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A serial risk-taker, Menkes never stumbles

FOR more than 20 years Nina Menkes has been taking risks that unfailingly arrive at destinations satisfyingly right no matter how elliptical the getting there may be. Her work is all of a piece, with each successive film flowing from the previous one.

Her boldly imaginative 1986 feature debut, "Magdalena Viraga," evokes the spiritual evolution of a benumbed young prostitute (Tinka Menkes, the filmmaker's sister) in a Latin American police state. Menkes had already done a short film, "The Great Sadness of Zohara," an intense portrait of isolation, which surfaced in 1988. Combining images of desolate beauty with fragments of poetry, Menkes chronicles a Jerusalem



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VETERAN: A bold 1986 debut set Nina Menkes' artistic course.

woman's (Tinka Menkes) increasing isolation from her Orthodox Jewish faith.

The tacky, deserted backstreets of Vegas are an apt locale for "Queen of Diamonds," Menkes' 1991 vision of alienation and decay in which a blackjack dealer's (Tinka Menkes) tedious

life is punctuated by the ritual caring for an old man. With the demanding and enlightening "The Bloody Child" (1996), Menkes found a fresh way of confronting audiences with violence — how we internalize it and its myriad consequences. A police officer (Tinka Menkes) absorbs the spirit of a dead female Gulf War Marine after finding her body in a car in the Mojave Desert. The transformation is expressed through surreal imagery intercut with otherwise near-documentary film.

Yet to screen locally: the 2005 documentary "Massaker," about the 1982 massacre by Lebanese Christian militias at two Palestinian refugee camps. Menkes' next project, "Heatstroke," will be set in Los Angeles and Cairo.

— KEVIN THOMAS