



Young-shil Han, *Living in the City - Look at the Back*, red clay, 1989 (photo courtesy of National Museum of Women in the Arts).

artist craftily balances wit and proficiency, rendering adventurous what would otherwise be rather hackneyed subject matter.

Echoing Cho's penchant for sculpture, Yong-Shil Han's figurative clay works use more emotive images than any other artist featured in the exhibition. Her glazed, unglazed, and sometimes weathered figures often have missing faces and outer layers peeled back. In the stoneware clay work *Living in the City—Words Become Noises*, a blindfolded figure is clothed in swaddling fabric, its features hauntingly imperceptible. The air around this and others of Han's works emits tragedy, displacement, or un-speakable disillusionment.

Kyung-yeun Chung's assemblages are as noteworthy for their originality as for their shock value. In *Untitled 87*, she stuffed hundreds of gloves, dyeing their fingertips in graduations from brown to black with most appearing burnt as the result. The gloves then were fused in a chaotic frenzy, with fingertips and palms intermingling in a large-scale, borderless mass.

In their sheer density, Chung's assemblages evoke images of proletarian struggle, of the depersonalized global oneness, a message of tribute to the people rather than a self-absorbed expression. With *Untitled 90-2*, the gloves are so stretched that they appear more like elongated udders, their dyed fingers curving slightly at varying lengths. Chung, who more recently has begun to produce gloves in clay, bronze, and ceramics, tucks the fingers of the gloves in *Untitled 90-L* under other gloves. The result is a cohesive tapestry decidedly more resigned yet no less appealing than the freneticism achieved in *Untitled 87*.

The remaining six artists' works featured in the exhibition exhibit ingenuity. In her abstract ink, acrylic, and gouache on paper renderings, Soon-shil Baik endeavors to re-create the inward and extrinsic sensation associated with the tea ceremony. The hazy fog achieved in *Dongda Song 8828*, composed of a brew of lines and grey dabs of color partially overlaid in steamy oranges and reds, perhaps best displays her agility in illustrating the theme.

A participant in Korea's "white color" school that came of age in the 1970s, Och-sun Chin moves beyond that monochromatic bend to elaborate upon minimalism in her more recent works presented. On her canvases, transparent geometric boxes often are drawn in varying sizes atop a muted backdrop with acrylic stretches of color sometimes used to highlight intermittent sections. Only in *Answer 90-B* are the color fields absent. Instead, here a sea of tiny boxes crowd one another, their structures melding in places, and float atop a yellowed canvas. Every arena the artist has entered seemed duly challenged. In her

abstracted landscapes, Boon-ja Choi fills in colored outlines with acrylics and oil to render dense fields of diminutive geometric movements that often appear Westernized to her countrymen and Asiatic to the Western eye. Dramatic and cell-like, the works belie the more traditional, textured approach more often associated with Asian landscape painting.

The painter Won-sook Kim, contributed a two-fold collection inspired by Korean legend. Her oil-on-wood boxes adorned with colorful, representational scenes echoed the mute-palettéd fantasy-based themes that dominate her paintings. Just as the symbolism inherent in Park's works typify the legacy of the female Korean artist, Soo-ja Kim's fabric works summarize the importance of bridging the past, of blending a bit of the old with the new. Her pieces, comprised in part of fabrics she received from her mother and grandmother, are sewn together, painted upon and regenerated into elaborate, often enigmatic assemblages that offer a contemporary cohesion of past and future. In their unbridled boldness and dash, the artists featured join her in her reverent appreciation for those that have come first and instinctively celebrate her search for new definitions.

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**Paris is Burning, Privilege, Queen of Diamonds**  
Sundance Film Festival  
Park City, Utah  
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Edward Said's calls to "use the visual faculty...to restore the non-sequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity" and to open "the culture to experiences of the other" resonate with particular intensity in what has now become the summer's surprise sleeper *Paris is Burning* (Jenny Livingston, 1990), which won the 1990 LA Film Critics' Documentary Award and the Sundance Festival's Documentary Prize for its look at a sector of the New York gay community: the Drag Queens. Rejected by society and their families, these black and Latino "Children" as they are called find refuge in "Houses"—ruled by older queens or "Mothers" and named after couturier houses such as the "House of La Beija," the "House of Chanel," the "House of St. Laurent"—which serve as surrogate families, providing emotional and financial support. The Children's lives focus around the annual Harlem Drag Queen Balls, gala costume and dance contests in which House members compete for trophies and cash prizes.

