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A Cinematic Sorceress of the Self



A scene from Nina Menkes' movie "The Bloody Child" (1996), set in the Mojave Desert.

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THE filmmaker Nina Menkes describes her troubled protagonists as shadow selves who embody some deep, possibly hidden part of her. It's no surprise to hear that her career — five features and two shorter films over three decades, a sporadic but startlingly coherent body of work — began the moment she found the right stand-in for herself.



Ann Johansson for The New York Times
The filmmaker Nina Menkes.

In 1981, while enrolled in the graduate film program at the University of California, Los Angeles, she made a short movie about two sisters, based on her relationship with her sister, Tinka, who had been ill with lupus. When the actress she had cast as her sister failed to show up, Ms. Menkes asked Tinka if she would play herself. Tinka was reluctant to re-enact her sickness, so they decided that an actress would play Tinka, and Tinka would play Nina.

"We were blown away," Ms. Menkes said recently by phone from Los Angeles, recalling the first time she saw the footage with Tinka, which she turned into an 11-minute film called "A Soft Warrior." "There was something that happened between me as the director and Tinka as the actress. It started this process of her being my body double on some deep level."

Ms. Menkes's films, which are being shown at retrospectives at the UCLA Film & Television Archive (through March 7) and at Anthology Film Archives in New York (March 9 through 16), are not literally

autobiographical, but they are intensely personal. More than that, they seem to emanate directly from her psyche. All are efforts to give form to something intangible, to film an inner state. It's a tricky task that Ms. Menkes accomplishes through long takes and wide-angle compositions, layered sound designs and oblique editing schemes, all of which make time and space seem like subjective dimensions, vulnerable to the warping effects of mood and memory.

Ms. Menkes has compared this alchemical process to sorcery, and her trancelike movies, which rely on repetition and incantation, act on the viewer like spells. "I like the idea of conjuring films as opposed to writing and directing them," she said.

A distinct and idiosyncratic figure in American cinema, Ms. Menkes, who declined to give her age, has also remained somewhat overlooked, an outsider both on the indie film scene and in avant-garde circles. Her work is sometimes called experimental, but unlike most experimental filmmakers she makes narrative features. The critic Bérénice Reynaud has written about the sense of "heroic solitude" that is central to Ms. Menkes's work. "She has no master and no disciples, which forces her to reinvent the history of cinema in her own terms," Ms. Reynaud wrote.

That loneliness finds a corollary in the profound alienation depicted in the films, especially the ones that star Tinka, who plays an Orthodox Jew adrift in the desert in "The Great Sadness of Zohara" (1983), a Los Angeles prostitute accused of murder in "Magdalena Viraga" (1986), a Las Vegas croupier sleepwalking through an entropic existence in "Queen of Diamonds" (1991) and a Marine captain in charge of a grisly crime scene in the Mojave desert in "The Bloody Child" (1996).

Inspired by a news item about a Gulf War veteran who murdered his wife and was caught trying to bury her in the desert, "The Bloody Child" is perhaps Ms. Menkes's most radical film, circling obsessively around the moment of the arrest and folding in seemingly unrelated scenes shot in the African jungle. Like many critics who reviewed it — Jonathan Rosenbaum praised its "chilling and clarifying" view of violence in American culture — Ms. Menkes considers it her artistic peak. But it was also, she said, the culmination of "a descent into hell." The psychological toll on both sisters, coupled with a recurrence of Tinka's illness, put an end to their creative partnership. Ms. Menkes did not make another film for nearly a decade. "It took a good five or six years to recover in the sense of being able to imagine anyone else in front of the camera," she said.

Ms. Menkes's recent films are not exactly lighter, but the second phase of her career has been characterized by a movement forward and outward. "They're still depictions of my inner self," she said of her characters, but her latest features are departures in crucial respects. The black-and-white "Phantom Love" (2007), a psychodrama about sisterly and mother-daughter ties, was her first film without Tinka. "Dissolution" (2010), a loose update of Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" set in a largely Arab quarter of Tel Aviv, was her first shot on digital video (also in black and white) and her first with a male lead (Didi Fire, in the Raskolnikov role).

Turning the page, for the moment, on a series of movies that confronted the patriarchal oppression of women, Ms. Menkes said she felt free to examine a damaged male figure in "Dissolution," which also allowed her to explore her signature theme of violence in the context of the Middle East, a region she knows intimately. Her parents, both refugees from Nazi Europe, met in Jerusalem. Ms. Menkes was born in the United States and raised mainly in Berkeley, Calif., but the family went often to Israel. Ms. Menkes speaks fluent Hebrew, studied Arabic as an undergraduate and values the region's spiritual significance.

No less than David Lynch, Ms. Menkes is an artist of the unconscious for whom the creative and the spiritual quest are one and the same. The charged images in "Phantom Love" — a woman walking past a boa constrictor in an apartment hallway, for example — emerged while she was working with a

psychic healer, in a months-long process she called “shamanic journeying.” Much of “Dissolution” came to her while she was living in silence and isolation in a Trappist monastery in Israel. Ms. Menkes recognizes the pitfalls of discussing her work in openly spiritual terms. More than once, as she spoke of her fascination with the mystical, she stopped herself. (“I’m afraid to sound too insane here,” she said. “This is going to seem ridiculous.”) But there is nothing hippy-dippy about her films, which for all their metaphysical leanings, are devoid of New Age sap and, if anything, derive their visceral power from a formal poise and rigor.

As controlled as her work tends to be — she is her own cinematographer and editor — Ms. Menkes emphasizes the importance of spontaneity. She never storyboards and insists on operating the camera herself, citing Henri Cartier-Bresson’s maxim that to take a photograph is to put “one’s head, one’s eye and one’s heart on a single axis.” She added: “The formal elements in my work are intuitive. What I do is get as deep as I can into the emotional content of a territory that seems to have its own structure.”

While teaching at the California Institute of the Arts, where she has been on the faculty for 10 years, she’s also laying the groundwork for a new feature called “Heatstroke,” a story of sisters: one a movie star in Los Angeles, the other a diplomat’s wife in Cairo. Gus Van Sant, a longtime admirer of Ms. Menkes’s work, has attached himself as executive producer, and Creative Capital, a nonprofit financing organization, awarded her a grant for the project, which should make the development process less difficult than usual.

“She’s had frustrations, but she’s also more motivated than ever,” said Mike Plante, a programmer at Sundance who organized Ms. Menkes’s retrospective through his distribution company, Cinemad Presents. “She’s the type of filmmaker where making a film is part of her existence.”

Three decades into her career Ms. Menkes remains a holdout and on some level an optimist: a filmmaker who hasn’t compromised her unorthodox approach to narrative and who believes an audience still exists for radical cinema. “I’ve always resisted the label of experimental,” she said. “To me the work is not experimental at all. It’s really just trying to be precise to what I experience.”

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