

FRAMES OF PASSAGE

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Barbara Hammer: Nine Recent Films

By Kathleen Hulser

The American poetic avant-garde film has pursued finding tropes of consciousness, rather than creating copies of the world. Just as film is built on frame-to-frame changes, so the processes of a filmmaker's understanding will shape the evolution of their films. Barbara Hammer has made 35 films over a dozen years; the last five years have seen a rapid change in her work. Previously, the West-Coast based Hammer spoke a more private language to ^awomen's community receptive to a new symbolism and imagery reflecting the political awakening that sprang from women's reappraisal of self and society during the 1970s. In her earlier persona as feminist quester seeking positive myths and new spirituality, Hammer pioneered non-narrative film in a women's community outside customary art world audiences. A careful reading of the latest work shows that feminism is still an important tool of analysis which now operates in multiple, technical and intellectual approaches. Hammer has taken the persona of underwater skin diver, architect, scientist, space/time traveler and a social observor. Her trajectory through different subjects deploying different filmmaking styles can be understood as a passage tracing her moves through landscapes and finally returning to the humanscape in her newest films.

Watching these nine films throughout this passage we sense the tension of the filmmaker's evolution away from the limitations of committed politics to a broader political inflection that draws on problems specific to film. In this reading her films can be viewed

as a coherent set of road movies. These travels alter the perspective and the nature of the problem, providing a simultaneous resolution and motive power to further searching.

The 1982 Pond and Waterfall is the only pure "nature" film in this series, although its "naturalness" undergoes transformation through optical printing. The camera eye is like an amphibian that sees on two levels in its journey from underwater in a safe pond down to a violent, turbulent ocean. Early in the silent film shot north of San Francisco we see an homage to Monet's *Nymphs* in the faded raspberry color of the stepped printed underwater lilies. The painterly effects of the printing make the water seem viscous. Pushing through clouds of fish eggs, fronds and algae the camera establishes a sense of intimacy and connection in a natural ecosystem.

But this amiable underwaterscape acquires ominous overtones as the camera/amphibian surfaces. Splashes strike the lens, and the rock of the ocean surf is destabilizing and disorienting. The last shot is of a wave that breaks over the "eye" (in the process actually crushing Hammer and her 50-pound camera to the sea floor). One of the most provocative foreshadowing ambiguities occurs when the half-submerged camera tracks the tip and slosh of the horizon, echoing the mood change from underwater confidence to vulnerability to natural forces, a passage from balance to defiance.

The half-submerged camera position plays a role in Pools, too. The film was shot in the Hearst newspaper magnates' castle, called San Simeon, which is now a museum. San Simeon has an indoor and outdoor pool designed by Julia Morgan who was the first woman to graduate from the Paris Beaux Arts school in architecture. If the

subject of Pond and Waterfall is the architecture of an ecosystem, in the 1981 Pools (made with Barbara Klutinis), architecture per se is the theme. The underwater ambience of the film is quite different from the pool with hard surfaces and mosaics. Since Hammer used flippers to obtain a smooth propulsion in the pool, the very motion speaks of power---more like swimming laps than gliding in a pond.

Coming from a painter's background Hammer often works on the celluloid itself, but in Pools she leaves her mark in two assertive ways. First of all, making a film was a way to get permission to swim in the forbidden San Simeon museum pools. As a filmmaker she occupied the territory of historical preservation for a morning---and forever in the frozen film moments. Then, warming to some risk-free desecration, she hand-colored the mosaics and stone in an animated sequence like architectural graffiti-writing. The coloring of the mosaics highlights the piecemeal construction of the solid wall which echoes the piecemeal frame structure of film.

This reminder of the building block origins of montage is more emphatic in the 1981 Arequipa. Shot in the Peruvian convent of Santa Catalina, Arequipa analogizes the building blocks of film (frames; color and black and white stocks; negative reversal; superimpositions) to the frames of architecture (doorways, windows, walls, corridors). The confinement of the frame, the convent, changed for Hammer as she realized there could be beauty and a self-willed delineation of activity within the "imprisoning" frame:

In the two previous films, unlike Hammer's pre-1980 work, the human figure has been absent. But behind the solemn facade of the convent we catch a hint of inhabitants. We almost expect someone

to appear in one of these frames within frames. Even a shot of flowers nestled in a dry stone wall is an intimation of life as startling as a desert bloom.