To focus as the film's publicity brochure does on the "fantasy" costumes is to ignore the implications beneath the Balls' more disturbing competitions, contests whose premises seem designed to subvert mainstream America's most fundamental source of reality—the "self." Participants in these contests are judged for the best representation of "Realness." The Children come down the runway dressed as Harlem hoodlums, and the point is to "look real"—"as real," the Ball announcer says, "as the punk that tried to rob you before you came in here." In a word, these are contests of males who are female impersonators who are impersonating males. The "Realness" contests illustrate the Children's deliberately self-conscious play not merely with their own respective identities but with conventional identity itself, a play in which no "self," and especially not white middle class heterosexual selfhood, has any basis in fact. Like the Ball's other costumes, such identity is a charade, dictated by an arbitrary set of social conventions. Indeed, if the self remains intact at all in this film, it is the non-identity of acting or disguise.

Just as "the appearance of the imaginary upsets social conventions" in Genet, as Sartre has written, so

it unsettles the "conventional" in *Paris*. The stupefying artifice of the Harlem Drag Queen Ball is juxtaposed with the puzzlement of an aging queen, Corey, as he applies makeup for the Ball: "the Children are not what they used to be," Corey says wearily. "Before, we tried to look like Betty Grable or Marlene Dietrich. We tried to look white. Now they want to look like Nancy Wilson or like black high fashion models. Before, we would put on feathers and sequins and beads—the really beautiful dresses worn by the most glamorous women. Now they disguise themselves as men." The Children are in danger, Corey suggests, because they don't know what they're doing. They have no point of reference. The epistemological upheaval implied in Corey's remark can be illustrated by the distinction between a 1960's ad for "Realemon," a citrus flavoring product that contains no lemon whatsoever and which thus falsifies reality, and the recent ad that reads: "Real cigarettes for real people," in which the word "real" is no longer used falsely but has lost its meaning entirely—what is a real cigarette? What are real people? There is in this postmodern world of Baudrillardian simulacra no "reality" to falsify.

Having used epistemic reversal to undermine the concept of a "real self," *Paris is Burning* can then use conventional characterization with far greater effect to focus on one of the Children, a tiny blond named Venus Extravaganza who, unlike Corey and apparently many of the Children, is oblivious to this distinction. Dressed in floral slacks and reclining daintily in her bedroom, she tells us dreamily that she wants to look like a fashion model, magazine shots of whom hang on the wall. "She is so beautiful," Venus says, tracing her delicate fingers across the photograph, "I just admire her so much...She's delicate, like me. The other Children are jealous of me because I'm so petite, just like a real woman. I am a real woman. Except for this part between my legs. A very private part that has nothing to do with anything, and that as soon as I'm a famous model I'll have removed so that I'll be free and beautiful at last." Our own "selves" unsettled by the film, we are so deeply affected by Venus' cultural victimization—her ideas of "beauty," her attempts to glamorize her marginalized existence—so drawn into her world and her yearning to be "free of a body she never wanted," that when the film's credits tell us that she was killed after getting into a strange car several months after the film's completion, we are stupefied at the homophobia that killed her. As with the film *El Norte* it is as if we have become this Other, this girl trapped in a man's body, victimized by and yet drawn to a set of standards that her culture has told her is "beautiful." The brutality aimed at her is aimed at us, because the radical intolerance that springs from our own erstwhile familiar "norms" has become incomprehensible.

This year the Sundance Filmmakers' Trophy went to producer/director Yvonne Rainer's sixth film *Privilege*, a witty and dazzlingly complex docu-drama on racism and menopause. In the frame story, a black filmmaker Yvonne Washington (Novella Nelson) interviews her white middle-aged friend Jennie (Alice Spivak) on the topic of menopause. The exchange sparkles briefly with gender-racial barbs between the two old friends—Yvonne: "Sure, you can forget color on this topic, but I never can"—and then slips deftly into Jennie's "hot flashback" of her youth as a SoHo dancer, her neighborly relations with a lesbian named Brenda (Blair Baron), Brenda's barely prevented rape, and Jennie's self-deluding romance with the rape case's white male prosecutor (Dan Berkey). A series of choral devices strategically interspersed throughout the flashback vividly dramatizes the shades of gray qualifying the "normal" blacks and whites of race and gender questions: Brenda's Puerto Rican would-be rapist (Rico Elias) blames his chauvinist brutality on the racial prejudice he has suffered; his battered wife Digna (Gabriella Farrar)—whose frequent Carmen Miranda costume pinpoints Anglo stereotypes of the Latino—ridicules the myopic Jennie who dances blissfully with the preppy Anglo prosecutor who is twenty years her junior; a series of found documentary clips show white male physicians, among them the celebrated L.A. psychoanalyst Judd Marmor,

