

BARBARA HAMMER IN NEW YORK, JULY 2017.
PHOTOS: [JACQUELINE HARRIET](#).

This summer, during group shows and ahead of fall exhibition openings, we're visiting New York-based artists in their studios.

There is a certain glibness in calling someone a legend, but if there's any artist worthy of the title it's Barbara Hammer, whose nearly 50-year career has spanned disciplines and broken boundaries, but has focused most especially on moving images. At 78, she is considered a pioneer of queer experimental film—a field that hardly existed when Hammer began making work, and one that she has in large part defined herself. Her works—which also include photography, collages, drawings, and installations—explore the female experience, from the taboo (menstruation, orgasms, lesbian sexuality, cancer) to the less taboo (homes, nature, history).

Hammer was raised in Hollywood, California. It wasn't until her early thirties that she left her husband, came out as lesbian, and, inspired by the experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, began making short, scintillating films of her own. One of her earliest, 1974's *Dyketactics*, which features Hammer having sex with her friend, is widely considered the first film made by an out lesbian. It also announced Hammer as an artist ahead of her time. Since moving to New York, Hammer has made over 80 films, held retrospectives at MoMa and the Tate Modern, and traveled the world with her art. This fall, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York will stage “Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies,” a career-spanning retrospective of her work, including previously unseen material from her archive.

This summer, ahead of the Leslie-Lohman show, *Interview* spoke with Hammer about the places she lives, the art she makes, and what it takes to fill, as she calls it, the blank screen.

- 1 Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones on Overnight Fame: “They Were Pointing and Laughing at Me!”
- 2 Sia and Eddie Benjamin Discuss Writing Hits and the Harry Styles Effect
- 3 Ask a Sane Person: Naomi Klein Is Not Ready to Give Up the Fight
- 4 Samara Weaving Talks to Patti LuPone About the Dirty Business of Hollywood
- 5 “It’s Okay to Not Be Okay”: Shailene Woodley and Sebastian Stan Catch Up in Quarantine

[View Full Images](#)

MATT MULLEN: I know you believe strongly that the spaces in which we live and work influence the art that we make. To begin, can you describe your studio space here in the city?

BARBARA HAMMER: This is the third studio/live-in workspace that I've had in Westbeth after I moved here in the early '90s—that was after being on the waitlist for seven years and sleeping on couches. I've moved up in the world; I went from the first floor across from a bar up to a Hudson River view on the ninth floor, with around 750 square feet, divided into two levels with a sculpted, raised ceiling and with a wonderful built-in loft bed. When you get up in the morning and you look out the two windows you see the water, and it feels like you're in a ship. The working space is pretty cleared out right now because the art transporters are coming Wednesday to pick up the installations and the artwork that's going to the Leslie-Lohman Museum. Every time it gets cleared out, I make new work, because I feel free again. So as soon as the art goes I'm going to see where my creative urges take me. I think they're going to go towards painting.

MULLEN: Why painting?

HAMMER: I was given these designer colors for ink pens a long time ago and I haven't used them, and I have some handmade paper, and I just have the desire to drip on wet paper. It reminds me of when I was seven years old and had my tonsils out, and one of the first artworks I made was on toilet paper with a colored pencil; it was sort of half paint and half colored pencil. But I got very involved with color and absorption and I think, you know, '78 is a good time to go back to the beginning.

MULLEN: Is it important to live in the same space where you make work?

HAMMER: Actually, not necessarily. My spouse is six blocks away, so I spend evenings there. I like opening the door to my workspace in the morning.

MULLEN: You also have a house upstate, right?

HAMMER: We do. It's in Kerhonkson, which is a rural area south of Woodstock, by about 40 minutes. It's for sale right now because it's a lot of work for two women.

Oh, but it's fabulous. It's three stories, and the first floor is an editing space because it's the coolest space in the house. So in the summers I often take my editing equipment there and work. The second level is the main living level and the kitchen is beautiful and spacious, and the living room has a curved roof so that the boards that support the ceiling and the window are shaped as if they were a bow of a boat. There's a glassed-in section that looks out at two and a half acres of mostly landscaped land that's got rocks and oak trees to hide you from the road, and a small 110-year-old cabin, which is used as a guesthouse. The top floor is a large bedroom with a very high ceiling. That leads to a study room, which juts out over the yard.

- 1 Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones on Overnight Fame: “They Were Pointing and Laughing at Me!”
- 2 Sia and Eddie Benjamin Discuss Writing Hits and the Harry Styles Effect
- 3 Ask a Sane Person: Naomi Klein Is Not Ready to Give Up the Fight
- 4 Samara Weaving Talks to Patti LuPone About the Dirty Business of Hollywood
- 5 “It’s Okay to Not Be Okay”: Shailene Woodley and Sebastian Stan Catch Up in Quarantine

[View Full Images](#)

MULLEN: You grew up and went to school in California; what brought you to New York and why have you stayed east?

