

LASTING EVIDENCE

WOMEN IN THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

RAMONA CURRY

"Lasting Evidence" was the title of the Seventh Annual Women in the Director's Chair film and video festival held in Chicago, IL from March 3-8, a designation that drew attention to the organizers' continued purpose of recognizing women's use of film and video to preserve and support their own and others' experiences and perspectives. This year's festival also gave evidence of its own expansion: 51 films and 46 videotapes directed by women, up from about 65 total in previous years, ran in 28 two-hour thematic programs over six days (expanded from the usual four) at Facets Multimedia, which cosponsored the event with the Center for New Television. While the festival retained its traditional emphasis on documentary work on a range of social and political issues (this year highlighting a Third World Women's film and video program chosen by Indian-born, London-based film curator Parminder Vir), the number of experimental, narrative, and animation films and tapes increased to about a third of the works shown. Attendance by Chicago video and filmmakers as well as by the general public remained high, and the number of directors, producers, distributors, and programmers from New York, Seattle, Toronto, St. Louis, and points in between further attested to the national recognition of the event as a meeting and marketplace for women working in media.

The opening-night reception, which drew about 150 participants, included three shorter narrative films in place of the usual single feature. Like much of the festival this program had a thematic emphasis: the experiences of Jewish women. *Rose and Katz* (1986), produced, directed, and co-written by Ruth Anson, is an engaging comedy about a young boy who, while preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, believes he has been saved by Jesus. His divorced mother must negotiate between him and her orthodox father to maintain family harmony. Despite its traditional premise of woman as buffer zone between men, the 25-minute film succeeds in using humor to register some complexities of motherhood: after initially dismissing the child's religious doubts, the woman concedes, "I'm too much of a Jewish mother to reject you for believing in Jesus!" *Separate Skin* (1987), written and directed by Deirdre Fishel, is a short experimental narrative that explores the deep anxieties and difficulties with intimacy that a daughter of concentration camp survivors experiences. Many viewers found the film stylistically uneven but liked its portrayal of the character's lesbian relationship as a facet of her complex subjectivity.

The third film on the opening-night program, *Louise, the Rebel* (1985), a 98-minute feature directed in France by Charlotte Silvera, elicits empathy for Louise, a Tunisian Jewish adolescent growing up in the early 1960s in France. At home, Louise is subject to her mother's arbitrary discipline and erratic behavior, her father's patriarchal privileges, and exacting religious and economic strictures of which her French classmates seem enviably ignorant. Secretly viewed late-night television introduces Louise both to the twist and the Arab struggle against the French and exacerbates her sense of being an outsider in every context. Louise rebels against the ambivalence and powerlessness of her position in an ongoing battle with her mother, which culminates in



Frame enlargement from *Girtalk* (1987) directed by Kate Davis.

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Su Friedrich's formally and sensually exciting film *Damned If You Don't* (1987) pleased both the avant-garde programmers and the audience. In this work Friedrich creates a filmic discourse on lesbian sexuality and Catholicism that is more highly narrative and playful than most of her previous work. The film establishes two main characters, a young nun (Peggy Healey) and "The Other Woman," as she is listed in the credits (Ela Troyana), who pursues and woos the nun. The film is distinctly postmodern in its construction and approach. Friedrich visually and aurally rewrites and rereads the sexual subtexts of *Black Narcissus* (1947, directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), an Academy Award-winning color film set in a convent in India,¹ by shooting scenes from it in black and white off a television set and recapitulating the plot in humorous voice-over. *Damned If You Don't* further incorporates documentary footage of nuns on the street and a number of beautifully composed shots of sensual animals and environments—a writhing black and white water snake, a white swan gliding on a lake behind the black bars of a fence, an undulating dolphin in the Coney Island aquarium, with the nun standing in the foreground, watching—with an aural recounting and discussion of the testimony in the trial of a seventeenth-century nun accused of lesbianism.² These and other images and sound elements are edited rhythmically and imaginatively in counterpoint to support the sentiment of the song fragment taken from *Black Narcissus*: "I cannot be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure!"

result is a thought-provoking cinematic essay on how women are affected by men's definition and control of public space. *Still Life with Barbie*, a 1986 film by San Francisco filmmaker Barbara Klutinis, is a playful satire that intercuts shots of a 10-year-old girl enacting conventional bourgeois scenarios with Barbie and Ken dolls and their friends, with similar scenes enacted by live adult stand-ins (except for Barbie, who is always represented by a life-sized store mannequin). The 24-minute film is edited as a discourse, with intertitles and a woman's voice-over posing questions and making comments that expose the contradictions between prescribed and actual fantasies and life stages.

June Brides (1987) is a high-energy, fast-paced 10-minute film made in 1987 by Milwaukee, WI artists Cathy Cook and Claudia Looze, reminiscent of, although less disturbing than, Cecelia's Condit's *Possibly in Michigan* (1983) videotape. (Condit, now teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, is credited as a consultant.) The filmmakers themselves don the requisite white bridal gowns to mow the lawn, shop in a supermarket, and appear to marry each other, as the cardboard grooms collapse and most of the guests strip off their drag costumes. *Our Marilyn* (1987), directed by Toronto filmmaker and theorist Brenda Longfellow, juxtaposes optically printed images of Marilyn Monroe with those of Canadian heroine Marilyn Bell, who in September 1954 at age 17 was the first person to swim across Lake Ontario. Titles, progress reports on the swim, and voice-over recollections by a speaker who says that she was named for "our," i.e., the Canadian Marilyn, augment an aural discourse on the differing fates of Monroe and Bell. Longfellow's film manages to reflect on United States cultural imperialism, nostalgia, the star phenomenon, and the representation of women; at the same time it exposes the arbitrariness of the sign, in this case "Marilyn."

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The festival also featured a number of experimental videotapes, notably by an active group of Chicago-based video artists. Cyndi Moran's *Home Movies 1938-1976* (1987) is a three-minute tape that explores the archaeology of family mementos without sentimentality, as the owner of a resale shop discusses how she feels about selling old pictures of strangers, in a voice-over counterpoint to re-edited, found home-movie footage of a family that has died out. Kapra Fleming's *First Kiss* (1986) also plays with disembodied voice-over, as diverse women's and men's confessions of their first sexual memory or experience fall gradually out of synch with the silhouetted backs of heads to which they initially seemed correlated. Annette Barbier's 1987 tape *Table of Silence* draws on an installation piece of the same title shown in the "Making Waves" exhibition in 1986 at the Noyes Art Center in Evanston, IL, in which four monitors faced each other across a table, each showing one of the artist's older family members eating. The edited tape casts the viewer even more emphatically as a voyeur of the familial intimacy of food and gradual physical decay. Barbier introduces each of the four family members with handwritten titles as they munch loudly without speaking in successive close-up. In subsequent sections, set off by titles and accompanied variously by phone messages about meals and synthesized music, Barbier layers the faces and then shows the images gradually, graphically eaten away by an ac-