intoning on female menopause as a type of "physical and emotional decay"; a Macintosh computer screen displays the staggering figures, given by State licensing boards, of the unnecessary hysterectomies performed by male physicians annually in the U.S., the vast sums physicians earn from them, and a text reading: "There is a popular saying among gynecologists that there is no ovary so healthy that it is not better removed, and no testes so diseased that they should not be left intact," a clown-lipsticked Yvonne Rainer, herself an admitted participant in the menopause debate pops up from behind a couch, deadpanning: "You know, I've reached the age where when I try to put on makeup I look like a transvestite," and then retracts like a jack-in-the-box.

Each facet of the film's multi-voiced colloquy is an aspect of Rainer herself. A case in point is Rainer's opening for the film: after the credits Rainer walks onto the set in a parodic impersonation of disarmament activist Dr. Helen Caldecott; she enters, seats herself before a dressing table mirror and proceeds to apply her lipstick carefully. With each stroke, she methodically smears the color further beyond her lips until, lipstick smeared clownishly across her cheeks, "Caldecott" turns from the mirror toward the movie theater audience: "Women," she intones severely, "I do believe the future lies with us. But we've done nothing yet. All this talk of equal rights, we've achieved nothing, we're pathetic." The "we" is salient here. Rainer counts herself among feminism's absurdly self-righteous Caldecotts, assuming the persona not merely to criticize what she calls "the white middle-class feminist movement that [has] stalled in a lot of ways, and...that has not made the kinds of distinctions, class-wise and race-wise, that it should have," but to critique her own myopic perspective, overdetermined as it is by her Anglo/bourgeois background.

The Caldecott persona, in other words, is the prelude to *Privilege's* systematic fracturing of Rainer's own identity, in which Rainer is now Caldecott, now her "own" white New York filmmaker self; now fictional black interviewer/filmmaker Yvonne Washington; now myopic, aging SoHo dancer Jennie; now the battered, sardonic, Puerto Rican housewife Digna, and so on. At the simpler level, the fragmentation of Rainer's cinematic portrait—the disorienting juxtaposition of her own experiences with those of fictional and actual women—acts to recuperate and thus reclaim the stigmatized event of female menopause: through the film's protean nature the conventionally negative transformations of a menopausal woman's body become positive events to be celebrated: a woman's privilege. At the subtler and undoubtedly the crucial level, the shifting interchange between the filmic composite of voices and characters and Rainer's own identity creates a stunning presentation of the manifold character of feminine identity itself.

The difference between the fragmented selfhood of *Paris is Burning* and the fragmented self-presentation of Rainer's *Privilege* is that such divisiveness is not a crisis but a feminine status quo, a fact of life that Rainer celebrates in all its liberating power. In a telling remark to the *Village Voice* Rainer remarked: "I don't see the various roles as splitting myself as more like making a literary connection." In the last analysis the connection Rainer alludes to is the one that exists not simply between women, white or black, rich or poor, but between people, regardless of race, class, culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or otherwise. Paradoxically, and thanks in large part to Rainer's markedly literary approach, fragmentation is the vehicle for such connection. What becomes evident in *Privilege* is that the acceptance of the purely fortuitous and random nature of human identity, which is in effect the refusal to quest after some kind of individual autonomy or mastery, may be the only vehicle for such a universal connection.

For all its experimentation, Rainer's *Privilege* remains grounded in reality, largely because of the historical basis of her political agenda: New York's

SoHo is New York's SoHo, Helen Caldecott is Helen Caldecott. Rainer invokes the banality of the real as an antidote to the blurry pinkness surrounding conventional notions of the feminine: "glamour," "romance," "creation," "motherhood"—all dissolve against the drab greys of the New York pavement. Unlike Rainer's historically grounded didacticism, Nina Menkes' *Queen of Diamonds* hovers oneirically about the question of what constitutes a "feminine aesthetics," and what is stopped short by the New York pavement in Rainer's film is given free rein through the surreal Las Vegas landscape in Menkes' *Diamonds*.

Like Menkes' second film *Great Sadness of Zohara*, *Diamonds* is to a large extent a "hallucinogenic journey through the vortex of unadulterated female space." But "this minimalist, post-pop emotional x-ray of the U.S." as Menkes calls it is also her "painting of...an over-enlarged, profit-motivated core, surrounded by mute and arid alienation." Shot entirely on location in Las Vegas, Nevada and in the southern deserts of California, the film is a visually stunning condemnation of America's spiritual bankruptcy: by the shore of the Salton sea an old man



Yvonne Rainer, *Privilege*, film still (photo courtesy of Zeitgeist Films).

dissolves against Mark Rothko expanses of rainbow sky and water; in a deserted vacant lot on the edges of the Las Vegas strip a single palm tree ignites spontaneously, its incongruous flames hypnotizing the audience like a torch in a bottomless cave; against a background of dry Nevada hills a giant casino dice clock poises tarantula-like above the top slats of a Budget rental truck.

