

# A Maverick Among Mavericks

Cecilia Dougherty Brings New Form and Content to Video

BY MARY WINGS

**C**ecilia Dougherty, an unequivocally eccentric woman with a look somewhere between Prince Valiant in horn-rims and Imogene Coca gone gay, has an original creative style solidly in the realm of experimental lesbian video. "I'm not into mainstreaming lesbian imagery," Dougherty says. "I'm into broadening the context that lesbians are allowed to be in. We really belong in every situation."

Dougherty's latest video, *Coal Miner's*

is slated to be shown Sept. 9 at the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival and Sept. 19 at the Pacific Rim Archive in Berkeley, Calif. The work is one of the first feature-length gay videos to be made.

Born to a working-class family in Lancaster, Pa., the 39-year-old artist left home in 1970 for Temple University in Philadelphia. She dropped out and moved to the Bay Area, where she completed her degree in painting at the University of California, Berkeley. She went on to the San Francisco Art Institute, where she discovered video.

"Video was accessible," Dougherty explains. "There's no process, really. You just tape it and replay. I was at the San Francisco Art Institute painting pictures when I took

a class in video. [I liked it because] everything I wanted happened instantly—and the elements could talk and move. Plus, I didn't have to paint."

Dougherty went on to make 14 videos in six years, and 11 of them have appeared in video festivals and screenings around the country. Her acclaimed *Grapefruit*,

which features an all-female cast playing the Beatles, has been shown at lesbian and gay film and video festivals in a number of cities, including London, San Francisco, and Melbourne, and at the Artist's Space in New York. In addition, she has received several

grants to continue her work.

The video maker's future ideas promise to be as maverick as the rest. "My next project is a story about the Civil War," she says, "but I wanted to think of a way to do it that wasn't historical. So it's going to be about the Civil War taking place in the present time, and it's going to be a horror story about racism. There aren't going to be any soldiers, just cops and zombies. I'm going to call it *Charlene's March*."

*Coal Miner's Granddaughter* is a profoundly moving and disturbing family portrait that zeros in on Jane Dobson, the youngest daughter. Jane eventually leaves her family in Lancaster, Pa., to go live in San Francisco, where she discovers her highly charged sexuality. The piece is largely autobiographical.

"Although it's autobiographical, it's completely subjective," Dougherty explains. "I tried to figure out what the past looked like to me, how I remembered it. And when I watched it happening, when I was taping, I went right back into my family, even though none of the actors looked like them. It was very painful. I started remembering things too clearly."

"I wanted to make a working-class family that wasn't just a portrait of a conservative racist, hard-hatted bunch but more complex and interesting," Dougherty says. "The working class is always presented with Dad in front of the TV drinking beer. In *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, Dad does have a drinking problem, but he's into politics and music."

Even in her medium, Dougherty redefines boundaries. "I wanted to make a narrative instead of an experimental piece," she says. "I'm really sick of artsy videos. A lot of people are making cute little short pieces that are overprocessed one-liner clichés. I thought video was going downhill and there must be some other way to do it. It looked like film was going to be the vehicle for narrative and video was slated for documentary or experimental work. I thought video was



A still of Jane, the everyday hero of *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*. The video is garnering praise for its impromptu dialogue and non-professional acting.

*Granddaughter*, is getting special notice for its unconventional acting and directing. Shot primarily on a Fisher Price toy video camera, a piece of equipment that intrigues artists not only for its accessibility but also for its black-and-white pixelated images, the video



MARC GELLER

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underutilized."

With *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* the video artist directed friends, none of them professional actors, to play the parts of her family and lovers, but the unconventionality of her approach doesn't end there. "I didn't really have a strict story line," Dougherty says. "I wanted to give the actors a form where their personalities could be displayed. I had definite scenes but an extremely loose script. We shot in my apartment. I gave them index cards with some key phrases

they had to include and what stage of the story they were in. They filled in all the conversation, and we taped for hours and hours. It became a simultaneous process—from the outside to the center, like an implosion."

Although the life of the main character of the video has a striking resemblance to the maker's, Dougherty has no designs on being a star. "I wasn't so much inspired by my particular life," the artist says. "I think everybody's story is good. Everyplace people come from is good. You don't have to be a

great hero or suffer a great tragedy. The point of *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* is not to expose a hero but to integrate. This is a normal family. They are fucked up, but the most normal situation is a completely full situation. An average story of an average person: Jane Dobson.

"The whole point of the story is that there is no point," she says. "Things are not real, nothing gets resolved. There's no logic to this person's life. You just try to get done tomorrow what you didn't get done today." ▼