

On August 17, 2017, Los Angeles-based curator Jamillah James spoke with Barbara Hammer about a cross section of her work, finding an audience, and the importance of intergenerational collaboration.

Jamillah James: I was looking at the checklist for *Evidentiary Bodies* and I am really excited to see that there is so much material that one wouldn't expect. People are very familiar with you as a filmmaker, but to go into the archive and to introduce so many of the things that aren't moving images—the collages, paintings, drawings, and a whole bunch of other things begs the question, and I'm sure you've been asked this before, where did it start for you? Was it moving image or was more traditional forms?

Barbara Hammer: It started way back when I just wasn't happy being kind of an alternative housewife. I was gender identified in a way that had no adventure to it. It was fixed. At that point I started reading the biographies of artists—Van Gogh and other artists who really broke tradition. I thought, this is for me; this is what I can do. So, I got on my motorcycle, went to Sonoma State and took some classes with Bill Morehouse. He influenced me a lot. It was painting that I started with originally. He brought in a woman on a motorcycle to be our model and she ~~'s~~ drove it right into the classroom. When he

told us she was coming, I built a huge canvas and I put it right up by her and I just went to town. I put on three legs and three arms. I had never seen Duchamp! Then Bill said to me, “you're more interested in movement than you are in paint on canvas.” So he brought in some clear 16m film leader without images and I began painting on it and projecting that onto a canvas. It was so exciting because I made the canvas move.

When I ended up at San Francisco State for my Masters degree in film and saw that there were no women filmmakers in my film history class until we got to Maya Deren, I ~~then~~ knew I should continue primarily in film. But you know, it was never only the moving image. It was the love of ~~the~~ abstraction, of color, of movement and then of representation—and lesbian representation in particular because that was nowhere to be found. I never saw anybody self identified as a lesbian director. I knew I must make moving images just to fill that hole and get the conversation going. ~~That's kind of the story in a nutshell.~~

JJ: I was a film student for a short while when I started school in the late 90s and it was really shocking that feminist or female filmmakers weren't really part of the curriculum until I enrolled in a media studies class my second semester at Emerson College. There we were able to verge into other territories, with works made by

people of color, women, queer folks. It's kind of odd that we have to take electives in order to learn the totality of moving image history.

So, I was just in Venice and I was very pleasantly surprised to see *Sanctus* (1990) in person in the *Intuition* show at Palazzo Fortuny. I was really taken by the style of it, its composition and progression. How does *Sanctus* compare to other works of yours that were made around that time?

BH: One of the things that I liked as a craft was the optical printer. The optical printer gave me a chance to be a painter with film, where I could compose every frame just the way I wanted. A lot of my work at that time, like *Endangered* (1988) was about the fragility of life on the planet and that of the experimental filmmaker whose demise I fear, as film as a medium has faded from the environment. *Sanctus* followed that film. *Optic Nerve* (1985) was before it. At the time, my grandmother was in a nursing home. I was teaching in Chicago. I didn't know people, so I would come home and work. I'd set out about ten rolls of S8mm film shot in the nursing home. When I used the optical printer, I was trying to bring emotion into structural filmmaking ~~and art~~, which at that time, left out the heart—left out personality, feelings, and relationships.

With *Sanctus*, the radiation that was used to make the image was killing the subject. This was my dilemma because first off, I thought, do I want to put a little tick tock at the bottom showing how much radiation each person is getting? I wanted the audience to be conscious of how little we know about new medical technologies. But to put a graph marking the amount of radiation know about medicine early on as discoveries are made. I decided, was no, that's too dogmatic and directs the audience too much. I want the audience to be involved and come to these thoughts on their own. Today But when I talked to people afterward the screenings, really only about 50% of the audience is aware of the danger that is entailed in getting the images. The other 50% just think remember the film is it's beautiful. Jamillah, That continues to be the question with that film. How did you perceive it? Did you start thinking about how those images were made?

JJ: I was spellbound by it and trying to puzzle over how it could have been possible to make. But also a little concerned about the x-ray exposure. There was this kind of ominousness to it. I did not have a full awareness of the technology or an understanding of the methods that were being used to make those images possible. That's why I'm a curator and not one of those magical artist types.

Could you talk a little bit about the early critical reception around your work?

BH: One of the very first screenings I had, right after I divorced my husband was with a group of lesbians. And the women walked out.

JJ: Wow.

