

# Barbara Hammer

## SISTERS!



Barbara Hammer (Los Angeles, 1939 – New York, 2019) is one of the most influential figures in American experimental and activist cinema. Including eighty-three films and a great number of photographs, drawings, performances, collages and installations, her autobiographical work is a record of how lesbian and feminist dissent has been formulated from the late 1960s to the present day.

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[LA VIRREINA]  
CENTRE  
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de  
Barcelona



This exhibition covers the fifty-year career of Barbara Hammer (Los Angeles, 1939 – New York, 2019), one of the most influential voices in American experimental and activist cinema. It is the first retrospective exhibition of her work in Spain.

Hammer was a pioneer in the political exploration of lesbian life and sexuality, the meaning of death, and the stories of those suffering social exclusion. She made eighty-four films, including short films and feature films, as well as a great number of collages, drawings, performances, photographs and installations.

Hammer's works stretch from the early Super 8 films to the trilogy *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995) and *History Lessons* (2000). She investigated disease in *Chance of Breast Cancer* (1993), *Cancer Bones* (1994) and *A Horse Is Not a Metaphor* (2008) and entered into "critical dialogues" with artists, filmmakers and poets, including Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Hannah Wilke, Elizabeth Bishop, Lota de Macedo Soares and Dziga Vertov. Her work can be considered a monumental autobiographical record of how lesbian and feminist dissent has been formulated from the late 1960s to the present day.

*Sisters!*, which takes its title from a short film made by Hammer in 1973, also offers a set of proposals based on ancestral myths in *The Great Goddess* (1977) and *Sappho* (1978); works on the ideological genealogies of lesbianism in *The History of the World According to a Lesbian* (1988), *The Female Closet* (1998) and *Lover Other* (2006); and many photographs of emblematic performances, such as *Be My Valentine* (1980-82) and *Aphrodite's Birth* (1972), and of emotional and sexual moments.

Drawing was prominent in Hammer's work throughout her career, from the early *Dark Vagina or Moon in the Head* (1969-1971) to *Prison Drawings (Marcel Moore)* (2005). Finally, the exhibition presents a large collection of her collages, which transfer her audiovisual experimentations to the field of plastic art, including *Happy Valentine's Day* (1982), *Je t'embrasse* (1994),

*Corky Wick & Me (IV)*, San Mateo,  
California, 1979, 2017  
Silver gelatin print  
20.32h x 30.48 cm  
Courtesy of the estate of Barbara Hammer  
and Company Gallery, New York.

*Hammer as Shirley Temple* (1996), *Lesbian Weeding Dewar Style* (1997), *Bang & Whimper* (2000) and *Censored* (2017).

Barbara Hammer's projects are both a celebration of life and a call to dissent, episodes of a confessional frieze and panoramic views of political and community events. Her written work—part memoir, part chronicle, part essay—is compiled in the book *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life* (2010). In her writing she reveals an artistic and existential position in which the drive to transgress all social taboos is linked to the revolutionary capacity for love, to the power of people to unite their frailties and rise up.

The preliminary work on this exhibition began in 2018, in close dialogue with Barbara Hammer. La Virreina Centre de la Imatge considers *Sisters!*, presented on the first anniversary of Hammer's death, a tribute to her life and work.

### Room 1

The films *I Was/I Am* (1973) and *Death of Marriage* (1969), which Hammer describes as her "first psychodrama", organize this area as a sort of political, subjective and sexual epiphany of gender. *Death of Marriage*, shot in Super 8, reflects the search for images and filmic methods to represent an inner emotional being. "I had built by hand with my husband a home in the woods", explains Hammer, "made my own horse corral, and had an art studio. Yet the alternative lifestyle didn't erase the feeling of entrapment, proscribed role, and constrictions. Yip, yip and away!"

The other works have the same questioning tone. They are self-portraits in a less literal version, jumping from one period to another, from one medium to another, from poetry to philosophical aphorism, from humour to transcendence. They challenge the clichés with which women are represented and ask questions about an identity in the process of affirmation or denial.



