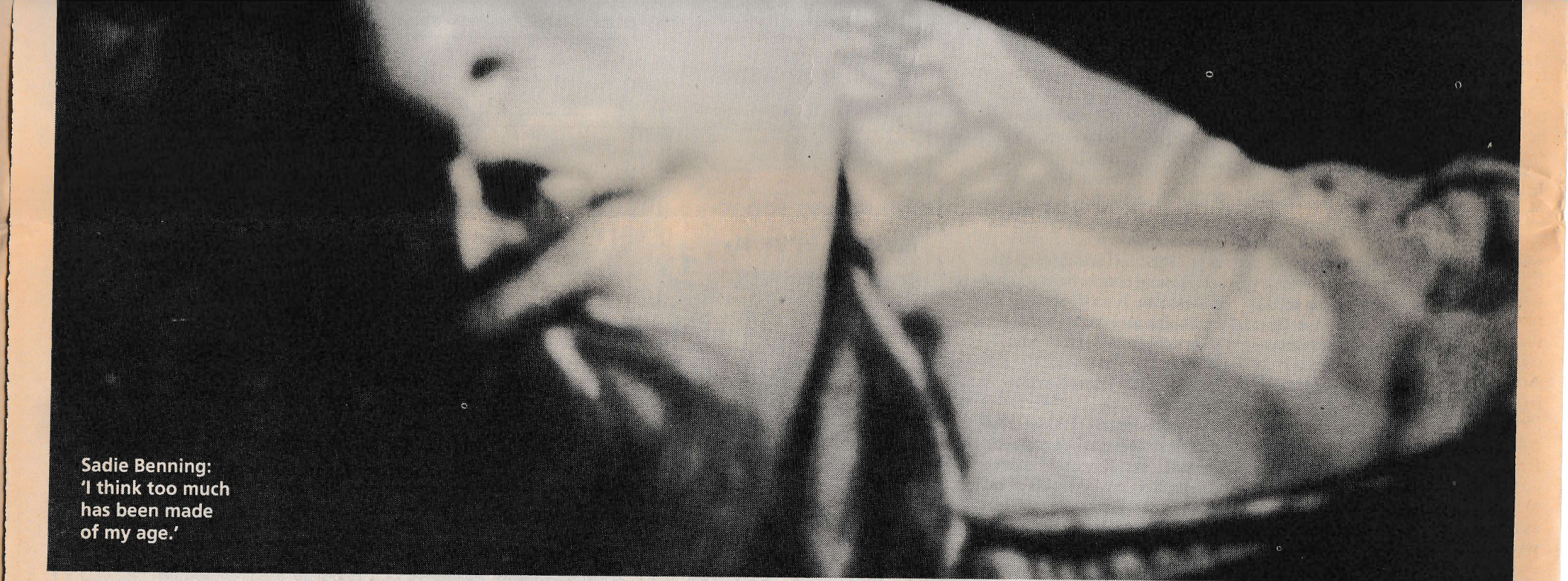


FILM

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FILMMAKERS CHAT WITH
OUT-OF-TOWNERS
IN THE SF INTERNATIONAL
LESBIAN AND GAY
FILM FESTIVAL





Sadie Benning:
'I think too much
has been made
of my age.'

GROWING PAINS

BY ARLYN TOBIAS GAJILAN

FILM SCHOOL GRADS like me often look to their youth for inspiration; video artist Sadie Benning doesn't have to look back quite that far. At 19 years of age, she's making waves with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera.

The seven videos she's made since the age 15 have already garnered critical acclaim and exposure through both national and international screenings — including a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

But while many critics remain focused on the novelty of her age, her diary-like works, from the point of view of a working-class dyke who's dropped out of high school, look at life through an exceptionally mature lens.

In a recent phone interview from her hometown of Milwaukee, I ask Sadie Benning about that viewpoint, and about the recent flurry of recognition: "Sometimes I'd rather be working at Burger King," she says. "I just don't have much time. I've loved all the traveling, but at the same time it's really ripped me out of my bedroom," she adds.

It's in her bedroom that she began making videotapes. Benning's father had given her the Pixelvision camera as a Christmas present. And since then, the process of revision has evolved from diary-like revelations to wry and insightful commentary on gender, sex, and love.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

AN EARFUL

BY CECILIA DOUGHERTY

TAKE A SMALLISH lesbian social scene and place it 700 years into the future. Take away all the usual forms of daily harassment of queers and females; add lots of in-group sex and violence, romance, cryptic and poetic dialogue that could be classical if it wasn't so nasty and funny; and then pour on the color, music, imagination, and emotion — *Flaming Ears*. I talked to Angela Hans Scheirl, who, with Ursula Purrer and Dietmar Shipek, co-directed this new feature

from Austria.