BH: Yeah. And the only two that were left were a couple that became my friends. I didn't understand why that was happening. They said there were men in my film and **the women who left** ~~that women~~ objected to that. The reason why they had stayed was because they had a boy child. They had a little girl and a little boy. So that was my very first kind of awakening **to community critique.**

Eventually, when I started traveling with my films, people would ask, “do you want to have a women's only audience? Or you want to have a mixed audience?” I would say it's up to the community. You decide; you know your audience. I don't. So sometimes it would be women only. One time I was in Vienna and they had two shows, one for women only and one for a mixed audience. My film *Multiple Orgasm* (1976) came on **during the mixed** ~~the~~ **screening** and there was a very nice, large projection of female genitalia, the clitoris, getting aroused. A man yelled out “AHHHHHHHHH!”

Both: [laughter]

BH: I don't know if he had never seen it or if he thought it was going to swallow him. But the women in the audience said, "if you don't like it, leave!" I then made ~~So, then I made the this~~ film *Audience* in 1982 which was about all these mixed reactions that I was getting.

You know, it was hard to get shows outside of the lesbian community until 1975 when I got a phone call from a man named Terry Cannon in Los Angeles, ~~director of with the~~ Film Forum in Pasadena. He said, "Barbara, we want you to come down and show your films." This was the very first invitation outside of the lesbian community. ~~And they paid me! As well as with Creative Capital, when I got a check from them, I photographed that one—whatever they paid me.~~ That was a big deal for me to be paid for my work outside my community and outside ~~the my~~ location where I lived. And the ~~films y~~ were well received which was a surprise!

JJ: I'm thinking about some of the recent controversies emerging about who gets to speak for whom, who should be the audience, and this idea of making work for a specific audience. A lot of progress has been made so that we are able to have a wide array of artists, audiences, ideas, and perspectives represented in the

institution and in galleries and so forth. As a curator, I'm terrified of the notion of going backwards and narrowing what is available to be shown in an institutional setting. So, I'm glad that there was an embrace early on and that you were able to find a broader audience.

BH: It's a very interesting discussion that's going on right now and similar in many ways. To tell someone they can't make work **of a subject, theme or style** will just **promote** ~~erupt into an outpouring an explosion and that work will be made regardless~~ **of work that addresses the censorship.** But you can also critique it. Look at a man [Abdellatif Kechiche] making a lesbian film—*Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) is an example. I saw the film in a press screening and thought, “wow, this sex scene is going on and on.” And it's not reading true to me. *Go Fish* (1994) rang true where the couple going out on the blind date cut their fingernails before they meet. ~~each other because~~ **T**his is cultural coding. This is something that only lesbians or somebody who had at least been inside the community would know. ~~So, then~~ **L**ater I find out ~~Kerchiche~~ the director for *Blue*, had actually put “cod fishes,” pubic merkins on the women—they were actually wearing plastic vaginas, so to speak. And **it is reported by the acots** he was ~~kept~~ **pteping** ~~the m women~~ under hot lights as he shot and shot that scene. So, work can be made by anybody but it can be critiqued by all of us, and ~~even~~ within our own

communities ~~as well.~~ ~~The groundbreaking-~~ Donna Deitch made *Desert Hearts* (1986), a breakthrough lesbian film because it was a ~~feature~~ narrative. Nobody had that kind of money—or the get-up-and-go to find it. ~~But Donna did it!~~ I'm happy she was able to break into dominant cinema, ~~but my~~ ~~I have a critique~~ ~~is that~~ of it: she shot the sex scene from the doorway ~~of the bedroom.. just about.~~ This ~~is was~~ an intimate experience, it should be an intimate camera. We can all critique each other. We can all make work. We just ~~need to~~ have the open dialogue about it.

JJ: Let's talk about looking forward and looking backwards at the same time and the relationship that you have with younger artists who are in your orbit, the notion of queer genealogy and kinship between generations.

BH: I ~~am was~~ a part of the organization Queer|Arts- in New York City ~~here,~~ which is a[n artist] mentorship organization. I was the first mentor for film and moving image ~~ten years ago,~~ and ~~this year~~ I ~~recently~~ set up the Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking a grant that is going to run continuously (forever, I hope). ~~for an experimental lesbian filmmaker. She doesn't have to be emerging, or be born female, or lesbian in consciousness, if one can use those old words.~~ I so strongly believe in sharing and passing on. Part of that is

because I didn't have many people to receive from. **For me there** ~~On my end there was a missing an empty~~ **fore**mother. ~~, somebody who wasn't there.~~ I love working intergenerationally! I love youth and I love age. I can't imagine living in a world where we didn't **interact with one another.** ~~talk to each other.~~