*Superdyke*, 1975  
16 mm film on video



*Dream Painting*, 1976  
Felt tip pen, oil crayon, watercolour on paper, 35,5 x 42,5 cm



*Wrestling, Hornby Island, British Columbia, 1972*  
Silver gelatin print, 27,30 x 21,59 cm



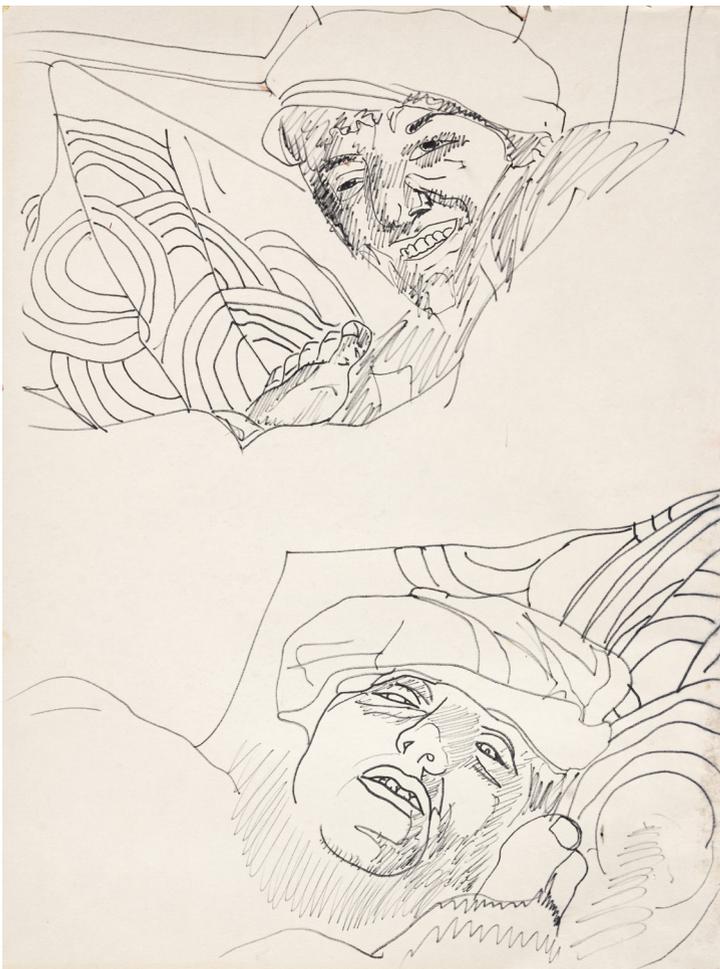
*Lover Other, 2006*  
16 mm film on video



*Sisters!, 1973*  
16 mm film on video



*A Horse is Not a Metaphor, 2008*  
16 mm film on video



*Two Ruths*, 1969-1971  
Felt tip pen on paper, 60,9 x 45,7 cm

### *Room 2*

During her career, Barbara Hammer conducted numerous investigations into lesbian myths of antiquity. She also explored historical genealogies referring to lesbian life. Sappho, the island of Lesbos, Aphrodite and the female fertility deities are found alongside iconic figures such as Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares.

Also important are the works like *Multiple Orgasm* (1977) that present a subversive pedagogy on sexuality between women, on how female bodies imagine forms of pleasure that disrupt all established norms.

The film *Superdyke* (1975) documents the empowerment and energy of lesbian political struggles in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. It is a comedy about a platoon of vagina warriors taking control of San Francisco's public spaces and institutions, supermarkets, the bus network, the Erotic Museum and City Hall.

*Double Strength* (1978), *Dream Age* (1979) and the exceptional *Lesbian Whale* (2015) narrate lesbian love epics using a visual language ranging from fable to psychological narrative. As is customary in Hammer's pieces, these authentic emotional journeys explore moments when the peak of happiness precedes the beginning of decrepitude, when tranquility is a communal conquest, a path built and affected by ideology, not a moral question.

