

# Barbara Hammer, legendary lesbian filmmaker, dies

By **Victoria Brownworth** - March 20, 2019 10:34 pm



Some people are so huge in life they deserve all the adjectives in death. Legendary lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer was one of those people.

Hammer died on March 16 in New York City after a long battle with ovarian cancer. She had been in hospice care.

On Twitter Sunday morning I wrote, "My longtime friend Barbara Hammer has died. She was an extraordinary talent, a brilliant filmmaker, a gutsy, fabulous, radical af, deeply engaged lesbian feminist and I loved her madly for her brave unconquerable self and her larger than life humanity, which impelled all her work.

"I met Barbara thirty years ago through another friend, the late photographer, Tee Corinne. Both of these iconoclastic lesbian artists taught us that there was a gaze that not only was not male, but also was not straight. They showed us the lesbian feminist lens. What vision they had.

"I cannot express strongly enough how much more I was taught to see by Barbara Hammer. The risks she took illumined a world previously unseen. Barbara was a lover, a teacher, an artist and a radical political voice."

I shared a series of photographs of Barbara who was a wiry, cool, butch hipster to the last. One of those photos is of her standing in front of the historic Stonewall Inn, giving two thumbs up, smiling with a rainbow flag in her teeth instead of a rose.

That photo is vintage Barbara Hammer, the things I wrote about her expressive of the impact she had on all around her. She engaged people right away—she never dissembled. She was forthright and funny, a font of information about myriad topics and she was an extraordinarily compelling person and artist whose persona and work challenged one in equal measure.



We use the words iconic and groundbreaking far too freely, but Barbara really was both. There is no other lesbian filmmaker who did the kind of experimental work she did nor who chronicled lesbian and feminist lives the way she did.

Born in Hollywood, Los Angeles May 15, 1939, Hammer's mother wanted her to be the next Shirley Temple. Instead, she became an iconic lesbian filmmaker, making her first film in 1968. She would make 75 short and feature films in her lifetime. In her final years battling ovarian cancer she became an activist for the right to die, which she chronicled in *The Art of Dying*, about what she called "Palliative Art." She was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2013 for her ongoing work in that arena.

Her 1974 film *Dyketactics* is considered by many to be the first out lesbian film and her 1992 feature, *Nitrate Kisses*, an exploration of the repression and marginalization of LGBT people from World War I on, was one of her masterworks. *Nitrate Kisses* was named one of the *100 All-Time Greatest Films by Women* by *Indie Wire*. Hammer was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for *Nitrate Kisses* and she said in interviews that she considered it her best work.

*Nitrate Kisses* was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 1993, and won the Polar Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival. In a 1993 interview with me for *Curve* magazine, Hammer said *Nitrate Kisses* and her work overall was in part about showing lesbian sex through a lesbian lens. In a 2018 interview she said, "I have never separated my sexuality from my art, even if the film has nothing to do with lesbian representation."

That was one of the most radical aspects of Hammer's work.

Yet at least a third of her films were indeed about lesbians and lesbian representation and that set Hammer's work apart. *Superdyke* (1975), *Sappho* (1978),

*The History of the World According to a Lesbian* (1988), *The Female Closet* (1996) *Tender Fictions* (1997) all focused her lesbian gaze on lesbian stories.

Barbara Hammer was featured in Philadelphia filmmaker Judith Redding's book *Film Fatales: Independent Women Directors*. Redding said, "Hammer's early work focused on gender and sexuality, and she became a torchbearer for women filmmakers in general, proving that one woman with a camera could indeed both make films and have

them screened."

Redding, who had worked with Hammer over the years, said, "She was generous with her time and advice, and became a lodestar for experimental filmmakers across the globe. She leaves behind a dense body of work, almost all of it autobiographical, snapshots of the rich fabric of her life."

In conversations with queer filmmakers Pratibha Parmar and Campbell X on March 17, both said that Hammer's lens was iconic in its lesbian gaze and that it was an honor to have known her. Campbell X called Hammer a pioneer, and said, "She was so incredible. So accessible to other filmmakers. So supportive. Great to hang out with. Fun. Loving. Sharing. Gone, but never forgotten. Never ever."

In 2015 Hammer established the Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant. In a statement she said, "It has been the goal of my life to put the lesbian lifestyle on the screen. Why? Because when I started I couldn't find any!"

Hammer is survived by her spouse of 30 years, the human rights activist Florrie Burke. Memorial plans are pending.

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