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The Fearless, Vital Voice of Barbara Hammer

Posted on [January 7, 2019](#) by [Michaela Owens](#)



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Barbara Hammer

An iconoclastic talent, Barbara Hammer has been leaving her mark on cinema for over five decades. The author of numerous thought-provoking, audacious works, Hammer has received many awards and honors, while also breaking barriers with her exploration of such topics as lesbianism, aging, the female body, and mainstream portrayals of women and homosexuality. Later this month, IU Cinema and IU Libraries Moving Image Archive will be celebrating this exceptional pioneer of queer cinema with the film series Barbara Hammer: Boundless.

To further learn about Hammer's career and why she is still an important filmmaker to this day, I interviewed Carmel Curtis, a Film Digitization Specialist from the Moving Image Archive and one of the programmers of the series.

CC: Barbara's moving image works are difficult to put into any one singular category. Her work is consistently multifaceted and not at all straight forward (no pun intended). Experimental, documentary, abstract, avant-garde, community based, personal, comedic, historic, visual, textile, queer...just to use a handful of descriptors!

With a filmography of over 100 works made over 50 years, Barbara's style is unique. In many ways, she really created her own path. For inspiration she looked not only to filmmakers, but to painters, poets, photographers, and activists.

When I think about Barbara's work, one of the first things that comes to mind is presence. Barbara's moving image work makes visible what is underrepresented on screen—whether that is lesbian sexuality, female companionship, intergenerational friendship, female shellfish divers in Korea, lesbians in post-apartheid South Africa, or the personal realities of living with cancer for over a decade—Barbara's films and videos are championing the underrepresented.



MO: How did you first discover Hammer?

CC: I can't say with 100% certainty, but pretty sure it was in middle school when I saw my first Hammer short. I was in the Gay Straight Alliance in my school and sometimes we would watch movies—*But I'm a Cheerleader*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, things like that. One time we watched a compilation

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In college, I studied film history/theory and to be honest I can't remember if we watched her films in class or if I just sought them out myself. Definitely after college, I rented her films from video stores and libraries.

In 2017, I co-curated, along with Staci Bu Shea, [a retrospective of Barbara's films and artwork](#) that was held at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay & Lesbian Art in NYC. In the two years of preparation for this retrospective, I watched pretty much all of Barbara's films and videos! I know, I'm so lucky!

MO: Hammer has frequently been called the first openly lesbian American filmmaker, and her films have worked to make LGBTQ representation more visible. What do you think her legacy has been? What is it about her work that is still relevant or striking today?

CC: Barbara's legacy is continuous—it is still being built and shaped. I can't imagine that that will ever stop. Barbara is known most as a filmmaker (with a filmography of over 100 works), but she also is an extensive writer and visual artist—working with photography, paint, collage, you name it. Her paper archive (now held at [the Beinecke Library at Yale](#)) contains writings, costumes, drawings, journals, and so much more. There are endless ways to respond to Barbara's body of work. And she's still working—constantly!

Legacy is an interesting word for me to consider. To be honest, at first, I was resistant to this question. I thought am I being asked this because Barbara is 79 years old and living with ovarian cancer? I thought, why ask about Barbara's legacy when she's still actively making work? I thought, do older male filmmakers who are still working get asked about their legacy?

Then I questioned my own hesitation. Why does legacy have to be fixed or imply completeness? Why do we typically consider the legacy of someone only after they've died? Legacy is about a lasting impact. Barbara's living legacy for me is about friendship, confidence, curiosity, and a refusal to accept the status quo.

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MO: Are there any Barbara Hammer films that aren't being shown that you would recommend people seek out?

CC: The [Academy Film Archive](#) and [Electronic Arts Intermix](#) have been doing incredible work to restore and preserve a number of Barbara's films and videos. These efforts will enable a new kind of access. A number of the works that we're showing at IU are rarely screened pieces. *Pictures 4 Barbara* is one of the few that I myself have never seen!

MO: Hammer's taboo-breaking style and subject matters have labelled her as a bold, provocative artist. What could today's filmmakers learn from her?

