

Obituaries

Barbara Hammer, artist whose films explored lesbian sexuality, dies at 79

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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Barbara Hammer, an artist whose experimental films on lesbian sexuality, women’s orgasms, menstruation and representation made her a pioneer of queer cinema, and who later turned to works that addressed her declining health and the fragility of the human body, died March 16 at her home in Manhattan. She was 79.

The cause was endometrioid ovarian cancer, said her spouse, Florrie Burke. Ms. Hammer was diagnosed with cancer in 2006 and became a champion of the right-to-die and death-with-dignity movements, delivering an October lecture at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York titled “The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety).”

“I hope that what is important to you stands out most clearly as it has for me, when life is measured in months instead of years,” she said. “I hope you will make your work from the place of needing to create without paying heed to the sugarcoated traps of ‘success’ promised by ‘the art world.’ ”

Ms. Hammer began making short films in the late 1960s, following after female experimental artists such as [Carolee Schneemann](#), who died March 6, and Maya Deren, whom Ms. Hammer once called her “mentor, mother, progenitor.”

Ms. Hammer directed more than 80 films and documentaries, including a trilogy of feature-length movies about LGBT history, and in recent years drew increasing recognition from the contemporary art world, with retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London and the Jeu de Paume in Paris.

“Arguably the first openly lesbian filmmaker, Barbara Hammer radically repurposed cinema into a celebration of bodies and desires that was as unprecedented as the life that formed it,” Stuart Comer, a curator who organized the Tate exhibition, wrote in [an Instagram post](#). “Her films are fearless, haptic, physical. They transcend the merely visual. Their radical embrace of cinema as a form of community and agency will keep moving us forward.”

Ms. Hammer said she was simply a bored housewife when she started painting and tinkering with a Super 8 camera, inspired by biographies of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh. She heard the word “lesbian” for the first time at the age of 30, and one day listened to a critique of the Miss America pageant on the radio.

“Guess what,” she told her husband afterward. “I’m a feminist.”

By 1970, she had left him and embarked on what she called her “dyke adolescence,” honing her filmmaking abilities in graduate school, crisscrossing California on a motor scooter and making love with women for the first time.

“My whole sense of touch increased,” she said in [an oral history](#) for the Archives of American Art. “I began to be more aware of the follicles of hair on my body, the way they told me what space I was moving through, the way I was reinforced by touching a body similar to my own.”

“This reinforced my own outline of the body and became the mode of my lesbian aesthetic,” she added, “so that in my films I want the viewer to feel in their bodies what they see on the screen.”

Ms. Hammer said her work was motivated not only by an absence of films about the lesbian experience, but a lack of films made by, for or about women. Her first major work, the four-minute short “Dyketactics” (1974), featured shots of nude women embracing in the California countryside, and culminated with Ms. Hammer and a female lover having sex on the floor.

It was soon followed by shorts including “Menses” — a humorous look at menstruation inspired by a passage from Pliny the Elder, who suggested that menstrual blood could sour milk or wilt a flower — and “Multiple Orgasms,” which showed Ms. Hammer masturbating and interwove close-ups of her vagina, shots of her face and scenes of Utah rock formations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the films were divisive. Some feminist critics said her work was politically reductive, identifying women merely as biological constructs. At least one man was said to have screamed when Ms. Hammer’s vagina filled the movie screen. Another viewer, a woman, burst into tears during a screening of “Dyketactics” in San Francisco.

“It turned out she thought she might be coming out,” Ms. Hammer told the [told the New Yorker](#) in February. “I said, ‘Welcome, it’s not a bad place to go.’”

Barbara Jean Hammer was born in Los Angeles on May 15, 1939, and raised in Inglewood, Calif. Her mother was a secretary, and her father managed a gas station and struggled with alcoholism; both parents frequently fought, Ms. Hammer said. Her maternal grandmother, a Ukrainian immigrant who cooked for director D.W. Griffith, also lived with the family, painting at the kitchen table and encouraging young Barbara’s interest in art.

Ms. Hammer received a bachelor’s in psychology from UCLA in 1961, and days later she married Clayton Ward. They divorced nine years later.

At San Francisco State College (now University), Ms. Hammer received master’s degrees in English in 1963 and in film in 1975. She later did postgraduate work at the American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles.

Ms. Hammer employed editing and optical techniques that were as unconventional as her subject matter, aiming her camera through color filters or a cut edge of shattered glass. She sometimes burned or punched

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through her celluloid, and often incorporated archival footage, calling herself “the Nancy Drew of lesbian archives.”

Her hour-long documentary “Nitrate Kisses” (1992) featured scenes from director James Sibley Watson’s 1933 film “Lot in Sodom,” which she cited as an early example of gay filmmaking, and incorporated interviews with gay men and women talking about their lives and loves.

It formed a loose trilogy with two other experimental documentaries, “Tender Fictions” (1995) and “History Lessons” (2000). For the latter, Ms. Hammer used loops of vintage pornography, sex-education films and an 1896 sequence from the collection of Thomas Edison, in which a woman is shown being hanged. Ms. Hammer speculated that the woman might have been a lesbian persecuted for her sexuality.

In addition to her spouse, Burke, a human-rights activist and her partner of 31 years, survivors include a sister.

Ms. Hammer taught for many summers at the European Graduate School in Switzerland, and after selling her archives to Yale in 2017 she used the proceeds to establish a grant for lesbian experimental filmmakers.

Her recent works included “A Horse Is Not a Metaphor” (2008), which used footage she took during her chemotherapy sessions, and “Evidentiary Bodies,” which also served as the title of a 2017 retrospective at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in New York.

“My goal in life and even with my last film, which I almost called ‘Empathy’ rather than ‘Evidentiary Bodies’ is to be able to know you from the inside out,” she said in the oral history. “Why can’t we have a way of, I don’t know, becoming the other person. . . . It could be seconds, it could be an hour — but to really see the world through someone else’s eyes? And nothing is more important than today, during Trump days, that we learn to do this.”


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