Barbara Hammer

The grandchild of D.W. Griffith’s cook, Barbara Hammer was introduced to such screen luminaries as Lillian Gish as a child. But the thought of making movies didn’t occur to her until nearly twenty-five years later when Hammer left her marriage, took off on a motorcycle with a Super-8 camera, and became America’s progenitor of lesbian filmmaking with her film “Dyketactics!”

An artist and experimental filmmaker having completed 50+ films and videos, Hammer’s work is iconoclastic, sexually explicit and inextricably connected to her lesbianism and feminism. Before she left for this year’s Sundance and Berlin film festivals, we talked about death, silence, history, and her first feature film “Nitrates Kisses.”

Tina DiFeliciano: How do you fear, anxiety, and aggression inspire your work?
Barbara Hammer: In “Vital Signs,” I was inspired by death, something I’ve been trained to fear. Gender is constructed, but we look at how death is constructed. I read about the medieval reception of those who had died. They were buried right next to the church. The presence of a part of life after the church became walled, cemeteries were put on the outside. We’ve put our dead far out of our minds. We’ve tried to forget those who have died. But now, certainly there is a new community saying, “We want to remember.” We want to know our history. So we are very interested in keeping the dead near by, and embracing them.

TD: We’re talking about death and history in the same sentence. In America, we allow our history to die. There’s only a certain privileged few who get to write history. “Nitrates Kisses” explores the silences around that history. Who is controlling the silences? That’s just as important as the history itself. Maya Angelou talked about that in her speech at the inauguration. The press was appalled that she could get up there and talk about the horrors of our history.

“Nitrates Kisses” is a film that is currently in production with Jane C. Wagner on “Madonna Mia,” and “Silent Voices of the Silver Screen.”

That’s a pessimistic thing, how could you bring up such an unpleasant thing? They totally missed the point. We have to learn from our history so we don’t repeat it. That’s obvious.

BH: I also think it’s time for idealism again. We have been living in cynicism, depression and a sort of status quo for a number of years. I don’t think we can have a 21st century culture by just accepting it. We need our personal energies behind that. Every place that I’ve been teaching, I bring together everyone in the classroom. I see quality and I think, “This is our time, let’s try it again.” We need to learn how to grab hold of the full force again. That use of the erotic that Andre Lorde wrote about so much of the time. She was a great living representative. Somebody who has changed all of our lives. She told me if I ever encountered a racist country, not to let go of it. I decided that I was Semitic, to homophobia, on or off, we have to look at all the different ways that we as people feel the need to disparage each other.

TD: In my own work, role models have been very important. My parents were immigrants. My grandmother didn’t get out of third grade. She was a peasant in Italy. Her history is on the verge of being lost. They don’t talk about their history in Italy because it was so painful and so devastating. At the point, I interviewed her. The stuff that came out was so rich and so wonderful, and I definitely want to incorporate that in my work, but I’m having a hard time getting people to give a damn about it. What does an Italian immigrant?

BH: That’s where thinking about an audience can change the creative spirit. I often don’t think about an audience when I make the work for myself. It’s always been my feeling that if I make a film that’s very true to my feelings, then I’ll be able to make something unique. Some will relate to it, maybe some will have trouble with the more experimental form.

TD: I’m very drawn to the themes in your film. I’m not an experimental filmmaker, yet, we share the same sort of concerns.

BH: It’s love that. The crossing of genres now. I think it’s the most exciting. There’s an absence of sequences where you can do a documentary on your own and you can put in a dream sequence, where you challenge visual auditors. A lot of times we think, “Oh, this documentary is going to tell me what to think, or it’s going to tell me what the filmmaker think.” The more interesting documentaries are those that combine other forms so that the viewer works on several layers in order to read it formally. Form determines content as well.

TD: That requires a more disciplined viewer and more American viewers are not disciplined.

BH: I don’t think we want to leave them the avenue they already know. Film is a new language and we’re still developing it. In “Nitrates Kisses,” I try to make the viewer the historian. I have to decide which piece of film came from the 1980’s, “What piece of film was shot last year?” Where there was six of hour of people have asked me, “What are those burnt out buildings doing there?” I want them to figure it out. That’s what we have to do, if we are working in a new language. We’re piecing things together in a whole new way. Now, it’s our turn.