Flaming Ears is an admixture of comics, horror, and sci-fi, where the lesbian characters are strangely familiar. The plot darts like a charge throughout the film, and meshes with the aesthetic to draw in the innocent, unsuspecting audience.

Cecilia Dougherty: The starting point for the story is very different from what a lot of your contemporaries are doing in lesbian and gay film work. It's not about the struggle of the lesbian against the mainstream, or about maintaining strong lesbian identity in the face of insistence on marginalization.

Angela Hans Scheirl: No, it's not. That's why it happens in the future. There are not many men around — the town is chaotic and only subcultures exist. You have the women doing whatever they like, including murder. But the film is also quite contemporary. I was trying to find out where my

FILM



Flaming Ears.

own morals are. What would you do if there were no mainstream to be reacting against?

CD: I think there's an assumption that it is the responsibility of women in film and video to present an idealized lesbian character, to counter the false and hostile portrayals in popular media.

AHS: It's important for lesbians who are able to make films to grab this power and do this thing that, for lesbians, is a luxury: to portray lesbians without having to define "the lesbian," to have lesbian characters that are representative of different types of people in the film. *Flaming Ears* is very artificial and not so realistic. But it's also a documentary because it's about how we are living, about what happens between women and lovers. These characters are personalities — not clones, and not superstars.

CD: What about the love story aspect? In Amsterdam during their film festival last fall, Teresa de Lauretis said that the lesbian character in

struggle is. The audience has a real need to see positive imagery and to see themselves represented in a good light, but showing one-dimensional "good" gay characters is a trend I work against.

AHS: Other filmmakers have to do that [create positive images]. I'm interested in what people — lesbians and women — think, but it has a limit. I couldn't do it to please the

audience. *Desert Hearts*, for instance, was a very popular film for many lesbians, but I can't identify with the characters because it's never been a problem for me to be a lesbian. *Flaming Ears* is not a movie where you can easily identify. You can watch these women in it, but you don't need to identify with them.

CD: What kinds of films do you like?

AHS: I like horror films because they break the taboos of the body. They go into the body. They open the body. I'm interested in sex and violence. When you use a lot of horror iconography, you can use fetishes and symbols to show a lot of sex and violence, and the audience can accept it that way. I want to create my own horror iconography, to build atmosphere and characters cinematically, not just to illustrate an emotion or have it acted out, but to show it through film, in a logical and complex narrative. I'd also like the audience to somehow relax and

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CD: What about the love story aspect? In Amsterdam during their film festival last fall, Teresa de Lauretis said that the lesbian character in narrative can only be identified by the fact of her involvement romantically with another female character. According to her logic, there would be nothing in the representation to identify her as a lesbian if she were not in love — she would simply be a female character, a woman.

AHS: What's important to me is to identify these women characters as lesbians by their actions and wishes, not by their relationships to each other. The relationships in the film are romantic, but not in the way that implies that a relationship between two people is the best thing that can happen. That's not the goal. For the women, desire exists for itself. A person exists complete with desires and fantasies — that is the whole person. To many lesbians, the goal is finding true love, and then there is happiness. For me, being someone who desires something, or someone, is being whole. That is happiness, too.

CD: In my own work, I consider the importance of making the lesbian characterizations as true as I can. This means not idealizing. It also means creating portrayals that are like observations or documentations of something that already exists, instead of trying to shape an accessible media image of the healthily assimilated lesbian, or one who understands what her

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CD: What are you working on now?

AHS: A porno. We're making a porno. We [Ursula Purrer] always talked about it, and made drawings for it, and filmed some of it. But we never filmed the actual sex after working on it for two years. We just filmed the sex today. It's a problem getting women who will have sex in front of the camera, but we did it and it was fun. In Europe, a lesbian sex culture has been building up since the '70s. It was important for us to see the lesbian porn films — it has to do with seeing other people doing it, and finding out new ways of doing it.

CD: So you see how it's been done before, and then come up with something different, something of your own?

AHS: Yes.

CD: Are they treating you well in New York?

AHS: Yes. We go to parties every night. ●

Flaming Ears plays Thurs/25 at 9:15 pm at the Castro Theatre, SF.

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