

*Interview*

PARADISE, BROKEN

BY ISOBEL HARBISON

An interview with director Nina Menkes about her 1991 Sin City—set film *Queen of Diamonds*.

Queen of Diamonds plays at Metrograph from Friday, August 26 as part of [Road Trip](#).



NINA MENKES

For *Queen of Diamonds*, Nina Menkes filmed her sister Tinka Menkes playing Firdaus, a card-dealer living in Las Vegas. An early shot: Firdaus stands behind a blackjack table, dressed in a uniform of a crisp white shirt and black tie, with long acrylic nails, hair trussed, a face powdered white, and lips glossed red. Her arms are folded. Gazing shiftily sideward, she seems absent.

Firdaus is a Muslim name meaning “paradise,” and this area of the city is also her stomping ground, walking languorously between shifts past the PAR-A-DICE Inn. *Queen* was the director’s fourth of six collaborations with her sister, complex studies of looted landscapes and the female figures suspended within them, from a young Jewish woman adrift in the desert in her mid-length film *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), to a Los Angeles sex worker accused of murder in her ground-breaking debut feature *Magdalena Viraga* (1986), to a Marine captain overseeing a strange crime scene in *The Bloody Child* (1996).

Menkes’s portraits have yielded comparisons to films like Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* (1970), Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), and Agnès Varda’s *Vagabond* (1985), reference points Menkes embraces. She pays sharp attention to the choreographic, to Tinka’s subtle movements communicating a sentient woman long set on auto-drive. Casting Firdaus’s every pointed gesture against atmospheric sounds—the spectral clinks, dinks and beeps of a cheap casino, for example—and within deftly angled and colored compositions (fortified by a 4K restoration in 2018), Menkes produces a sumptuous and immersive picture of prolonged dissociation.

Here, Sin City presents a punchy backdrop, a site of nocturnal pleasure and self-transformation, of lit signs pulsing day and night to elicit entry through the passage below. Other women of the avant-garde have explored this, too: Yvonne Rainer (*Film About a Woman Who...*, 1974), Joan Jonas (*Lines in the Sand; Pillow Talk*, 2002), and Peggy Ahwesh (the planned setting for *The Star Eaters*, 2003), following a trail of Las Vegas flicks showing dislocated women, women on the edge, fleeing (as Joan Didion writes in her own Vegas psychodrama, *Play it as it Lays*), “the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing.”

At this intersection *Queen* reigns, with Menkes’s work offering a sublime encounter with the residual decadence and pain of living in a paradise, broken.

ISOBEL HARBISON: Where did *Queen of Diamonds* begin? How did Vegas become its destination?

NINA MENKES: At the time I made *Queen of Diamonds* I was living in L.A., but I had never been to Las Vegas. I had seen a photograph of this really harsh, alienated woman. It was taken in an old casino in Europe, or Cuba, somewhere very elegant. She was angry. Something about the photo hit me like a bolt of lightning, and I got very excited about making a film about a woman who worked in Vegas, because most films about Vegas are about gamblers who come into town, the players, the drunks, the partiers, but never about someone who actually works there. I decided to drive to Vegas to look around, but I was shocked when I got there because it wasn’t elegant like the old European casinos. It was all kitschy Americana, with buffets, tacky—but then I was like, wait, it’s so amazingly American, and so evocative.

When you drive in from L.A. at night, across this huge parched desert, it is pitch black. From the top of this hill, you look down and see Vegas glaring like an oasis of light. And when you get there, the whole town is like “money, money, money”—its whole purpose is for you to lose money as entertainment. It’s the ultimate alienated labor, there’s no product at all, it’s just pure unadulterated capitalism. I found this to be such an incredible metaphor, this glittering center of greed in the middle of the desert, and the workers there are paid minimum wage. I thought it was interesting to look at the people who keep this whole place running, behind the table, in the daytime.

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IH: How did you film the people playing inside the casino?

NM: I was all fired up that I needed to shoot in a real casino, because since the beginning I’d set up my narratives like they were documentaries. Everyone in LA said, “Nina, you can’t shoot in a real casino, you have to build a fake one.” It wasn’t my style, and I didn’t have the money. Around the time that I was trying to figure it out, I got this ad through the post promoting the casino Bob Stupak’s Vegas World, so I called and got right through to the VP. Through him, I told Stupak what I wanted to do, and he said, “Yeah, sure.” He gave me his whole casino to shoot in for free.

To film, we had to put up signs in front of every entrance—*By Entering the casino today you agree to be filmed*—and that made it legit. People were so obsessed by gambling they paid no attention to the signs, or to me, or to the huge 35mm camera on a dolly, the lights; no one looked at us twice. For the exterior shots, I was just wandering around and saw the PAR-A-DICE and the other locations. The whole place is just a satire of itself, chapels with people getting married, hotels and motels, it is so epic.

IH: This was your fourth collaboration with your sister Tinka. How did you discuss Firdaus’s character?

NM: I had the idea that Firdaus would be something of a drifter, she’s a creature of the night and she doesn’t really like the sun, so there’s almost a vampire quality. We talked about that, and about the rhythm of the character, which is quite syncopated. But whatever I imagined, Tinka took it to the stratosphere. The way we work is that I imagine the world, write the script, and create the container where this magical thing is going to happen, but then Tinka comes in and she just electrifies that space with her being, her presence, with the very complicated and deep place she goes. In her own way, she turns into this character in front of our eyes. Then I grab the shots and capture that reality.