TD: For a long time you were the first, if not the only, lesbian avant-garde filmmaker. That must feel rewarding now, to see a proliferation of experimental work by lesbian filmmakers.

BH: My work has been challenged and criticized by younger lesbian filmmakers, and I expect that it will continue to be. That’s the way change is made and if it ever gets totally critiqued in a negative sense, it will get regrouped later. It is something to build upon. Somebody’s got to start making those first efforts out there. I was lucky when I made “Dyketactics.” I didn’t realize that it was the first lesbian film made by a lesbian. I would have been so afraid and intimidated. Instead, I just bust out and let my energy carry me through my work. In some ways being alone was great. There was a blank screen and I was filling it. That was a thrill. At the end of “Dyketactics,” I showed a vagina on the screen and the man screamed, “AAAAAHHHHHHH!” All the women said, “Haven’t you seen that before?”

TD: The two older women making love in “Nitrates Kisses,” was something I’d never seen. Women in their sixties or seventies, nude, making love; that was a first.

BH: That’s why everybody likes it, it gives them hope.

TD: I just read this article by David Edsman in which he says, “Whether heterosexual viewers as well as those identified by ‘Nitrates Kisses’ is uncertain because the film requires from the personal experience of the audience that so many people have worked so mightily to construct.” I thought that was really at the heart of the matter. That is a major challenge.

BH: Yes, and I have not succeeded with
the heterosexual viewers. A producer who I would like to produce my next film said that he felt left out. I felt crushed, because I'm so vulnerable. My lower overhears and as soon as he left she said, "I feel left out by 99% of cinema in this country. " When we read in, we can infect lesbian sex into the sexuality of the character. That's what we have to do. He doesn't have to do that. He has enough of it ourselves. I went to see a film that I had produced with heterosexual sex and I gave the same line back to him — I felt left out — and I think he understood.

TD: I had a conversation with my partner June and one of our interns about male viewers. When they feel uncomfortable it's more disturbing for them than it is for women.

BH: They haven't seen cinema shot by women produced by women, edited by women, who have a totally different constructed experience of the world than they do because cinema has been in their domain. The apparatus, the scripting, the money, the way the film was shot makes a seamless escape narrative for the male viewer. Any woman who has identified with the man, in a heterosexual world, also becomes part of that audience. The advertising has been for them. It's only recently that there has been enough of a response for the independent cinema. That's why we have Sundance. That's why we have Sundance. That's why we have Sundance. That's why we have Sundance. That's why we have Sundance.

TD: Is it hard for you to say, "Quiet on the set."

BH: As a woman, I've been trained to be liked. Trained to do the sort of work that people will like me. I do what I have different ways of working with people. We become communal and involve everyone in the process of filmmaking, which isn't the usual purpose of a director. We get terrific results from that. But as I move into the project I can see that I am going to want to have control and I am going to look like a dictator. But I really have a vision, and the only way I can do it is to have control and respect from everyone I meet at this time.

TD: You're about making an excuse for being a director.

BH: You're right.

TD: I was reading about la Laguna. The back of her director's chair read, "The Mother Of Us All." She would be like, "O.K. baby, O.K. honey," using her maternal charm as a way of getting what she wanted. In reading about women filmmakers from the past, you find how women were very involved as writers, editors, producers, and directors. Then they were pushed out.

Let's switch gears and move onto the imagery in your films. What about your repetitive use of hands?

BH: When I had my experience coming out in 1970, I touched a woman's body for the first time when we made love. All the sensations on my skin that have nerve endings that go to the part of the brain that is about touching were highly charged by touching a body similar to my own. I feel that my sight is connected to my sense of touch. When I look at the world I can feel it in my body. I don't need to go over there and touch that pillow to know the difference of textures around me. My sexual sense is in my eyes. I think it was Aiko Takesue who pointed out that children know the world through touching before they can see. They can't even focus, yet they are touching. They put things in their mouth which is full of sensory touch organs. Of course, the clitoris has more nerve endings than any other organ in the human body. More than the penis. The thumb is next.