HAMMER: After I first started making work I discovered that the critique I was looking for was really on the East Coast. That’s where the avant-garde work was, and that’s where I wanted my work to be. I thought my work was broader than film. It included performance and installation and painting and photography. In New York I could go to Chelsea or the East Village or Williamsburg and see work that would challenge me. And I’d walk into the gallery and maybe I wouldn’t know what was going on and what the artist’s intention was, but that’s what I liked. I don’t like being fed work that’s easy and familiar.

MULLEN: That leads right into the retrospective you have coming up at Leslie-Lohman. To start, how did this come together? Why did now feel like the right time?

HAMMER: A board member invited me to breakfast and said, “How would you like to be the first living lesbian to have a retrospective at Leslie-Lohman?” Of course I said yes, I’m behind the politics of that. So I signed up for it and in the meantime, because that was a few years ago, a new director was hired, Gonzalo Casals, who brought diversity in terms of ethnicity to the museum, and was receptive in a big way to the exhibition, in supporting the book publication and exhibition catalog/monograph. I’m working with these two wonderful curators, Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis, who have gone into the depths of my work and pulled out things that I didn’t think a typical retrospective would show.

MULLEN: Like what?

HAMMER: Well, some of it is difficult work—for example, they are re-creating part of an eight-monitor installation on breast cancer that has breast models on pedestals with an LED screen. When you touch the breast model and find what feels like a cancer node, the television screen turns on and you hear a cancer detection story by a woman, maybe a homeless woman, a woman of color, a lesbian woman, a deaf woman. It's a very diverse group of eight, and the piece is called *Eight in Eight*. Another one is called *Pond and Waterfall*. You watch the moving image of a girl soaking in water that moves down over a waterfall and into the ocean. While you are watching, the soundtrack is made by your body's fluids, because you put on a stethoscope. Those are some of the things they've uncovered, and it's really going to give me an opportunity to be more fully understood. That's why I make work—to start a communication with the world.

MULLEN: In excavating your past work, did you discover anything surprising?

HAMMER: Several things. One is a huge box of my Super 8 material, including some of my first films, all from '68. Many of them are really experimental and anticipate what I did with optical prints in the '80s, with color light play, and shooting abstractly through filters, like the cut edge of glass that was shattered. It wouldn't even be an image, but it would shatter the light. Another early film I found is called *The Death of a Marriage*. In there I have a dress model that I picked up from an old department store that I had painted all these different colors on, and I had my ex-husband making love to it. Then there's a selfie shot of me in a cowboy hat; the camera is below looking up at me and I'm making grotesque faces. That one shocked me.

- 1 Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones on Overnight Fame: “They Were Pointing and Laughing at Me!”
- 2 Sia and Eddie Benjamin Discuss Writing Hits and the Harry Styles Effect
- 3 Ask a Sane Person: Naomi Klein Is Not Ready to Give Up the Fight
- 4 Samara Weaving Talks to Patti LuPone About the Dirty Business of Hollywood
- 5 “It’s Okay to Not Be Okay”: Shailene Woodley and Sebastian Stan Catch Up in Quarantine

[View Full Images](#)

MULLEN: Do you work on one project at a time? Or do you dabble?

HAMMER: Pretty much one thing a time. I can’t take on more than one thing and do them justice. But there are things here and there—like painting!

MULLEN: For your films, what is your research process like?

HAMMER: There's lots of reading, of course. Interviewing people. Getting permission to shoot them—oh my God, is that hard. Some people won't sign the release after you set up everything for an interview. People will say, "You shouldn't be making this film." To go into the Alice Austen archives over on Staten Island and find some of the letters missing, or hear that the board was taking the lesbian material home and trying to destroy it... It's an adventure.

MULLEN: How much are you thinking about posterity when you make work?

HAMMER: Oh, I have thought about posterity all my life. And in fact sometimes I think, "Why am I still doing this? Why didn't I do more fly fishing or horseback riding?" There isn't as much adventure and creative unfolding as there is in planting a garden and watching it grow. It's like watching the film grow, because you don't know what the seed of an idea is going to actually result in. When I was young and couldn't find any lesbian artists—and in fact there wasn't even any women's work being shown at the school where I was studying—I knew there was a blank screen, as I've often said, that I could fill or at least begin to fill. And I could give inspiration to others to fill it.

"BARBARA HAMMER: EVIDENTIARY BODIES" WILL BE ON VIEW AT THE LESLIE-LOHMAN MUSEUM OF GAY AND LESBIAN ART IN NEW YORK FROM OCTOBER 7, 2017 THROUGH JANUARY 29, 2018.