

## **Friedrich on Friedrich**

### **Excerpts from an interview with experimental filmmaker Su Friedrich by Shari Kizirian**

*Since Su Friedrich invited us into her dreams with 1982's Gently Down the Stream, the New York-based filmmaker has been offering up celluloid pieces of her life for contemplation. We got to know her mother in The Ties That Bind (1984) and her father in Sink or Swim (1990). She revealed the obsessive-compulsive thought-patterns that vexed her after a breakup in Rules of the Road (1993) and portrayed her take on growing up lesbian in her ITVS-funded Hide and Seek (1996).*

*In her latest film, The Odds of Recovery, which premieres in San Francisco at the MadCat Women's International Film Festival in September, Friedrich takes us on an intimate journey through her many health crises, sharing her struggles with knee surgery and a hormone imbalance, as well as her attempts at creating her own recovery. She weaves video footage shot clandestinely in examination rooms with 16mm film of her urban garden, an embroidery project designed specifically for the film, the preparation of a shrimp curry dinner, and many other elements, including a series of intertitles elucidating the wisdom of t'ai chi.*

*Taking time out from her summer holiday in Berlin, Friedrich graciously answered many questions about her new film, digital technologies, and the state of arts funding as well as offered insight into everything from the mainstreaming of gay culture to the importance of eating right. Here are some excerpts from that interview.*

#### **The Odds of Recovery: Genesis**

In 1997 I finished a big project, *Hide and Seek*, which had taken three-and-a-half years to make. While working on it, I came across a book that I wanted to adapt, but someone else got the option before me (and six years later, the film still hasn't been made). So, I started making a short film using all my old black and white outtakes and a kora song from Mali that had always intrigued me. But it was a disaster and I eventually threw it away. During that time my partner gave me a Hi-8 camera for Christmas to use as a sketchbook because I didn't have money to shoot film and she saw that I was going nuts. Getting that camera was one of the instigators for making *The Odds of Recovery*, as was the fact that I was experiencing new medical problems.

My work has most often grown out of my own life, either the present or the past, so I guess I first acknowledged that I often had medical problems and would have to do more to prevent them from recurring. I then thought I might be able to make the situation better if I studied it closely in the process of making a film about it. When I announced this decision to my partner, she regretted giving me the camera. She thought I was already too immersed in my maladies and that spending another two, three, or four years making a film about it would just immerse me further. Part of me knew that she was right (she usually is), but the part of me that was desperate to find a new

subject got the upper hand and I started shooting. In hindsight, I might have found a different topic if I'd been patient, but patience is not my strong suit.

### **At the Doctors'**

It was imperative to have footage of myself at the doctors' offices, so I took my Hi-8 camera with me to every visit. They always usher you into the examination room, tell you to change, and then make you wait for twenty or thirty minutes, so I had ample time to study the room and figure out the optimal place for the camera. I disabled the little red light that indicates the camera is running, put it in an inconspicuous place, and then hoped the doctors wouldn't notice it until afterwards. They usually didn't until the visit was over, then we would chat about it. I'd play the role I've learned to play over the years when I want to shoot in an unacceptable situation: the innocent girlish role, "Oh, it's just li'l ole me and my silly little camera." It usually works. Quite surprisingly, it worked this time as well.

Thankfully, I got signed releases from all of them, which I knew I would need and was afraid I wouldn't get. In most cases I had a prior relationship to the doctor, so I suppose they trusted that I wasn't trying to get evidence for a malpractice suit.

This explains the nature of my footage in two respects. In the first place, I caught a few damning moments on camera (which is why I didn't list any doctors by name in the credits), something I never could have gotten if it was staged, and probably would not have gotten if they'd been aware of the camera from the outset.

Secondly, the framing, if it can even be called by such a deliberate name, is totally wacky—I'm on the edge of the frame, or no one is there, or the doctor stands in front of the lens and almost blocks the whole image. I suspected that would happen and was fine with it when I saw the footage. It's not as if I didn't consider what would be in the frame when I placed the camera, but I could never predict where the doctor or I would end up. Moreover, I was more concerned with getting a clear audio signal, and in most cases, the camera delivered.

It was also interesting for me, as someone who's shot virtually all my own footage for twenty-five years, to work with images that I'd shot but not chosen how to shoot—to be freed from my own instinctive and perhaps too familiar way of framing.

### **In the Garden**

When I told a filmmaker friend about the project, she said, incredulously, "You're going to equate women with nature?" I hadn't considered that it would be seen in that way. I felt I was no different than a man in terms of the experiences I'd been having with doctors. Well, maybe slightly different, but not to the extent that I planned to make a case for how the medical establishment deals unequally with the sexes—which they of course do. I also thought that men as well as women have found meaning and pleasure in gardening. So I most definitely did not want to make that equation.