Space and time are the raw materials for the 1984 Bent Time as Hammer crisscrosses the North American continent filming landscapes inspired by physicists' observation of light rays curving at the outer edge of the universe implying that time also bends. Bursting out of the pond, the pool, the convent, Hammer includes a thousand year historical span and a continent to articulate a filmic conception of particle energy. The human hand lies heavy on these landscapes. Even at the oldest site, Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, the focus is a sun calendar, a tool of dividing, measuring time which relies on light. Here, measurement is an act of possession, a declaration of knowability.

The archaeological sites in Bent Time combine with "high energy" urban sites. The hectic pace of the city footage recalls the American pioneer of experimental film Marie Mencken's Stop and Go, but it's also a glimpse of an earlier energetic Hammer mixing some helter-skelter into a more rigorously formal filmmaking scheme.

The journey cross-country is like a conquest in the mind's eye. The camera in this film is aggressive. The wide-angle lens makes the frame's center bulge, as the frame edges bend as if phenomena were cringing away from the inexorable passage through the center. The push of the lens forward makes us aware that subjecting landscape/cityscape (from the Ohio hills to the Brooklyn Bridge to a linear accelerator) to this incessant motion renders even monumental city architecture plastic. The urgent forward pressing

of the filmmaker's perspective is cut with footage that saps the solidity of glass and steel structures, as, for example, when the World Trade Center seems to suffer vertigo.

To then document the breadth of her concerns, Hammer's Doll House deals with a miniaturized feminized space which contrasts with the architecture of the universe in Bent Time. Doll House sounds fed up, an echo of the political feistiness of some of her previous work. Composed of angry splutterings from the frypan and brusque dish-scraping, the soundtrack registers impatience. During the animated film, the dollhouse, appearing as an apartment and compartment house, is a memory palace. Stuffed with food, boots, books and kitchen tools, it's a slice of life or a piece of mind, emotionally colored. The human character reappears in the shape of a doll who is a pyromaniac. Hammer has thrown together a personal diary of a wild artist with available materials, delighting in the humdrum connotations of her domestic arsenal. The revolt of the mad Ms. culminates when the doll house lands in a tree --- outside, defiant, unconventional.

New York Loft, a companion piece to this meditation on domestic space, incorporates even more diverse domestic debris. Although a loft is home, it's also a mediant social space because it lacks the dividing walls that carefully mirror the cycles of the bourgeois family. Maya Deren once explained in the 1940's that available materials and space were essential to the independent filmmaker. In New York Loft, cloth bolts, poles, twigs, bedclothes and film cans leap into motion and bedding is animated in a climax with a snarled tangle of blankets and sheets. The filmmaker herself appears on camera performing a sort of abstract housework arranging

poles that evoke the work of such Judson Church choreographers as Yvonne Rainer. Here, the explicitly personal architecture of the space is hand-made by the filmmaker, marking the loft not as an "anywhere", but as a reflection of the filmmaker's state of being (a move from the West Coast to New York). This marks a transition to human/social concerns played out against a backdrop of architecture.

Parisian Blinds, 1984, and Tourist, 1985, investigate the nature of spectator perception in an unfamiliar environment. Manipulating the movement of the film direction on the screen much like the motion of Venetian Blinds that open and close, Hammer questions the perceptual experience of mass tourism as the Bateau Mouche endlessly circles the Ile de la Cite. The content is the perpetual forestalling of experience embedded in the form of the abbreviated glance the film editing allows.

The slide of the image into politics finds concrete expression in the film Tourist as the world "spectacle" nestles in the Hollywood Hills like an Edward Ruscha painting. Psychic desires of "tourists" permeate the architecture of seeing. The fleeting spectacle is a species of imaginative possession, a conquest through the gaze accented by the shots fired on the video arcade game soundtrack. The tourist "look" is as ephemeral as the animation of the collage suggesting a miniaturizing and glazing of the grandiose wonders of the world.

Barbara Hammer's films of landscape, geography and architecture have returned to a human iconography transformed by her filmic investigations becoming increasingly rigorous where formal structures are implicit in and developed from content. The exploration of

looking at has turned to an analysis of the act of looking augmented by scrutiny feminists have made of cinematic representation, patriarchal voyeurism and the positioning of spectators. As a seminal feminist filmmaker in the seventies, Barbara Hammer is creating now an intelligible filmic world of complex interpretations of social geography.