

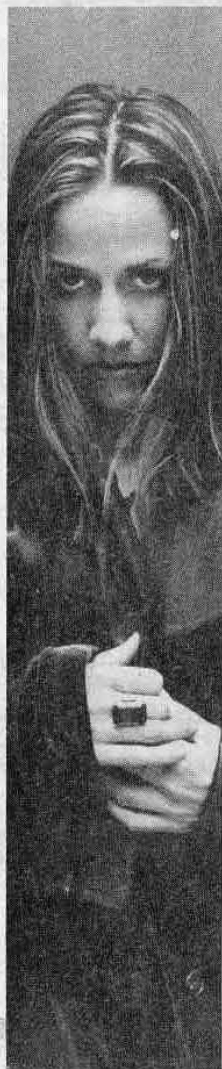
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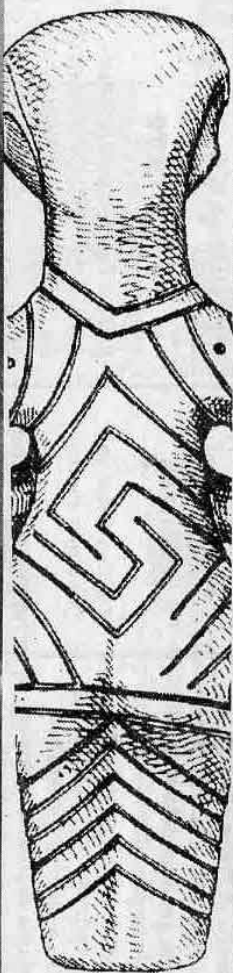
*The Women's Forum*

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## THE ARTS ISSUE!



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BARBARA HAMMER



## FEATURE

# Sharing Tender Fictions: New Work by Lesbian Filmmaker Barbara Hammer

By Christine MacDonald

About midway through Barbara Hammer's 58-minute autobiographical documentary, *Tender Fictions* (1995), she tells us about the first lesbian in her life. The year was 1970 and she was a 30-year-old university professor living near San Francisco, yet she had to ask the meaning of the word. Then, she began to wonder if she was a lesbian. "It sounded real good," she tells us later in her inventive collage of personal statements, family stories, found footage, and dialectics on lesbianism, life, and autobiography.

That same year she declared herself a lesbian and embarked on a career as an experimental filmmaker. The dual identities have intertwined to define her and her pioneering work ever since. In nearly three decades as a filmmaker and a lesbian activist, she has focused on bringing the images, stories, and reflections of a lesbian filmmaker to the "blank screen" she encountered at the beginning of her career.

"It was imperative to me that I begin to contribute to the filling of that blank screen," says Hammer, who has made some 80 films and videos, including the 1992 award-winning documentary film *Nitrate Kisses*. "Little did I know at the time that there would be a wealth of lesbian and queer cinema today!"

Indeed, some narrative films of this genre—*The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* and *Strawberries and Chocolate* to name two—have landed commercial distribution and ended up in cinemas and video rental stores across the country and much of

the world today. Yet *Tender Fictions*, a title which is a tip of the hat to Gertrude Stein and her autobiography *Tender Buttons*, reveals Hammer's roots in the tumultuous 1970s when lines blurred between art and activism. She is as much an activist as an entertainer. Mixing personal stories and experiences with sound bites from lesbian theoretician Sue Ellen Case, she reminds us of the not-so-distant past when the word "lesbian" was introduced into our everyday vocabulary. It is a difficult and multilayered work that makes demands on the viewer as it sets out to create what critics and Hammer herself define as a personal and historic manifest of lesbianism in the United States.

"*Tender Fictions* is really just another part of my entire life work, which is to document a lesbian life in the late twentieth century," says Hammer. "Now, [I document] maturity, to create a record for generations to come. I don't want people to find the blank screen—the invisible screen of lesbian representation—that I found in the late '60s and early '70s."

Jytte Jensen, an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a longtime observer of Hammer's work, calls it "the iconography of being a lesbian in society" and praises Hammer's artistry as both formal and experimental.

"There is something about Barbara and her work; she has so much to say and it is so critical to her. She really needs to say it. This very artistic need



Barbara Hammer (right) as a young girl. Her mother compared her to Shirley Temple.

makes her unique in the field and an inspiration," Jensen continues,

*She has managed to incorporate the experimental and avant-garde elements into work that reaches more mainstream people . . . making it palatable to the audience without compromising what she is saying. She is really trying to construct an alternative history. It's a very tall order and few people still do it.*

As Hammer relates her own tender fictions, this pioneer of lesbian film takes us on a journey through the lens of her own perceptions. It is rich with archival footage and family stories. Many of them come to us second and

third hand, passed on from her suburban housewife mother and Ukrainian grandmother, a gutsy immigrant who arrived in America alone on a steamship at the age of thirteen and eventually worked as a cook for 1930s film star Lillian Gish.

The Hollywood connection seems to have had a serious impact on Hammer and her mother, who tried unsuccessfully to make her precocious daughter into the next Shirley Temple. "Do I fit, Shirley? Do I fit?" asks a grown-up Barbara, as she tries to match her hand over the child-size palm print. The film shows us Hammer's transformation from a would-

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be child star to her straight life as a young married woman, running through a pumpkin patch like a 1960s earth mother, long dark hair streaming across her shoulders and down the back of her simple white frock. Then, she comes into focus in her current form—a 50-something, spiky-haired dyke tap dancing on Shirley Temple's Hollywood star.

