Lesbian Whale: An Interview with Barbara Hammer

By Jane Harris December 14, 2015

AT WORK

INSTALLATION VIEW OF *LESBIAN WHALE*. COURTESY BARBARA HAMMER AND COMPANY GALLERY.

Barbara Hammer is something of a legend in queer feminist and experimental filmmaking circles. In the seventies, she was the first lesbian feminist to make open, celebratory films about her sexuality. In the eighties, her films took their inspiration from structuralism, using paint, animation, and optical printing to explore notions of embodied spectatorship. By the nineties, she'd helped to pioneer "essay films," an attempt to produce "a genealogy of survival" amid the thrust of identity politics. Her work foregrounded important queer figures in history—Willa Cather, Alice Austen, and Hannah Höch among them—and their historical erasure.

Hammer's forays into suppressed queer history have evolved into feature-length documentaries. Tellingly, the subjects of these films are early twentieth-century lesbians—artists and writers whose official biographies often elide their sexuality. Lover Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore *(2006), for example, is a moving portrait of the couple's lifelong collaboration and love affair. Hammer's latest work,* Welcome to This House, a Film on Elizabeth Bishop *(2015) follows the poet's life from her bleak New England childhood to her ten-year romance with the architect Maria Carlota Costallat de Macedo Soares. Elliptical and poignant, it runs counter to mainstream accounts of Bishop's life, many of which—right down to her Wikipedia entry—still omit these relationships and their impact on Bishop's work.*

On the occasion of her recent exhibition, "Lesbian Whale: Early Drawings and Paintings," I spoke with Hammer about the radical changes she made in the sixties and about her approach to film.

Most of the historical women artists you've made films about—Claude Cahun, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bishop—predate you. Is there a drive, perhaps, to create a sort of record for future generations, a record that you were deprived of? Your generation was denied open lesbian role models, with a few potential exceptions.

My role models were male artists, who I learned about by reading their biographies. It's a unique way to go to "art school," reading the life choices of Vincent van Gogh and Emile Gauguin. I was redefining myself between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty, and I noted that these artists I admired had taken great social risks. Gauguin, in particular, had left his family and a bourgeois job. I could do it, too, I thought, just in a different way. I left my husband in April of 1970 and came out in August of that year. I had no idea before then that I desired women. Isn't it Wittgenstein who says one needs the language before one can think of the concept? I hadn't even heard the L word until the middle of that summer.

Once I came out and began to look for historical role models, I found a lot of cover-ups and obscure biographical conceits. When I spent time in archives, I was

HAMMER IN 2012. PHOTO: JIM NORRENA

The works in “Lesbian Whale” represent a pivotal time in your life. You decided to leave your husband, come out as a lesbian, and pursue filmmaking all at roughly the same time—momentous decisions for a woman in the 1960s. What was that like?

In the late sixties, I was trying to identify myself as an artist. Even though I’d gone around the world on a Lambretta and built a house from the ground up with the man I married the day after graduating from UCLA—I was a child of the white-picket-fence fifties—I knew there was something inside me I wanted to express, and it wasn’t nurtured by household work or even teaching. I was studying painting with William Morehouse at Sonoma State College. He was the first person who saw me as an artist, but he also nearly wiped out that identification by putting the make on me. I was about to leave my husband at the time, but not because I was a lesbian—I scarcely knew what the term meant then.

Those tensions resonate in your work. At first glance, the bright colors and buoyant lines that animate your early paintings evoke a playful, exploratory quality. Looking closer, though, I see something darker in in the faces of certain self-portraits.

I think the joy you noticed is the pleasure of color and mark making. The freedom to put anything at all on paper—even the roll of dust brought out from an empty washing machine after the clothes are emptied. I found a page of this lint in a 1969 sketch pad. And yes, the self-portraits, as you’ve noted, reveal the struggle to emerge from a housewife homebuilder to a motorcycle dyke artist.

AN INSTALLATION VIEW FROM “LESBIAN WHALE.”

How do you choose your subjects?