But Menkes' use of the Las Vegas environs to critique American values is only a backdrop to the film's more pressing concern—the vague sense of a "distorted" or alternate form of being. Like *Privilege*, *Queen of Diamonds* is about the feminine self. But unlike her friend Yvonne Rainer, who in her support of alternate social groups is still willing to engage and even do battle with the external ("male") world, Nina Menkes has turned from that world almost entirely. What she discovers with this inward turn seems to be emerging almost exclusively of Menkes' help, almost of its own volition—a "Wounded Feminine," Menkes calls it for want of a better term, and a presence that frightens Menkes herself. Menkes' nebulous sense of this Other is not so much a fragmented being as an alien one.

*Diamonds'* oblique "story" involves Firdaus (played powerfully by the director's sister, Tinka) a young woman who works as a dealer in a Las Vegas casino. Living alone in a motel room, she spends her days watching the arid landscape and nursing an old man who lies dying in one of the motel rooms. Her nights are spent dealing cards at a blackjack table. Minimal in its overt action, little "happens" in *Diamonds*. The film's power stems from the palpable aura of repressed rage and despair that Tinka gives Firdaus and her surroundings. Much like her sister's

painstakingly static camera work, Tinka's portrayals of Firdaus is sphinx-like, her movements slow, weighted, like a wounded but still dangerous animal. Traditional depictions of Las Vegas usually involve action of some kind—violent action as in casino gangster mobs, frenetic activity as in laughing, glitzy nightclub scenes, but always movement, and always rapid. Neutralized by speed and action, the city's tinselly grotesqueness remains an object of laughter, a forgiving and forgivable playground. In *Queen of Diamonds* it becomes a Bosch or better, a Breughel nightmare, its teeth-grating banality stripped to an almost unbearable rawness by Firdaus' endless gaze. Tinka's unblinking stare—barely distinguishable from Menkes' painfully extended long takes—transforms and dissolves the bleak Las Vegas scenes into a surreal landscape against which Firdaus stands, an enigmatic monolith. "Her loner position," Menkes comments, "is the backside of centuries of Western Heroes; she stands in the center as watcher and victim of a system which is starting to crack."

But as alternate being, Firdaus moves beyond the status of mere watcher and victim. As Menkes explained in a Los Angeles interview several months after the Sundance Festival, "our environment has the power to victimize us only if we give it that power." In *Queen of Diamonds*, Firdaus has begun to withhold that power, even to reclaim some of it for herself. As a result, her nightmare surroundings have begun to crack. Under her gaze a palm tree ignites; on the tacky table of her sparse motel room, fabulous jewels mysteriously appear.

How the system will crack, who the "watcher" is, where she will come from and how much she will have to do with the system's dissolution is not made clear. At the film's conclusion a car pulls up, Firdaus gets in and the car pulls away. The audience is unsure whether she knows the driver or whether she's hitchhiking—whether she might be killed. Unlike the similar ending of *Paris is Burning*, the credits give no information. She is just gone. "When she's gone," Menkes remarked, "we'll never get her back. We will have lost her, that part of ourselves, or that Other, forever." Like the best of the Sundance Festival films, *Paris is Burning*, *Privilege* and *Queen of Diamonds* are about this fragile alternative identity, this fragile "Other" that has nothing to do with the autonomous selfhood that the western world so jealously guards.

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## Do Poznania: Conversations in Poland

A film by Gordon Ball

For two months during two summers (1986 and 1988) American filmmaker Gordon Ball visited Poland. He talked with Poles of every social class; he listened attentively to the nuances in the verbal patterns of their lives. He took notes. He shot color footage with a small format camera. Back home (he currently lives in Virginia), quite unlike the usual American documentarist who travels abroad, he shaped his "diaries" into sixteen minutes of cinema that might be taken at first as straightforward documentary but quickly draws the viewer into the realm of visual and aural poetry. But in addition to being poetry, *Do Poznania* is a parable reminding us of the dangers of our own homegrown cultural/political authoritarianism. In this sense *Do Poznania* is much akin to Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Bruillard* (*Night and Fog*), another cautionary film with poetic/parable qualities.