

Crucial Viewing

Su Friedrich at the Gene Siskel Film Center, 9/7/2023

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Su Friedrich's SINK OR SWIM and RULES OF THE ROAD (US/Experimental)

Thursday, 6pm

By the 1980s and '90s, some people thought that personal filmmaking might be approaching a dead-end. It seemed like diaristic cinema had walked down every formal path—from the flash-frame to the stone-cold long take—and taken advantage of every conceptual frame-work—from the mythopoetic to the militantly political. Then along came Su Friedrich to remind people that there are no tired ideas, just tired people. Friedrich's films were simultaneously more restrained and more spectacular than similar work from the time, paradoxically more literary and also richer in textural, physical beauty. **SINK OR SWIM** (1990, 48 min, 16mm) consists of 26 vignettes, framed around the alphabet (a nod to Hollis Frampton), that combine to portray a young girl's coming of age and her relationship to her father. Gradually, elliptically, we come to understand how the father's casually cruel remoteness structured the young girl's consciousness. The story is told in voice-over and the images, filmed in beautiful black and white, toggle between synoptic and digressive functions. **[Tom McCormack] ///** Up to that point her most autobiographical work, Su Friedrich's **RULES OF THE ROAD** (1993, 31 min, 16mm) explores an intimate relationship vis-à-vis that most iconic of American symbols: the wood-paneled station wagon. Watching the film made me think of a passage in Dave Kehr's 1980 essay on Robert Zemeckis' *USED CARS*: "The affordable family car once represented the fruit of American life: unchecked personal mobility, the unlimited flow of material goods, the triumph of free enterprise—the chrome-plated proof that every American could live like a king... [i]t is an image that's at the center of American life." Readers who are familiar with Friedrich's work might assume that her stance toward this machine would be vastly dissimilar to conventional ones such as what Kehr espouses above. But, endearingly, it's not. The car, acquired for Friedrich's girlfriend by her brother (who was then unaware of his sister's sexuality), is all of those same things for the two women. It certainly enables ease and mobility, especially in New York City, where a simple errand can become an arduous chore; it also allows for an easier escape from the urban jungle and into more open spaces—spaces that are geographically open but not necessarily more open-minded. In this way the car itself becomes a more personal and even subversive emblem, as the ease and leisure it affords the women takes on a greater meaning both with regard to their intimate relationship and the one they have with society at large. "RULES OF THE ROAD began because I happened to be out walking around my neighborhood and saw a car that I thought was being driven by my ex-girlfriend," Friedrich said in a 2020 interview. She and her girlfriend were broken up at the time the film was made, although it references the time when they were still together. (The two later reconciled and, as far as I know, are still a couple.) "I freaked out, went home, and started scribbling down notes. That was the genesis of the film." The couple's station wagon doesn't appear in **RULES OF THE ROAD**, but rather other cars that evoked memories, both good and bad, of what had taken place in their mobile utopia, from stress-free errands to weekend trips outside the city. (This

reminded me specifically of Chantal Akerman's NEWS FROM HOME, where generally impersonal, unrelated tableaux assume meaning via the filmmaker's gaze.) A motif of a person playing solitaire appears at various intervals, most notably during the opening credits that indicate Friedrich's loneliness; at times her expository narration is punctuated by bursts of music from artists such as Bob Dylan, Rick James, and Aretha Franklin, with hard cuts between these moments and the resumption of the narrator's story. The car, the cards, and the music come together to construct a representation not of something at the heart of American life but rather a portrayal of life itself, where the real heart can never be replaced. [Kat Sachs]

Su Friedrich's TODAY (US/Experimental)

Thursday, 8:30pm

In her diaristic featurette TODAY, Su Friedrich considers a number of tragedies that occurred between 2016 and 2021, from the Trump Presidency to the deaths of her parents and several friends, yet the tone is generally light and personable. That's partly because of what Friedrich does and doesn't include in the film; for instance, we never see Trump, but we do see footage Friedrich shot at the women's march on Washington that overshadowed Trump's inauguration. The gentle mood of TODAY also has to do with the gracefulness of Friedrich's filmmaking, which is always a joy to behold. One of the most gifted editors in experimental cinema, Friedrich condenses five momentous years into just under an hour, and while the montage suggests a stone skipping across the surface of time, the film doesn't feel brief or insubstantial. Friedrich is always building meaning through her sequencing of sounds and images—you often have to chew on the associations between one shot and the next. In an early example, Friedrich pans up on the dessert case in a diner she stops at during a trip, overlaying the words "I should resist," then cuts to a shot from behind a window of a man surfing on the ocean. The shot lasts long enough to achieve poetic resonance before the man falls off his surfboard and the words "But I'm on vacation!" appear on screen. Soon after this sequence, Friedrich introduces her longtime friend Diane and shares via text that she's been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. A sappy R&B song comes up on the soundtrack and the clouds above downtown Chicago appear; another cut reveals the song to be a live performance by a busker at O'Hare Airport, who seems charmingly invested in his work. Next: a few shots on one of the O'Hare people-movers and another sobering title card: "I've come to Chicago because my dad is dying." TODAY is always moving between optimism and despair like this, and in so doing, it achieves a sort of Buddhist wisdom about the inseparability of joy and suffering. Friedrich also addresses the impermanence of all life, as in one sequence shot at the final-ever performance of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The film contains appearances by Mavis Staples and Gladys Knight as well, but it's the more modest stuff—a block party in Friedrich's Brooklyn neighborhood, the antics of her pet cat, the repeated shots of flowers and feet—that grants TODAY its sense of wonder. *Friedrich in person at all screenings.* (2022, 57 min, DCP Digital) [Ben Sachs]

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