly be different after you go through with it.

In a world where it was/is hard enough to get recognition as a woman artist, it would seem that it was all the more difficult as an out lesbian when being ‘out’ hadn’t yet entered the vocabulary—

**I'm curious to hear what that was like and how it's changed...I'm especially interested in the fact that your career has blossomed in recent years—and the evolution of that and of the gay community becoming more accepted in the art world.**

You've said it all but the blossom hasn't fully opened until the sexual preference, the disabilities, the genders, the age disappear from the art work that stands alone in exultance, without hiding the personal if relevant to the work, but without standing there solely because of it.

**Is the lesbian body different than the heterosexual female body?**

My lesbian body is different. It is more sensitive to touch and smell. It is more fluid and less predictable.

My lesbian body often surprises. And so I am frequently learning. To learn I must be aware. For me, my lesbian body is my classroom of configurations and destructions, of weavings and discolorations, of firm and sagging breasts, of breathes and air intakes that cannot be counted upon. My lesbian body is my own. It's been a long time but as I remember my heterosexual female body was not my own.

**Any other thoughts about how an artist moves through the world, and what you see happening in this world?**

Like every sentient being there is no movement now for us. We are holding our breath. We gasp, we sputter, we hope for the best but the turntable of desire has melted into a fixed and blatant cry for help, for saving the planet and ourselves and good things that recognize moral principles of the right for all live on this planet.

**How do you feel about the upcoming Wexner show?**

I'm very excited for my work on mortality to be curated for a one woman show at The Wexner Center for the Arts! The most exciting aspect is that the curator Jennifer Lange and her team are committed to exhibition my new film *Evidentiary Bodies* in the manner I desire. A 'black box' will be built within the gallery space, transition screens of projected moving cat scans on 4 or more layers of x-rays will be activated by viewers who will be surrounded by 3 screens of my intimate performances of living with cancer. I'd like the viewer to have a contemplative space undistracted by exterior stimuli to reflect on the personal images and the extraordinary cello composition by Norman Scott Johnson my audio collaborator on the project.

**What are your thoughts on pornography? Does it have a value?**

What is pornographic? There lies the key. To me images of starving malnourished children in Yemen, children separated from parents in the borderlands of the U.S., and all images of war are pornographic. Making love, having sex, seeking stimulation through visual means is not offensive, nor should it be deemed so. Hurting other people, using underage children for ones' own means, abusing trust is pornographic. How can we learn to talk with one another about the words that bring about fear, preconceived notions, and blatant judgement? How can we see that it is not pornography that is drying up the oceans, collapsing our water systems, providing the climate change responsible for an over-heated planet where fires run amuck, people are left without housing or shelter, and the landscape prays for recovery? How can we protect the gentle empathy we have as toddlers and young children? Empathy that can guide us as a leading force in our relationship with others and with all animate and inanimate planetary objects.

**Your thoughts on where we are today regarding gender and fluidity of identity?**

It is a very exciting crossroads that we live in today. A period when we can make personal choices for gender display without fixed and prescriptive identities. As more and more friends choose their preferences I am reminded of the liberating time of the 70s when lesbian identity bloomed. It is another period of that type of cultural revolutionary change that is real people making real choices. Our growth continues as pronouns and choices are rethought. To live in a place where "we don't take for granted" that's my kind of living.

Speaking as a lesbian, I experience a unique culture different I am sure from a trans culture. It's sort of like protecting life on the earth. If each species has a place to grow and develop, we are richer for it. If lesbians, and trans proclaim and share their cultures, their differences, we are all, cis, gay, queer, trans richer for it. I like seeing the butch lesbian working by the side of her trans sister both in their fullness of being, their strong sense of selves. There is room for everyone.

### **Who are your hero(ines) and sources of inspiration?**

My greatest source of inspiration is my spouse of thirty years, **Florrie Burke**, who not only has transitioned into caregiver as well as lover, but whose life's work is so different from my own; a person who I respect with the very core of my being. When President Obama invited Florrie to the White House to receive the first presidential medal given for combating human trafficking, I was thrilled and deeply gratified by her recognition, and thought 'yes' here is a woman getting her due. My sources of inspiration begin with her and continue through the long list of women who have followed their dreams to give back in whatever way their talent directs.

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