TD: The thumb?

BH: It's a whole new respect for the thumb. (laughter) So, I began in my work to connect touch and sight. In "Dyptichs," I had 110 shots and every shot in that four minute film has a quality of each about it. Either a literal one, a woman touching a woman or a more metaphoric one, brushing of hair. As I said before, we know the world in ways other than sight. For instance, I'm driving down the road, and I look out at a sloped field. I can feel that texture in my body through my sight. It comes back to me, through my lesbian experience of touching a body similar to my own. I think this reaches out to Fanciochi, talking about how Western knowledge has been limited by sight. That's why there are so many hands, and clitorises, and feet and skin in my movies because that is our organ of touch. Skin takes up 37% of our body. We are touching even when we are sleeping. All is touching us. All the time I make, I try to make experiential. It's not underweater I take the viewer in the swim. Through the pond, down the river, into the ocean. That's in "Pond and Waterfall."

TD: You're very prolific.

BH: People say that with envy, sometimes with hate and sometimes with resentment.

TD: Are there other filmmakers?

BH: Yeah. Always look toward Stan Brakhage and his success. He's done twice as much work as I have. I don't think people say he's prolific with negative tones. Sometimes I feel I
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made as many films as Stan Brakhage I couldn't be ignored. Times have changed and it's okay to be all of myself now. All dyke and all artist.

But, in the ideal world, why should I be known by my sexual practices? Besides that, they could be fluid and changing as we see in "Nitrated Kisses." It's pretty boring to think that you're going to be cast as lesbian, or heterosexual, or bisexual in all your life. Why not just be known as a filmmaker? Why does it have to be "woman filmmaker?" Somebody told me once, "You'll never be Stan Brakhage. You wouldn't die for your work." I said, "How do you know? How do you know whether I've suffered as much as the male artist has suffered in the romantic myth?"

TD: One thing I wanted to bring up was the Hays Motion Picture Code over that wonderful dick rubbing that man's white butt in "Nitrated Kisses."

BH: That is my favorite shot. Isn't that funny that two lesbians can enjoy that shot so much?

TD: I love the irreverence and how beautiful it was. Was that equally as enjoyable for you to connect those two images?

BH: I was so nervous about that shoot. I'd never seen men make love. I directed them to use a condom. Then I got into it. People said it was so refreshing to see gay male sex that was not phallicentric. It was so friendly. It was all body over way of loving.

TD: Is your NEA grant status for "Nitrated Kisses" something you want to talk about?

BH: Not right now. But when I found the Hays production code, I didn't know anything about that fact that not only were you not allowed to show queer sex until 1966, you couldn't show mixed races. So, it was perfect to overlay two men — one white, the other African-American — over the text of the code and to set up a challenge for the viewer. They had to decide which they were going to watch. They could be restricted by the fence of words, it imposes a sense of censorship on the image.

TD: It says, "FUCK YOU!" to censorship codes.

BH: It also says, "I love penises." Old stereotypes of lesbians not liking penises is not. We are polyamorous people. We like everything.

TD: As long as it feels good.

BH: Exactly.

TD: In another scene, you intersected animals with sex and lovemaking. I'd never seen that represented in film before. I have a rabbit and when you start doing something, she wants to get right in the middle of it. If it's with my lover or by myself, she is always literally on top of me. Animals just get mesmerized. What inspired you to capture that on film?

BH: The same line you're talking about. The male couple had all these dogs and as soon as they got close to fucking, the dogs would start barking. The dogs didn't bark earlier during the wrestling, the massage, the caressing. The dogs were quiet. But when it came closer and there was an erection, the dogs were all barking.

TD: My rabbit grunts. I love that shot, that point of view of the dog. Through the dog's eyes. It's very unexpected, very funny.

BH: We are animals and a lot of times we deny it. In "Typhoonic," I have salamanders crawling on women's breasts. There is a connection.

TINA DIFELICIANO