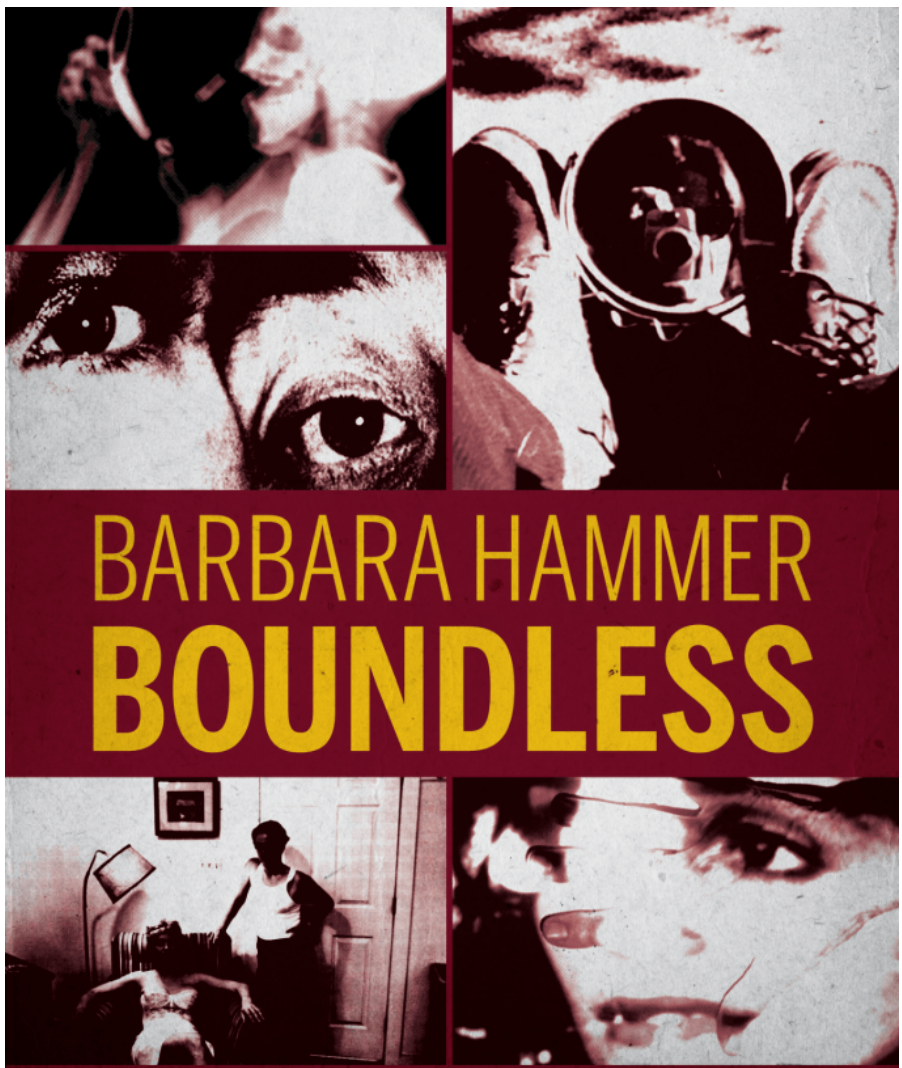
CC: Barbara is a filmmaker of today—very much so! For over 50 years, more than half a century, Barbara has been making films and videos! One of the pieces that will show on Friday, January 18th, *Evidentiary Bodies*, was made in 2018.

I'm not a filmmaker, so I don't know how to speak to what filmmakers could learn, but what I think people can learn from Barbara and her art is to be open to ones' surroundings, to listen and trust yourself, but to also be open to feedback, to be flexible and adaptable, to be respectful of the people and environment around you, and to say "yes!"



IU

with a shorts program entitled "The Beginning." This screening is free, but reservations are required and can be made [here](#). The series will continue at IU Cinema on January 17 with another shorts program called "[The Middle](#)," which will be followed by a post-screening, live-streaming Q&A with Barbara Hammer herself. The series will then conclude on January 18 with [History Lessons and Evidentiary Bodies](#).



BARBARA HAMMER BOUNDLESS

Born in 1939 in Hollywood, Calif., legendary filmmaker and artist Barbara Hammer has been making works since the late 1960s that explore lesbian subjectivity and sexuality, politics and representation, and visceral manifestations of pleasure and discomfort. Often using the camera as an extension of her body to see, touch, and explore, Hammer's oeuvre is evidence of a hybrid approach to film and video making that is simultaneously rooted in experimentation with the medium as well as experiments with representations of oneself. Positioning herself in front of and behind the camera, Hammer uses the process of media making as way to create and cultivate alternative spaces in cinema not positioned in patriarchal, Hollywood conventions. Barbara Hammer: Boundless explores five decades of Hammer's work—highlighting themes of desire, feminist community, health and wellness, historical and archival research, and self-representation. These threads consistent throughout Hammer's work point to a pioneering filmography of queer experimentation.

This series is sponsored by Cinema and Media Studies, The Media School, Department of Gender Studies, Center for Documentary Research and Practice, Cultural Studies Program, IU Libraries Moving Image Archive, Department of Art History, and IU Cinema.

Barbara Hammer:
The Beginning* (1968-78)
January 16 - 7 pm

*Screening takes place in the IU Libraries Moving Image Archive Screening Room in the Herman B. Wells Library.

Barbara Hammer:
The Middle (1981-90)
January 17 - 7 pm

Barbara Hammer:
The Never-Ending (2000-18)
January 18 - 7 pm



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Michaela Owens is thrilled to be the editor of A Place for Film. An IU graduate with a BA in Communication and Culture, she is pursuing an MA in Cinema and Media Studies and has also been a volunteer usher at IU Cinema since 2016. She never stops thinking about classic Hollywood, thanks to her mother's introduction to it, and