### *Room 3*

Barbara Hammer's works can be read as episodes describing the construction of a project of lesbian subjectivity. Hence, in her photographs of lovers and companions, of women having sex, kissing or laughing together, we see a comedy of manners dealing with everyday life and, above all, a portrayal of how bodies recover their power to act and enjoy.

Faced with the normative fictions that seize control of desire politically and socially and the hetero-patriarchal grammars of discrepancy in 1960s and 1970s America, Hammer's work displays a rediscovery of intensity that goes beyond the simple tone of the time.

Emancipated from approval or disapproval, as if they had a premonition of the current idea of sisterhood, the women we see in Hammer's work grow, feel and cooperate together, invent liberating tactics while embodying what it means to disagree, and conceive forms of struggle and resistance that take into account the vulnerable nature of each life.

Into all of this, Hammer's films—especially those made in the 1970s—introduce experimental strategies characteristic of avant-garde cinema, a physicality of the female body that feeds reciprocally on the cinematographic medium, as happens in *Sisters!* (1973), *Dyketactics* (1974), *Menses* (1974) and *X* (1975).

#### Room 4

Maya Deren, Claude Cahun, Dziga Vertov, James Sibley Watson, Jack Waters and Peter Cramer are some of the members of a hypothetical community that influenced Barbara Hammer. Deren and Cahun in particular were the subject of works through which Hammer paid homage to or dialogued with their lives and works, such as *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011), *Lover Other* (2006), *Dynamic Single (Claude Cahun)* (2005), *Prison Drawings (Marcel Moore)* (2005), *Motion Lines Bad Ass (Claude Cahun)* (2005), *War Tunnels (Claude Cahun)* (2005) and *Buddha Head (Claude Cahun)* (2005).

This section also includes a selection of works in which Hammer shows caustic irony in her treatment of some stereotypes of the hegemonic artistic narrative and popular culture, including Van Gogh, Matisse, Vlaminck, Goya and Shirley Temple.

Finally, *The Female Closet* (1998) closes the critical journey through art history. It is a documentary that uses archive photographs, home movies, interviews and other visual materials to investigate the publicly hidden lesbianism of three female artists: Alice Austen, Hannah Höch and Nicole Eisenman.

#### Room 5

Disease is one of the great themes in Barbara Hammer's work. The ostracization of ageing bodies, the public criminalization of certain diseases, the clinical system with its sometimes dehumanized protocols—a whole set of socio-economic aggressions are added to the physical and mental fragility of patients, leading to their exclusion.

Hammer's works on this topic include *TV Study 1-4* (1984-1985), dealing with the alarm in the media about AIDS in the 1980s, and the many works she devoted to cancer, such as *Cancer Bones* (1994), *Chance of Breast Cancer* (1993), *What You Are Not Supposed to Look At* (2014) and *Contemplation: What Now?* (2014). In these works, Hammer contributed to the artistic representation of disease a kind of counter-iconography that depathologizes the experience of suffering, rescuing it from hospital facilities and the health business to show it naturalized and even as a community bond.

To counter capitalism's marginalization of people it considers "unproductive" or "undesirable", Hammer thus gives voice to the vicissitudes of these vulnerable people by narrating—often in the first person—their existential and political evolution.

In the film *A Horse Is Not a Metaphor* (2008), Hammer reflects on her personal struggle against late-stage ovarian cancer in a project/manifesto that brings together the above ideas. The film mixes scenes of chemotherapy sessions with images of light and abstract movements. Hammer rides over the hills of Georgia O'Keeffe's Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, the grass-

covered foothills of Big Horn in Wyoming, and the leafy trails of Woodstock in New York City.

