

# BAY AREA REPORTER

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## F I L M



Su Friedrich retraces familial relationships in her new film *Sink or Swim*.

## Intelligence, Grace and Visual Power

by Warren Sonbert

Su Friedrich's latest opus, *Sink or Swim*, is a black-and-white 40-odd minute film that details in unconventional imagery her elusive relationship to her father. Told with a grainy, gritty palette composed of hand-held footage, home movies, found film and TV sitcoms from the '50s, and narrated in a monochromatic delivery by an artless little girl (whom we never see), the work has the intelligence, grace and visual power to sustain its probing subject.

Feminist Friedrich traces the split-up of a nuclear family and the consequent enfeeblement of women's power that that entails. An engaging, offhand meticulousness is the cornerstone of her strategy: The recited prose track never quite coincides fully with the visual text, though there is a close enough relationship between image and word to keep the viewer alert and intrigued by the alternate disparities and fusions. The sustained whole is disconcertingly haunting.

Lesbian pornography dovetails into clips from *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best* and *Make Room for Daddy* in an exploration — which Friedrich develops in different directions aurally and visually — of the variety of attitudes toward women's roles in American society. No easy, soft irony is

at work to make the connections more obvious or less rigorous.

A Schubert song and occasional silence are welcome relief from the narration, which though candid and "unactor-like" has a cumulative monotony that undercuts too much the more resonant images.

### Astute Investigation

*Sink or Swim* is a deft, astute and accomplished investigation of familiar relationships, all the while managing to maintain a tentative tenacity as it gropes with the uncertain. Much of the the film's uniqueness and stature derives from Friedrich's ability to hold the balance between assured reason and openness toward what is to be discovered.

*Sink or Swim* unfolds with almost scientific precision that ascends into poetry. Those concerned with current cinematic exploration will not want to miss what is easily one of the best independent works of recent vintage.

*Editor's note:* *Sink or Swim* screens with *Ann Robertson's Apologies* at a Feb. 7, 8 p.m., San Francisco Cinematheque presentation at the S.F. Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St. Tickets are \$5 general, \$3 for students, seniors, the disabled and Cinematheque members. For additional information, phone 558-8129. ▼