

## Framing lesbian angst

### Filmmaker Su Friedrich

by Erin Blackwell

**F**or someone who never went to film school, Su Friedrich has an enviable reputation as a filmmaker. The 42-year-old New Haven native has spent the last 20 years in New York piecing together experimental films she has toured internationally to critical and popular acclaim. Tonight and Sunday she'll present three films that form an incidental triptych on the individual's struggle inside the trap of socially-determined identity.

Two early films cut her parents up into conceptual DNA without ever losing the emotional conflict and connection. The elliptical *Ties That Bind* (1984) is a difficult but loving dialogue with her German mother about life under Hitler. *Sink or Swim* (1990) is a harder-edged primer on life with and without a father who divorced the family when Friedrich was 14. These two films suggest a nature and nurture (if not genetic) genesis of the filmmaker's genius for combining rigorous analysis with deeply sensual forms to express the ultimately unknowable nature of the human heart and mind.

Friedrich's latest film, *Hide and Seek*, is an hour-long homage to her own young lesbian self. Don't worry, this isn't "straight" autobiography. Written with her on-and-off girlfriend of 17 years, painter Cathy Nan Quinlan, the film encompasses the talking heads of smart urban dykes, vintage educational gender propaganda, and a lyrical narrative featuring some great child performances. It will be shown in this year's Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

In a 1990 interview with Scott MacDonald you were very articulate about your creative process. To paraphrase, you start with an emotionally charged experience, which you then analyze and put into an accessible and pleasurable form.

Going back and forth between emotion and analysis sometimes almost functions like an escape mechanism. I'll start thinking about what it was like to be with my father, or what my mother's life was like during the war, or what it was like to be a lesbian child. Then it may become hard to think about, or just very emotional. So I think, How am I going to



James Hamilton

Filmmaker Su Friedrich

write this sentence better? Or, What kind of structure can I use for this series of images? It removes me from the emotional mess of it. And when I look at the structure, I have to ask if it actually expresses the emotional stuff?

What do you do when you're overwhelmed by the emotion?

I suppose I have a few beers. They weren't easy films to make. But there's a sense of pleasure when I get past a certain hurdle. I may start by feeling I can't think about something, and then I make myself think about it, and once I have, then I *have* it and can start to play with it.

How was writing the film with your girlfriend?

It was really great to work with her, because she's an interesting writer [who] had her own stories about her childhood. We used a bit of hers and bit of mine and a bit of the things we both experienced. She has a good sense of

humor and tended to want to find the joyful moments, while I tend to look at the more difficult moments.

In *Hide and Seek* you play a sexed teacher who delivers the classic classroom line, "Am I going to have to separate you two?" Are you doing a Hitchcock?

That was never my intention. I just thought, probably the night before, I'll get one of the women on the crew to do it. When the time came, I turned to everyone and said, "Okay, we need someone to put on this ridiculous outfit and say one line." And everyone refused and insisted that I do it. And I was really upset because I hate being on camera.

Are you an artist?

I suppose.

You seem to have a commitment to something other than success.

I don't want to be a hired gun. I've

## Su Friedrich

◀ page 44

seen that happen to a lot of people. They get picked up after one film that's made from the heart, and they're offered scripts. Maybe they do something that has some significance to them, but they get caught up in making things that will just be bigger or — I don't even want to start using those adjectives.

What's in it for you?

There's an intense pleasure in working. I love most aspects of filmmaking. I love to shoot, I love to edit. I love to write — once I've written it. Writing is not very pleasurable, but the end result is kind of gratifying. There's a simple pleasure just in doing it, just as somebody who loves to swim goes swimming. So I don't feel like a public servant, because there is a selfish pleasure in the craft of filmmaking.

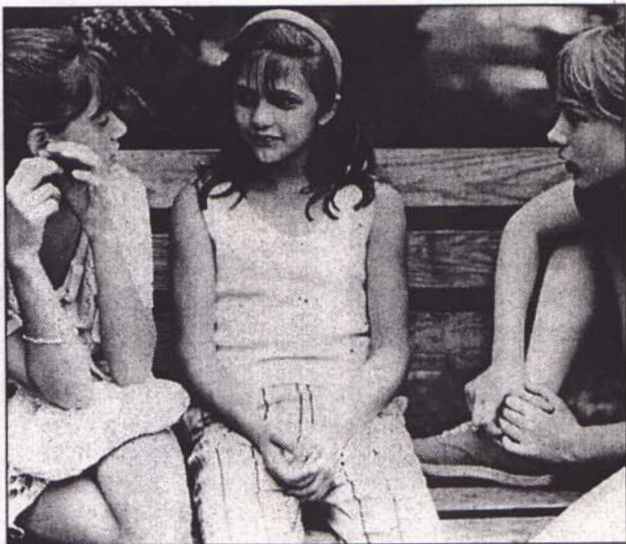
The term "independent film" seems to have lost its meaning. You've said the same of "experimental." Can you devise another term?

I sort of wish we could just talk about film. When we talk about painting we don't talk about independent painting and Hollywood painting or New York painting. There's just this understanding that there are thousands of people painting paintings. Some of them make tons of money selling them, some don't. But they're all working in the same medium. I don't think Ron Howard's new film starring Geena Davis is any more important or impressive than a 20-minute Super-8 film starring nobody. All the distinctions are really absurd.

How did you finance *Hide and Seek*?

I'd gotten some money from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Jerome Foundation. And then I got money from the NEA. But then I was funded by the Independent Television Service (ITVS) in late 1994, and that made it possible to do the fictional part of the film. The ITVS money pushed the film into a different form than it started out being.

The ITVS gave you \$228,000 out of a total budget of \$300,000. That's not a lot of money.



Joyce George

Alicia Manta, Ariel Mara, and Chels Holland in *Hide and Seek*.

It was a lot more than I'd gotten for all the other films combined. I'd made 11 other films for half of that. It's not a lot by Hollywood standards.

The film braids together three separate films, or levels of discourse. Why?

If I had just talked to women and gotten their stories, then I would have had a talking-heads documentary, and that would have been really boring. If I had just used archival clips they wouldn't have made sense the way they do now when I combine them with the other two elements. If I had just made fiction, then I wouldn't have had all the richness of these real women telling these very amusing stories about their childhood. I love your image of them

being braided together, I guess because I had long hair when I was a kid and wore a braid all the time.

Is there a word for this kind of mixing of genres?

Just don't call it docudrama.

I promise. ▼

**Su Friedrich will appear in person at two programs this week: *The Ties That Bind* and *Sink or Swim*, at Yerba Buena Gardens Center for the Arts, Thursday, April 3 (7:30 p.m.); and *Hide and Seek* at the San Francisco Art Institute, Sunday, April 6 (7:30 p.m.). Admission is \$6. For information, call the SF Cinematheque at 558-8129.**