*We Heal Ourselves* is the title of a photograph showing the artist's thoughtful face. The same face, as if it were a visual *Aleph*, appears in the series *After Hannah Wilke* (2016). Wilke's work *Intra-Venus* (1992-1993), presented posthumously, documents the physical transformations of Wilke's body as a result of chemotherapy and bone marrow transplantation.

### *Room 6*

This section brings together a group of works that can be described as agitprop, parodying the founders of neoliberal political conservatism embodied in the figures of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, in addition to the reactionary, censoring populism of Donald Trump.

Next to them is the film *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), which attacks media misrepresentations and alarmism in line with the anti-HIV activism of the 1980s, as well as the series *Charlene Atlas* (1998), in which Hammer ridicules advertisements in the press promising muscular male bodies. Hammer's smiling face occupies the place previously reserved for this multitude of testosterone alpha males.

### *Room 7*

*Tourist* (1984) is a video that critically delves into the libidinal energy of mass tourism, its psychic impulses of consumerist possession and its ratification of performance. By contrast, the film *Generations* (2010) narrates the process of transmitting the tradition of experimental cinema as the passing of knowledge from one generation to another, in this case between Barbara Hammer and Gina Carducci, a young queer filmmaker. Filming during the last days of the Astroland amusement

park on Coney Island, the two artists perceive the ageing of both the disused recreational architecture and the cinematographic medium. Hammer and Carducci edited the picture and sound separately, as did Shirley Clarke in her popular short film *Bridges Go-Round* (1958). The result is a generational experiment and a tribute to cutting-edge film-makers.

### *Dining Room*

*Sisters!* ends with two feature films separated by more than a decade: *Out in South Africa* (1994) and *Lover Other* (2006). The first is a documentary on race, sexual orientation and civil rights in a changing South Africa after the apartheid period. It was created on the occasion of Hammer's invitation to present a retrospective of her films at the First Gay and Lesbian Film Festival on the African continent.

*Lover Other* is another documentary that explores the biographies of Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun, surrealist artists of the 1920s who were lesbians and step-sisters and lived together all their lives. Because of their resistance during the Nazi occupation of Jersey, an island in the English Channel west of the Normandy coast, they were imprisoned and sentenced to death in 1944. They were released in 1945, although a large number of their works had been destroyed.

**Films included  
in the exhibition**

*Death of a Marriage*

1969  
Super 8 mm film on HD video  
3' 9"

*I Was/I Am*

1973  
16 mm film on video  
5' 44"

*Sisters!*

1973  
16 mm film on video  
8' 25"

*Dyketactics*

1974  
16 mm film on video  
5' 44"

*Menses*

1974  
16 mm film on video  
3' 15"

*X*

1975  
16 mm film on video  
8'

*Superdyke  
Superbollera*

1975  
16 mm film on video  
17' 34"

*Women I Love*

1976  
16 mm film on video  
22' 39"

*The Great Goddess*

1977  
16 mm film on video  
25'

*Multiple Orgasm*

1977  
16 mm film on video  
5' 32"

*Double Strength*

1978  
16 mm film on video  
14' 38"

*Sappho*

1978  
16 mm film on video  
7'

*Dream Age*

1979  
16 mm film on video  
10' 58"

*Tourist*

1984  
16 mm film on video  
2' 44"

*Snow Job: The Media  
Hysteria of AIDS*

1986  
16 mm film on video  
7' 42"

*The History of the World  
According to a Lesbian*

1988  
16 mm film on video  
16' 22"

*Out in South Africa*

1994  
16 mm film on video  
50' 46"

*The Female Closet*

1998  
16 mm film on video  
59' 3"

*Lover Other*

2006  
16 mm film on video  
55' 6"

*A Horse Is Not a Metaphor*

2008  
16 mm film on video  
29' 43"

*Generations*

2010  
HD video  
14' 36"

*Maya Deren's Sink*

2011  
HD video  
29' 8"

*Lesbian Whale*

2015  
HD video  
6' 35"

Curator: Valentín Roma

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday  
and public holidays, 11 am to 8 pm  
Free entry



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