Metaphors can and will be drawn (and were sometimes deliberately drawn by me) between an event in the garden and one in my body. I think that's unavoidable and valid, but I also mean for the act of gardening to be taken on its own terms: for it to be seen as a necessary and delightful and interesting human activity, not just a repository for romantic analogies with the female body. Men have been doing that for ages; I'm not.

### **Healing Through Embroidery**

I learned how to do embroidery from my mother, and all my life, in a scattershot fashion, I've done embroidery, quilting, crocheting, sewing, etc. While the act of it is similar to the stitching up of a body, that wasn't my first reason for using it in the film. I made a lot of pillows as a child that had floral patterns—that's a typical element in traditional embroidery design—so it came to mind as I became more involved with the garden. However, I do like the analogy between the two kinds of stitching. The labor of doing it was significant for me and for the film. Here I was, with a long and complicated medical history, and if I really wanted, once and for all, to know in every fiber of my being how profound and wearying and affecting it all was, how better to know that than to devote countless hours to inscribing it through an embroidery?

### **Intertitles: Creating a Narrative**

Intertitles/text have often played a part in my films, but I've never used them to the extent that I do in *The Odds of Recovery*. When I edited in film on something like *Sink or Swim*, it was necessary to plan ahead, since I had to create and shoot all the text before editing. In editing *The Odds of Recovery* on Final Cut Pro, the situation was utterly different because I could create and change text constantly without any physical effort. Obviously, there was labor involved in thinking about how they would read/be composed, but making them was effortless.

When I started editing *Recovery*, I had no idea how to structure the film. That's always been my experience—I have a vague notion of what should come before what, but in putting things together everything changes a thousand and one times. In this case, I had so much footage and no written text/voiceover to lead me, so I began by creating short segments centered around the various visits to doctors, interspersed with scenes of me gardening and doing t'ai chi, but at some point I recognized the need for a narrative line, so I started making intertitles.

I wondered whether it would work to have the audience read so much, but I couldn't find any alternative. I didn't want to add a voiceover because I felt that would be confused with my "video voice" at the doctors' offices, as well as my voiceover when I read the operating room reports. Plus I had other voices reading texts from books. So I thought it was cleaner and clearer to have a separate intertitled narrative.

I'm fairly satisfied with how the intertitles work in the final film. My two regrets are technical: in the first place, it didn't look good enough, and it would have cost more, to take the video-generated titles and transfer them to film, so I had to recreate them on 16mm film, all 250 of them, which was a ridiculous amount of work and time and headache. People who transfer their head and tail credits are fine going from video, but these were a substantial visual element throughout the film, so I felt they needed to look as sharp as possible. My second regret is that something went wrong when the title man re-shot them on film, so they're more green than I'd intended.

### **Post-production: Combining the Elements**

*The Odds of Recovery* is made up of two-thirds film and one-third video. I shot about twelve hours of footage on Hi-8 video, about ten hours on 16mm color film, and, in post-production, recreated all the intertitles on film, which had been initially composed in the computer while editing. For six months, I transferred and logged all the footage and learned Final Cut Pro, and then I could begin the real thinking. From the summer of 2000 until fall 2001, in between teaching jobs and life, I edited.

Once I was done with all the creative work, I spent almost seven months getting the film out of the computer. People suggested that I just finish on video, but I've always worked in film, and a lot of the footage was shot in film and looked quite beautiful, and I wanted to maintain a distinction between the video images (of the doctors' offices and hospitals) and the rest, so I decided to finish on 16mm. But I felt like a guinea pig: like most people working today, I had to learn as I went along. No one has all the answers to what one has to do to make the conversion to film. I found myself reinventing the wheel more than once, and after this experience, my cautionary note to filmmakers is that it really isn't much cheaper or faster to shoot and edit in a film/video combo and then go back to film.

I have to say that I love Final Cut Pro. It's a beautifully designed program and I find it much easier to work on than I did Avid or Media 100 (cost aside). But if you're going to go back to film, either with originally shot film or by transferring your final online edit to film, it still means a lot of money and as much time. For example, one of the hidden costs (seemingly, since most of my film friends weren't aware of the need for it or didn't realize the difference it can make) is color correcting the video before it gets transferred to film. I hadn't planned to do it and hadn't set aside the few thousand dollars it costs, but once I saw how it improved the quality of the video images, I had no choice but to do it.