Ideas, subjects, themes appear as possibilities and I follow them. *Welcome to This House* began with an architectural concept. I had a residency in the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, where I had a week to film in a 1970s home—glass, metal, stone. Some years earlier, I'd lived for a month in a dune shack made of scrap driftwood and salvaged beams. The space and structures we work in influence our art, and I'd wanted to contrast the two. I shot sixty minutes of film in the modern house, but to understand the architecture and landscape, I needed a human figure. I learned that Elizabeth Bishop had summered as a teen in a camp very close to the house I was in. Voila! I ended up visiting and filming her homes around the world—in Nova Scotia, Key West, three locations in Brazil, Boston, Cambridge.

FROM *WELCOME TO THIS HOUSE*, 2015.

Found footage is a constant in your work, especially in the essay films. Were there any influences that helped to shape your use of it?

Nitrate Kisses, from 1992, was my first feature-length essay documentary. When I was making it, I had no idea it was an essay film. There weren't any books on the subject then, and it wasn't the hot topic in documentary filmmaking that it is today. I only had fragments of gay/lesbian/bi/trans/asexual historic remains to draw upon, these little pieces of sixteen-millimeter film. I realized I could collide, extend, interrupt, refuse, or celebrate them, and, most importantly, in that collision of montage, I could make meaning, make a film. I read Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, and I felt supported by his notion that "thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well," and his belief that an artist's task is "to brush history against the grain."

By 1979 I was already tired of showing my films to a passive audience. I thought, How can they make political choices if they aren't active? To get them out of their seats, I made a film called *Available Space* where I projected from a wheeled rotary projector table, which I took around the architectural space. The audience had to move to see the cinema. The image is a woman pushing out of the frame. Thirteen years later, I wanted to activate the minds of the audience, and the collage format worked perfectly to stimulate without telling.

Collage features prominently in your work, especially in the shorts of the eighties, where there's a lot of visually entrancing abstraction and fast-cut edits. These works stand out for their relative lack of human presence—but they exude a strong sense of touch.

I was studying Jung at the time, and when he defined intelligence in four areas—intellectual, intuitive, emotional, and sensational—I knew that in my personal hierarchy it was touch, or sensation, that ruled. My eyes are directly connected to my sense of touch. In *Dyketactics*, one of my first films, there are 110 images in four minutes, and every image is an image of touching. Reading Ashley Montagu's *Touching*—from 1971, and the only book I could find then on the sense of touch, which seems scandalous now—I learned that the area of the brain related to touch is much larger than that for sight or sound. I wanted the audience to be embraced, as if they felt their hands or bodies moving across the screen, connecting touch with the images. I want the audience to feel in their bodies what they see on the screen.

FROM *DYKETACTICS*.

You use lots of material references to the process of filmmaking—images of frames, screens, cameras, filmstrips—in your work, too. Endangered culminates in scenes of you operating a camera. Did you mean to embody this phenomenological approach to cinema you've alluded to?

Yes, but those images also come out of the structural cinema of the late seventies and early eighties, which addressed the elements of the camera, the tripod and film celluloid. I wanted to reference the material itself, to remind us that these images—this subject matter, this abstraction—are grounded in plastic with holes, recorded by a metal camera that can swing and walk or stand as steady as a statue. This is film. This is not a story. Endangered sees the medium, light itself, and the filmmaker as endangered species on a planet turning from film toward digitization. I ran some of the frames through a sewing machine, to show their fragility. Others were bipacked with sequences of crabs in the Galápagos, which I'd torn, pulling the crabs apart. And some strips I'd just scratched, peeling away the emulsion, showing film as the aging skin it is. When the camera was invented and artists feared painting would end, it didn't. But since the new, lightweight, large-pixel files of the digital camera have become accessible, we've seen the decline of cinema as filmic material. That's another reason why it is important to reference the medium used—especially as film enters an archival period.

Jane Ursula Harris's writing has appeared in Art in America*,* Artforum*,* Time Out New York*,* The Village Voice*,* The Believer*, and elsewhere.*

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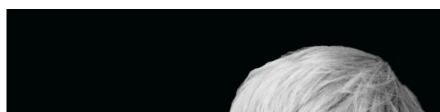

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