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Nina Menkes' filmmaking wizardry heads to Hammer Museum

'Nina Menkes: Cinema as Sorcery' features several screenings from the experimental director — including her latest, 'Dissolution' — at the Billy Wilder Theater.

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For three decades filmmaker Nina Menkes has made poetic, evocative films that have placed her in the forefront of American experimentalists. She's a visionary who trusts in the power of image, movement and composition to communicate narrative, meaning and emotion.

Her work has received awards and acclaim in international film festivals, but only her most recent film, "Dissolution," has received a theatrical release. On Saturday that film kicks off a UCLA Film and Television Archive retrospective of her work, "Nina Menkes: Cinema as Sorcery," that runs through March 7 at the Hammer Museum's Billy Wilder Theater.

Arguably not only Menkes' most accessible but also most accomplished work, "Dissolution" expresses her skill at making the moving images captured by her camera expressive of the inner life of her characters.

Loosely inspired by Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," "Dissolution" is a departure for Menkes in that her central figure is a man, but otherwise she continues to focus on isolated individuals living peripheral lives and striving to make sense of them.

Set in the Arab quarter of Tel Aviv, it stars Didi Fire as a young Israeli so desperate for funds he commits murder only to be overcome with guilt.

Other highlights of the retrospective include:

Feb. 19: In the taxing, shimmering, hypnotic "Queen of Diamonds" (1991) Menkes' pale, beautiful sister — and frequent collaborator — Tinka plays a Las Vegas blackjack dealer whose monotonous existence is punctuated by her ritual caring for a dying old man. Tacky, barren side-street Vegas is a perfect locale for the director's vision of alienation and decay as she evokes a sense of the cycle of life and death with scenes of a marriage and a funeral.

Feb. 24: "Magdalena Viraga" (1986), Menkes' first feature, is boldly imaginative and rigorous, evoking the spiritual awakening of a benumbed young prostitute (Tinka Menkes) in starkly beautiful imagery and in passages from the poetry of Mary Daly, Gertrude Stein and Anne Sexton. Menkes draws upon vivid East Los Angeles locales to suggest an unnamed police state to create a most realistic and compelling environment in which her heroine's inner life begins to awaken.

March 2: Menkes finds a genuinely fresh way of confronting her viewers with violence, taking a newspaper article as her inspiration for the "The Bloody Child" (1996). Much of her demanding yet enlightening work takes place on a Mojave Desert highway, where a group of Gulf War veteran Marines awaits backup in taking into custody another Marine. Recently returned from the Gulf War, the man has murdered his wife and her bloodied body lies in the back seat of a car. The film's key figure is a Marine captain (Tinka Menkes) who is the arresting officer and who absorbs the dead woman's spirit. This is expressed in surreal imagery intercut with an otherwise near-documentary film to suggest the ways in which we internalize violence and its myriad effects upon us.

March 7: With the challenging yet luminous "Phantom Love" (2007), Menkes continues her explorations of solitary women undergoing a painful process of self-discovery in a surreal, fragmented world that mirrors the tumult and longing in their inner lives. It's easy — and best — to yield to Menkes' powerfully seductive vision, which invites viewers to make intuitive connections. The elegant Lulu and her tasteful vintage home seem from another era, but the brutality and chaos of the contemporary world are forever intruding: news of the war in Iran on TV, sirens and traffic noise from the street. Lulu has a vivid imaginative life but is gradually confronted with the real-life psychotic breakdown of her younger sister (Juliette Marquis), which propels Lulu onto a path of self-liberation that Menkes expresses in an increasingly daring, surreal manner.

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