

video



Video still from *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, shot with a Fisher Price toy camera.

"Trying to do the Impossible"

Cecilia Dougherty's art brings lesbian feminists and narrative video out of the margins

by Harry Kloman

Jane Dobson came out to her working-class Lancaster parents in a letter she mailed them from Temple University.

Her father immediately rejected the idea that his daughter could be a lesbian. He died before Jane could reconcile their shattered relationship. It took a while for Jane's mother to accept reality and her daughter. But she finally did - by giving Jane an old camera that her father had owned and valued.

Jane is not a real person. Not really. But these moments in her life are also moments from the life of Cecilia Dougherty, the artist who created the typically dysfunctional Dobsons for her video *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*.

Dougherty wanted to break through the boundaries of narrative video by making a feature-length work. She needed a story, so she used the one she knew best. But she didn't anticipate what would happen when her performers reenacted moments from her life: she began to hear echoes of long-ago family conversation as the actors, with her encouragement, filled in the skeleton of her script with their own ad-libs.

"It was like watching my family," Dougherty says, "and I had not anticipated this. It was kind of cathartic, but it made me deal with things I had never been able to deal with. It somewhat ran away with me."

For example, she had tried in the past to make films about her older sister's death. In *Coal*

Miner's Granddaughter, the sister story finally works. "The person who played her," says Dougherty, "played her a little too well."

Coal Miner's Granddaughter is not without humor, some of it at Dougherty's expense. When her alter ego Jane comes out, she declares to her family that she wants to "come home as the real me - a lesbian feminist." Those were fightin' words in the 1970s. But Dougherty now calls the line "a comic reference to a time when everyone was nuts," and she admits that people (like herself) who applied and accepted the label "were trying to do things that were totally impossible."

She recognizes that the desire to be a "lesbian feminist" grew from a time of intense anger and dissatisfaction among women with their options and with the way things worked. She recalls: "We were screwing each other constantly. It was actually pretty wonderful. But it couldn't sustain. It was a catalyst for getting back into communities of where people came from."

Like Jane, Dougherty began her adult life by leaving Lancaster and spending two years at Temple. She quit school and traveled, ending up in San Francisco. For 13 years, she worked just about everywhere, from a mail order house to a machine shop, all the while painting and showing her work whenever she could. Throughout much of this time, Dougherty admits, "I was actually a very mixed-up person. I had a major need to get away. I spent a lot of time looking for my identity."

Finally, she went back to school, earning a bachelor's degree in painting from Berkeley in 1985 and a master's degree in performance and video four years later from the San Francisco Art Institute. She has since given up clerical work for teaching, currently at the Kansas City Art Institute. She began making her videos in 1985 and now has a videography that boasts 17 works ranging in length from four to 80 minutes.

Dougherty says she finds a lot of women in particular who choose to work in video instead of film. She believes these women "want to engage the audience more than the system," and video offers immediate access to a means of production and a finished product.

Her video career formed around the disheartening realization that most early video art preached a single message and then ended with a joke, a one-liner. She tries to challenge that sensibility with her work, which she hopes is both entertaining and thought-provoking. Except for a few color scenes, she filmed *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* in black and white on a Fisher Price toy video camera, giving the images a haunting, grainy look. The video's long takes and hand-held camera movements enhance its mock documentary style.

"I don't have the answers about what narrative video means," says Dougherty, "but I'm definitely working on finding out." And she adds: "I'm really not trying to document what lesbian reality is. I'm an artist."

Dougherty isn't surprised that Hollywood's images of gays and lesbians are either negative or shallow. She calls *Basic Instinct* "a camp riot" for its portrait of a world where "women are all geniuses, all sleep with each other, and are all murderers." She says it's rather silly to picket Hollywood because the industry doesn't care. Yet she was glad to see the protest over *Basic Instinct* because at least someone made some noise.

Dougherty says even the film industry's sensitive portrayals of gays and lesbians have "no passion," and the characters are too extreme - too good or too bad. She surprised herself by crying at the end of *Longtime Companion*, and though she believes the movie "portrayed a middle-class gay community that does exist," she says that class is "out of touch with other parts of the gay community."

"This is not a strange underground existence," she says of her sexuality, which is at the center of all her work. "It's really part of what happens to everyday people in everyday life. My insistence on not being marginalized is based on the fact of placing yourself in the center and not in the margins as an act of resistance. There are some major differences in perceptions and relationships that come from having been marginalized, not from placing yourself in the margin."

"It's really pretty positive to start making strong statements," she adds. "If people are insisting they're different because they're gay, it also can work that the person can insist they're still like everybody else. This confusion about your identity - we have to ask: Who has to go through this? Straight people don't have to go through this. It's not oppressive because it makes people really look at who they are and what they're doing."

Dougherty will come to Pittsburgh on Tuesday, May 4, to present *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* and talk with people about it. The program begins at 8 p. m. in the Fulton Annex Theater downtown and is sponsored by Pittsburgh Filmmakers. **IP**

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