IH: Was Firdaus always going to be a blackjack dealer?

NM: It started with the idea of a croupier, but it went very fast to a blackjack dealer. I had this vision of a character with extreme long nails, like a beast emerging from a dark lagoon. I had her go and get them done but when she showed up for her casino training, the dealers said, “You can’t deal with those nails.” I said, “No, she has to have those nails, it’s part of the character.” So she had to learn how to move her fingers in this odd way that accommodated the card dealing but that no dealer would have in real life.

IH: You talk about syncopated rhythm of the character but there’s also a particular treatment of time in your shots.

NM: I have always been a little bit bored by the way traditional film approaches time. I find that most basic narrative films have an accepted way of presenting time: someone goes to sleep, cut, they wake up the next morning. There’s a language which I always found to be false. The way time flows in all my films is as a mystical element. Tarkovsky says that film is sculpting in time, and he talks about horizontal time as mundane time (at 8am I have coffee, at midday I have lunch, I go to bed at 9pm) and then there’s vertical time, which is transcendental, which is the reality that all the mystics have always said, and the psychoanalysts, Albert Einstein: there is no fixed past, present, future, it’s all concurrent. What interests me is this intersection between horizontal and vertical time—that’s where my films sit.

IH: When did you decide upon the 17-minute central shot?

NM: Most of the film is cut right off the script with this one exception. Originally, the dealing shots were to be spread across five or six scenes. But in editing, Tinka said, “Let’s make the dealing one big giant scene in the middle.” I thought that was great, and I ended up putting in every single second of dealing that I shot inside the casino—there are no outtakes, every second of footage is in there.

Queen of Diamonds

IH: I’ve also wondered about the origin of the burning tree scene.

NM: I got that idea from a photograph in a poster I saw in a bookstore in Berkeley. It was of a burning palm tree by Richard Misrach [*Desert Fire #1 (Burning Palms)*, 1983] who did a lot of photography in southern California. When I saw it, I thought, I have to put this in my film. Researching, I found out that spontaneous combustion of palm trees does happen in the desert—Misrach’s was a documentary shot of a natural occurrence. So I drove around the Salton Sea area looking for a tree we could burn; we found it in the middle of nowhere, went to the fire department in this town and asked them to help us burn it down. They agreed because the tree was scheduled for demolition the following week! So, they came, lit it on fire, and stood behind the camera and watched with us as it burned. We only had one chance to get that shot.

IH: Is the fire a motif that connects Firdaus to the imprisoned woman in *Magdalena Viraga*, above whose head appears a crown in flames?

NM: I never thought of a connection between those two images before! But perhaps the connection is that it’s the fire of God, a spiritual power. Tinka’s character in *Magdalena Viraga* comes into her power at the end of the film and she is consequently shot because of it. The fire in *Queen of Diamonds* is also clearly evocative of the burning bush from the Old Testament. In this case, she stands as a witness to the miracle.

I work very intuitively so a lot of times I understand things about my films after the fact. After making *Queen of Diamonds*, I understood that there are a number of skewed religious symbols that I wasn’t overtly aware of at the time we were shooting. The upside-down Christ was inspired by an actual dream I had; a fish can be a symbol for Jesus, and her ring returns to her inside the fish—God is calling her! Firdaus is alienated not only from patriarchal religion, but from her own spiritual center—that’s the real source of her pain, which is an ongoing theme for me.

IH: There’s a foregrounding of her resistance to convention, of opting out...

NM: Certainly the characters that I explored with Tinka—maybe at the end of *Phantom Love* (2007) there’s a glimmer of light?—but all are about a woman who is saying no to everything. Although completely different, they connect to Loden’s *Wanda*, or Varda’s *Vagabond*. These are films that I love because I relate to them so deeply. Wanda is saying no, but she’s completely depressed, which is a different energy than Tinka’s Firdaus. And when I saw *Vagabond*, I thought, “Oh my God, I could have made that film,” it felt so close to home. Mona [the film’s protagonist] says “fuck you,” refusing all this stuff that’s offered to her as a woman, and then she ends up dead in a ditch. I related to that very deeply. You say no to all these things, but what can you actually say yes to?

IH: Your next collaboration with Tinka, *The Bloody Child*, again features the Mojave. What is the evolving significance of this desert in these works?

NM: I’ve always found the desert to be a highly evocative space—in a religious sense, and also because I’ve lived most of my life either in Southern California or various areas of the Middle East, where the desert is always nearby. The silence of the desert is profound.

IH: In an interview from 1992 you mention the condition of the “shadow feminine,” and how its hidden layers are the stuff of your filmmaking. Does that still resonate?

NM: Yes, I had spoken [then] about the common image of women in cinema as being friendly and fuckable—which is exactly what my new documentary [*Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, 2022] is about. Although *Brainwashed* approaches the subject in a different way, it’s also about how the friendly and fuckable image of a woman we’ve seen in films a million times is the cornerstone of cinema. That we’re pushed into the object position, again and again. The underside of that is women’s rage and pain, and that was the idea of the shadow feminine.

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Queen of Diamonds