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## Barbara Hammer

LESLIE-LOHMAN MUSEUM OF GAY AND LESBIAN ART



Barbara Hammer, *Double Strength*, 1978, 16 mm transferred to digital video, color, sound, 14 minutes 38 seconds.

"How are you feeling?" asks the clear, sweet voice, almost certainly from behind a broad smile. I heard the question from across the room just as I was about to touch a silicone model of a breast, my fingers searching for a node that would activate a video on the monitor before me. Barbara Hammer's question was, of course, not directed at me but at the character in *Double Strength*, her 1978 film tracing the arc of a relationship. It was nonetheless apposite, seeming to evoke a doctor/patient relationship as I began my figurative search for a cancerous lump. This iteration of *8 in 8*, a modified installation of the original eight-channel piece from 1994, consists of two breast models and two Sony Trinitrons; instructions direct the visitor to "gently locate a node in breast model. Firmly press down to activate video." In each of eight videos, a woman speaks (or signs) directly to Hammer's camera, telling her personal story of cancer detection. But the viewer quickly realizes that there is nothing gentle about the touch required to turn on the screen. The models themselves had begun to disintegrate, and as I pressed and probed they continued to crumble ever so slightly. This was more likely a consequence of the material's age than of artistic intention, but the implication is powerful: To watch these videos is to have reached inside the body, to have invaded it.

For Hammer, "How are you feeling?" is also "What do you feel?" Throughout her fifty years of filmmaking, she has attempted to endow images with a sense of tactility. Her frequent superimpositions, overexposure, changes in focus, and alternation between analog and digital formats are techniques to frustrate a strictly visual mode and a self-conscious acknowledgment that images are always mediated. At the end of the ten-minute 16-mm film *Sync-Touch*, 1981—her most explicit but by no means only attempt to create a haptic cinema—Hammer carefully repeats in French the theoretical musings of a similarly dressed woman; English subtitles translate the final statement as "The heart of film is the rapport between touch and sight."

Hammer is widely lauded for her celebrations of lesbian sex, for the joy and exuberance behind her portrayals of the naked female body—and rightly so. Her humor, passion, and confidence are all on display in the exhibition at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, from the "Charlene Atlas" collages of 1998 that superimpose her grinning face on the absurd figure of 1930s bodybuilding adman Charles Atlas to *Protegée II*, 1972/2017, a photo of the artist lifting her leg in mimicry while standing behind Rodin's explicit *Iris, Messenger of the Gods*, ca. 1895. As befits a retrospective, early, never-before-shown drawings; photographs and descriptions from decades of performances; several vitrines of ephemera; and recent projects are displayed alongside essential films such as *Double Strength*; *Dyketactics*, 1974; and *Still Point*, 1989. "Evidentiary Bodies" gracefully demonstrates how resolutely Hammer has retained her spirit as an experimental filmmaker over a half century of production; it also offers tangible, and rarely seen, examples of how poignant and how discomfiting looking can feel.

—Rachel Churner