The film, which will be shown with a couple of Hammer's visually exquisite and thematically subversive experimental short films at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in February, is Hammer's third and most widely-screened feature. It opened two years ago at the Sundance Film Festival and has since been shown at the International Berlin Film Festival and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Yet the larger and more mainstream audiences and organizers have had mixed reactions to the film, she says. For an artist who thrives on face-to-face discussions with her viewers, Hammer says Sundance organizers "didn't know what to do with a post-modern film that loops, undercuts the narrative line, and challenges the viewer to construct the film her- or himself."

But Hammer explains that a departure from traditional narrative structure was the effect she sought with the film. "I wanted to work with an 'all-over' approach, sort of like a new Sue Williams painting," Hammer says. "The canvas would be covered with autobiographical stories, but they would all be interlinking, circling back on themselves, including historical context and subverting and challenging the notions of 'truth' and 'fiction.'"

Hammer said she reviewed a slew of Super 8 reels dating back to the late 1960s when she was given her first film camera, outtakes from several of her 16 mm movies. Then, she raided the autobiography section of University of California/Berkeley library.

"I found the current concerns for autobiography to focus on the questions of 'what is truth?' 'How does the writer and her remembering influence the recorded record?'" she said of the pro-

cess. By then it was the early 1990s, yet once again, Hammer said, "I found only two essays on lesbian autobiography and neither were about film." So, she set out to fill in a new corner of the "blank screen," breaking new ground once again, this time with lesbian representation of the self.

While her life as a "visible lesbian" has often been rife with personal risks and difficulties, her struggle to make art films on difficult subjects has also been an exercise in perseverance. She can boast an alphabet soup of grants, fellowships, and awards for her work. Yet financing has gone from a difficult to a painful proposition since the earlier 1990s when Hammer was awarded production funds from the National Endowment for the Arts's now-defunct regranteeing bodies, the American Film Institute and the Western Media Regional Film/Video Program, to contribute to *Tender Fictions's* \$27,000 budget.

"That is all gone now and it is a sad, very sad thing," said Hammer. "Now, there are slim pickings and we are all trying for them. I suspect this will give a burst to the short film form again."

As for Hammer, she is currently at work on several projects. They include a feature-length video entitled *The Female Closet*, which will study the construction of lesbian invisibility using the personal lives of photographers Alice Austen and Hannah Hoch. "I am shooting on High 8 video and began by completely using my own money to buy the tape, which isn't expensive. I was lucky to receive a \$10,000 post-production grant from the New York State Council of the Arts, which means I can finish the piece." Hammer is also seeking \$350,000 in financing for a 35-mm dramatic comedy, entitled *Nothing Could be Worse than Two Dykes in Menopause*.

"I like working in the long film format because I can develop a theme in greater depth, and when I meet with the audience after the film we are addressing a current concern," Hammer says. With the shorter pieces, she says she has found it harder to engage the audience

in the same way. "The discussion often seemed to skip along the top of the water like a stone thrown into water at a certain angle," she said.

"The subjects I am choosing now are determining the length and complexity of the work. It is not really an *a priori* decision," she says.

In the course of this interview, which was conducted on line during the first two weeks of the new year, Hammer



Barbara Hammer

wrote enthusiastically about changes in story telling, viewing, and distribution, which is being driven by emerging computer and Internet technologies. She has made her own foray into the emerging new media, establishing a presence on the World Wide Web via the Interactive Lesbian Biography in Cyberspace project, launched by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the art gallery The Lab two years ago. Having just finished *Tender Fictions*, Hammer explains, "[I] was sick of myself . . . I wanted to hear from others." She adds:

*I had been reading about gender theory and ambiguity and thought, what an interesting concept to be a lesbian in cyberspace. "Anyone can be a lesbian! The rigid early feminist ideas*

*were challenged: biological determination was thrown to the wind, [and] an openness for self-naming identity seemed possible.*

*I continue to receive (via e-mail) stories and events, biographies and histories, images and sounds from self-identified lesbians from all over the globe. One of the most touching was a young Korean lesbian who had found the home page and made contact with the first lesbian community she had known.*

*I will be putting up clips from my films and making an extensive database of my own work. I have already seen some mail order for home videotapes of my work from my homepage and I imagine this will grow. The hardest thing is having time to devote to updating the site. I just don't have it right now with my full-time teaching schedule, video documentary production, and the first draft of a narrative film script to rewrite.*

Her Laurie Andersonesque spiky locks have turned gray since she launched her career as a filmmaker 27 years ago, yet Hammer continues to work at a frenetic pace. "It's so sad to have just one life," laments the artist, activist, and filmmaker, who with *Tender Fictions* took her own advice to "construct your own autobiography before someone does it for you." Yet Hammer appears to have a ready store of tender fictions to share with the audience as she pushes on toward the end of her third decade in filmmaking.

*Editor's note: Barbara Hammer's e-mail address is [bjhammer@aol.com](mailto:bjhammer@aol.com). She welcomes correspondence and would also like to hear from people interested in lending a hand or a dollar to her upcoming productions.*

*Tender Fictions will be playing at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on February 20 at 6 p.m. as part of a film series on women's lives. (See calendar.)*

*Christine MacDonald is a Boston-based journalist who frequently writes about the electronic media.*