I shot all the garden and cooking footage MOS and then decided it needed sound, so I created thousands of Foley sounds with the help of two friends who had a good ears and a good sense of timing. The sound editing took many weeks, but since I created fourteen tracks in FCP, the sound mix only took two days, which, for a sixty-five-minute film, was pretty speedy and cheap.

I've never had a worse post-production (I mean post-editing) experience than I had with this film because of all the mixed format issues. But I guess you just grit your teeth, hire a good assistant if you can afford one (and I was very lucky to find a fabulous assistant, Emily Haddad), then hope to have a nice vacation when you finally emerge from it all.

### **The Odds of Funding**

I got two grants from the New York State Council on the Arts for this project, amounting to \$50,000. I was rejected from two other grants. I haven't figured out how much the whole thing cost, but it was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$140,000. I knew from the outset that I wouldn't get full funding—I never have, although *Hide and Seek* came close to being fully funded. I always hope for the best and then feel very grateful for what I get.

I think everyone knows how bad the funding situation is. Between the right-wingers who think art shouldn't exist and the misuse of what money there is by the government, this country is absolutely shameful in its lack of support for the arts. Even in the golden days, let's say the '70s and '80s, when there were more foundations funding the arts, it was still a pitifully small amount in comparison to [funding in] Europe and in light of what the wealth of America is (mis)used for.

All around me I see people making work that's more conventional, that will sell to broadcast TV, cable, etc. People have to survive and want to work, so I don't blame them, but I think it's a damn shame. I do blame this narrow-minded culture at large for the shallowness of most of our "culture" now.

### **Audience and Distribution**

I don't know yet how this film will play. I'm a little confused about whether it makes sense for the gay and lesbian festival circuit. Some of the story revolves around my relationship with my partner, but I don't see it as a "lesbian film" (whatever that is). At the same time, it might be too unconventional to be useful for people working in healthcare. And the experimental film scene? Oh, who knows. I've been bedeviled for years with the question of what niche I fit into. Every film I make seems to work in some old niches and find some new ones, so I just feel grateful for the audiences that find something in the work and try to understand the audiences that don't.

I've worked with the same few distributors here and in Europe (Women Make Movies, Canyon Cinema, Light Cone, Canadian Filmmakers, etc.) and it's been good, I get my royalty checks and they respect the films. Basically, they struggle as hard to get the work out as do the filmmakers whose work they support, so we're in the same little boat. I wonder how it continues to chug along as it does, but it does.

I had to laugh at myself many times over during the eight months I spent getting this film back into film. Except for the times when I'll bring a film print to a school, festival,

or museum for a screening, it will probably be shown on video. Almost no one rents film anymore for their classes. I know a few hardy souls who do, but if I judge the situation by my royalty statements, it's a video rental world. That makes me sad, but what can I do?

The idealist in me still believes enough in film to spend the time and fortune to have a film print, and the realist in me gets a good Beta transfer and sends out VHS copies to whoever wants one. If my films as films get to live for a while in a museum film archive, then that's the way it will be. There's absolutely nothing to be done about it, and yet the diehards will continue to run small film venues and bear the burden of those heavy reels because they know it's worthwhile.

### **Gays in the Mainstream**

While I see lots of video and filmmakers producing slick gay and lesbian media, that doesn't make me feel pressured to do the same. It more often makes me bored and I just change the channel. And you know what? I don't think of the American gay and lesbian community as any different, in essence, than the straight community.

But maybe I should explain that inflammatory remark. Yes, we were oppressed. Yes, we had to fight to get our rights. Yes, we still have to fight to improve on the basic rights which we now have (or at least I'm old enough to appreciate the drastic difference between now and thirty years ago). But once all that hiding and fighting is over? I think it breaks down just about the same as it does in any other community—heterosexuals, people of color, Eskimo vegetarians, Latvian soccer players, transsexual librarians. I think the vast majority of people are socially and culturally conservative—conservative in the sense that they want to conserve their energy, feelings, money, and the rest for the small and close things that matter to them, like a happy home, a good meal, a decent job, and fun on the weekends.

The smaller minority will see injustice wherever it is, work to end it, make sacrifices, insist that life be full of challenges and surprises. That's a good thing, because life can and should always be improved upon. But at this point it doesn't surprise me that the majority in the gay and lesbian community wants their gay TV and gay cruises and all the rest of it. We wouldn't be human if we didn't, and even if I'm not entirely interested in, or a part of, all that gay mainstreaming, I'm not surprised by it any more, nor do I think it's inherently wrong.

### **Final Words**

In the final analysis, films are not made by machines, they're made by humans, with the help of machines. No technology is going to guarantee a better film or make a worse film—the outcome is in the hands and mind of the person using the technology.

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