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From the Ground Up

by Chris Neilson

A viewer of *From the Ground Up* might be surprised to learn that this documentary following coffee from plant to cup was made by experimental American filmmaker Su Friedrich who is best known for her avant-garde films about sexual identity and politics. As director, cinematographer, and image and sound editor, Friedrich displays a nuanced approach to her subject. Where a careless viewer might come away thinking *From the Ground Up* is viewpoint-free observational documentary, a careful viewer will be rewarded by the subtlety of Friedrich's style: only the slightest of pauses on the face of a child agricultural laborer or on a coffee plantation owner's exquisite hand-tooled leather saddle, or the marriage of images of crude shanties with the airiest of jingles, hint that Friedrich is appalled with what she's seeing and thinks we should be too.

From the Ground Up begins on a hillside on a Guatemalan coffee plantation. Men, women, and children work side by side picking coffee beans and filling large sacks from early morning to early evening. Children as young as six, not officially on the payroll, help their parents fulfill their 100 pound daily quota for which the picker receives \$3 a day.

Back from the fields, the foreman shows Friedrich how the coffee is processed to separate the bean from the pulp. She then follows the coffee from plantation to warehouse where the coffee is assessed for quality and then sold into the international market. But, before picking up the story upon its entry into an American port, Friedrich stops off at an urban Guatemalan grocery store where her camera scans coffee section. Ironically, the Guatemalan grocer's coffee selection appears identical to that of a mid-market American grocer's, Folgers Instant and Ground predominate, followed by Nestlé, Maxwell House, Sanka and a host of other brands likely all exported from Guatemala, roasted and packed elsewhere, and then imported back into Guatemala for sale.

Once stateside, Friedrich catches up with the coffee at the offices of Balzac Bros., a white-shoe, third-generation coffee importing firm in Charleston, South Carolina. The firm's owners and sales staff are urbane businessmen steeped in the jargon of their trade. Friedrich's camera records a tasting provided to a couple of new clients, young owners of a coffee house and micro-roaster, who settle on a stock and take delivery all the same day.

Friedrich heads next to her home town, New York City, to a large commercial roaster, Vassilaros & Sons, that supplies the city's ubiquitous push carts. From roaster, to push cart, to Manhattan office worker Friedrich follows the coffee completing the grower to consumer cycle for coffee.