

# PHANTOM LADY

THE EXPERIMENTAL FEMINIST FILMS OF NINA MENKES, AT UCLA

BY KARINA LONGWORTH

**B**ased in Los Angeles and trained at UCLA's film school, Nina Menkes has made five feature films in 26 years, all of them appropriating Hollywood genres — noir, horror, procedurals — as raw matter for wildly nonlinear works dedicated to scrambling conventional narrative logic and gender politics. "Nina Menkes: Cinema as Sorcery," opening Saturday at UCLA's Billy Wilder Theater, is the first nearly comprehensive retrospective of Menkes' independently produced, largely grant-funded filmography.

Repetition is a key theme of Menkes' work: Events re-occur within films and across them, reflections and mirrors complicate compositions, and characters are psychologically marked by oppressive routine. Tracing her pet concerns (gorgeous, sad women; the emotional fallout of violence) across locations as disparate as Las Vegas and Tel Aviv, through aesthetics ranging from vivid color 35mm to crisp black-and-white HD, Menkes' body of work is a fluid continuum of dreams and nightmares.

In *Queen of Diamonds* (1991) — my pick for the must-see rediscovery of the program — Menkes' sister and frequent collaborator Tinka Menkes plays Firdaus, a bored, beautiful blackjack dealer at an off-Strip Vegas casino. The first shot, a close-up of blood-red, press-on talons and a tangle of curly black hair on a hotel-white pillowcase, clues the viewer in to Menkes' attitude toward femininity: sexy tipped over into scary, natural clashing with artificial, and totally visceral. Firdaus, all mile-high legs and high-waisted short-shorts, is impossibly implacable, her keel as even as the constant beeping of machines inside the casino.

Its "action" broken up by long sequences of Firdaus at work — a cog in a machine of stimulation — what narrative the film has concerns the nearly imperceptible effect this city's sunbaked, manufactured desire has on an ice queen. Though emboldened by her own youth and beauty, Firdaus grows increasingly aware of the need for self-protection.

The film's most fascinating scene takes place at the wedding of Firdaus' neighbor, whose daily violence against his wife-to-be has been the only thing to provoke a real response from Firdaus. In what would become a Menkes signature, the camera stays far away from the wedding-party scene, taking it all in and implicitly highlighting the protagonist's isolation in a long, unbroken crowd shot. Firdaus, dressed in diaphanous white, floats through the party like a ghost, her presence more out of place than the bride's black eye.

*Diamonds* premiered in the narrative competition at Sundance alongside Richard Linklater's *Slacker* and Hal Hartley's *Trust*, and as much as it's a formal exercise in withholding, the film also makes sense within the context of the early-'90s Ameri-



Queen of Diamonds

can indie: Firdaus' affectless affectation is compatible with the era's X-Girl brand of cool. Sixteen years later, when Menkes returned to the theme of a statuesque, obsessively manicured brunette sleepwalking through a casino job in the L.A. Koreatown-set *Phantom Love*, she'd take a tonal and visual U-turn. *Phantom's* hazy black-and-white cinematography and silent film-reminiscent spookiness suggest Guy Maddin without the wink, its women-in-surrealist-peril plot distinctly David Lynchian. (Indeed, *Phantom Love* and Lynch's *Inland Empire* would make a fascinating early-21st-century L.A. double feature.)

The film begins with, and frequently returns to, imagery of Lulu (Marina Shoif) enduring the thrusts of a male lover whose face we can't see. The repetitive motion of his rutting back, the perfectly percussive rustle of sheets and breath, too obviously convey mechanization (satisfaction is a scant commodity for women in Menkes films). While Lulu's "womanly duties" may be as joyless an occupation as her job at the

casino, the film is increasingly more concerned with the trauma she suffers from her overbearing mother and troubled sister, in waking life and in dreams. In Menkes' mystical vision, the people who are supposed to provide unconditional love for Lulu instead become sources of terror.

Menkes' interest in crimes of passion and the ghosts they create is dramatized most directly in another pair of features, *The Bloody Child* (1996) and her most recent film, *Dissolution* (2010). Based on an incident in which a Gulf War veteran was found digging a desert grave for the wife he had just killed, *Child* is essentially a backward procedural, telling the story of the crime's prelude and aftermath, and the mark it leaves on a female Marine (Tinka Menkes), in fractured chunks, more or less beginning at the end and ending at the beginning.

Menkes' most ambitious narrative scramble is also her most successful experiment in frustrating genre expectations, specifically, her refusal to identify characters of this "procedural" in any traditional way,

often keeping the camera so far from dialogue scenes that voices can't be matched to faces. What we see is all we get, and given Menkes' periodic drifts into surrealism and non sequitur, what we see is often intentionally disorienting. The murder may be the film's motivating action, but Menkes avoids depicting it, a structural absence defined as the film's subject by a movie-closing on-screen biblical quote.

Menkes continued to explore the fallout from unseen acts of violence in *Dissolution*. Based loosely on *Crime and Punishment*, the film stars Didi Fire as a broke Jew in an Arab section of Tel Aviv, who robs and kills a female pawnbroker, off-screen, and becomes increasingly plagued by paranoia. A stark noir, the film is both a departure from Menkes' previous work (for the first time, the protagonist is male and the shooting format is video) and the culmination of it,

NINA MENKES' *PHANTOM LOVE* AND DAVID LYNCH'S *INLAND EMPIRE* WOULD MAKE A FASCINATING EARLY-21ST-CENTURY L.A. DOUBLE FEATURE.

deliberately pointing back to images from her earlier films (a ring found in a cooked fish, first seen in *Diamonds*; the motif of horses, echoing a stallion who invades the crime scene in *Child*). Setting *Dissolution* almost entirely in hallways, bars, alleys and stairwells — rendered as dark spaces ripe for hallucinations — Menkes and her faraway camera seem to be emphasizing not just the isolation of her subject but that her subject is isolation.

This is familiar thematic territory for Menkes, with a twist. At his most desperate, the never-named Israeli man asks for a sign, and gets it; Menkes' women, however, seem to have given up hope of being heard. In Menkes' previous films, men are at best a physical burden, and at worst a physical threat, to a female protagonist. That's still true in *Dissolution*, but this time Menkes explores the behavior and psyche of the man after he commits the act of violence. It's not that *Dissolution* has a different worldview — it's the same fatalistic feminism, but this time seen, as things so often are in Menkes' movies, from the flip side.

NINA MENKES: CINEMA AS SORCERY | UCLA Film & Television Archive at the Billy Wilder Theater | Feb. 18-March 7 | cinema.ucla.edu