



VIDEO ART

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Gloria Deitcher: Exposing Human Frailties

The month before last, I presented an overview of Gloria Deitcher's entrepreneurial goals in establishing D.Visions, a profit-oriented video and graphic arts gallery in New York City. The Canadian-born artist has a relatively small collection of her own videotapes, several of which I viewed in her intimate gallery. I did not then have the time or space to discuss her work beyond commenting that "they are tapes you never forget."

I was fascinated by a dichotomy in her autobiographical tapes. They offer an objective, logical, intellectual inquiry set against past emotions that distort and diffuse present feelings. Her personal tapes sear reality by presenting raw life tempered with the saving graces of humor, naiveté, candor and intelligent search.

Deitcher uses video's unique capacity for layering images and sounds to offer us tapes involving her present and past experiences simultaneously. Unfortunately, the montaging sometimes drowns both time perspectives in a cacophony of undiscernible images and words. Happily, some people are better than others at untangling sense density. The inventory of Deitcher tapes includes works that give the artist ample room to display her talents as graphic artist, performer, humorist, feminist and political observer. All should be seen. Here are my comments on two representative works.

A Portrait of Bonnie Lucas

Fortunately, the audio in this tape is not layered, permitting the intermittent autobiographical comments the subject

makes in her dulcet voice to be easily comprehensible. Bonnie Lucas talks about the two parts of her life: as artist, as waitress. The best parts of the tape are the collages of materials which embody values of femininity—delicacy, sweetness, softness.

To earn a living she must resort to waiting on tables. She casually recites her hopes and fantasies, frustrations and disappointments about being an artist in New York City; then, as eloquently, she talks about earning a living as a waitress. Gloria Deitcher, with exquisite artistry, successfully blends Lucas' two worlds by layering images of Bonnie Lucas with the accoutrements of her two disparate lives.

This delicately human, revealing, video portrait of a woman as artist could not have been made by a man. The fact that the maker was an empathetic woman allowed Lucas to be herself without risking ridicule. The casual, sometimes hesitant Lucas voice, plus the layering of natural images of the artist over her work, combine to make this a totally harmonious tape. I hope that Gloria Deitcher's plan to do another interview with Bonnie Lucas, documenting her two-year progress as an artist, will come to fruition.

Coming Down the Home Stretch

It is unusual for me to quote, in full,

comments written by an artist regarding his or her work, but because this is a highly personal work, I am compelled to do so.

"*Coming Down the Home Stretch* is a straight interview between the artist and her mother. Strains of *The Drinking Song* from *La Traviata* open the interview and we see a blonde, well-dressed woman in her early fifties seated next to a younger woman wearing jeans. Both of them are imbibing gin. The interview begins with the mother telling the daughter a Hungarian joke about how to keep one's lover. The tape continues in a light vein and gradually becomes more personal, more intense as the mother discusses the breakup of her marriage, her son's suicide, aging parents and other grim realities of her life. The content of the interview intensifies as does the overt struggle for power between mother and daughter.

"The tape is 45 minutes long and there is rarely a pause in the flow of conversation. Special effects are sparingly used toward the end of the tape. Here, intimacy between mother and daughter is visually demonstrated by the merging of both their heads. If one is to fully appreciate this tape it is necessary to see it from beginning to end."

Without using pretentious, obscure words and convoluted phrases, Gloria

has simply and accurately described her tape. However, she only referred to the tip of the iceberg. What lay beneath the "interview," and it takes time and some patience to perceive it, was a horrendous, beyond-words battle between mother and daughter.

At first I was relaxed, not knowing what to expect, but as the tape rolled on, I became increasingly embarrassed, and I felt guilty and uncomfortable at being made a witness to such a private, lurid affair. I soon felt better, realizing that I had been asked to watch this intramural warfare by one of the protagonists. This gave me the needed distance to properly judge the tape as a video composition created by an artist.

Gloria Deitcher created the tape while she was an artist-in-residence at the A-V department of the University of Bridgeport. "My mother and I stayed at a hotel the night before the taping. I played an audiocassette for her, a tape I had made recalling my childhood years in order to trace where my influences came from. This gave my mother some inkling as to my perceptions."

Since she was on camera the next day, Gloria gave the production crew free rein. They instinctively placed her mother in a more dominant position within the frame—underlining, in a sense, her ascendent role during the

entire taping. The blending of their heads toward the end of the tape, supposedly connoting intimacy, proved absurd because their unresolved confrontation, with its absence of trust, could not have produced rapport except on a superficial level.

The tape is supposed to present the two women as pals, although one is the mother, the other the daughter. But, as Gloria said, "You cannot truly be both." She seemed scarred by the real-life attempt. Ironically, although the mother appears to dominate the "interview," the daughter ultimately becomes the aggressor by producing the tape and making it public.

The work raises ethical questions that learned individuals might hotly debate: Did the maker exploit a family situation? Is the tape an invasion of privacy? Was the tape made at the expense of other members of the family? What is the value of having it all hang out?

Simple production values helped to focus on the nuances and subtle changes and reactions taking place between the two subjects. Even the pauses in the extremely fluid conversation were silently explosive and pregnant with meaning. While Deitcher acknowledges a certain amount of artifice about the project, both mother and daughter were as natural as one would expect. Nothing

they said to one another could be faulted. They were highly civilized and occasionally displayed sensitivity for one another, but the sum total of their interaction proved a dreadful experience to watch. They were two intelligent, articulate women jousting in jest on the surface, but being self-protective and fiendish underneath. No need here for special effects! The 45-minute session was not edited; the extended real time helped to intensify the encounter.

Video, unlike film, added to the immediacy, the reality of the struggle. The undeclared war snares us; yet we remain frustrated and immobile, not knowing what to do with the knowledge spilling out before us. Can we apply it to our own lives? According to Gloria Deitcher, the tape may have certain universal qualities that people can relate to, but she doesn't think others have the same kind of openness with their mothers.

"We did not have the same boundaries that most mothers and daughters have in terms of what to say or not to say to one another. It was an unhealthy relationship that I consciously exploited on camera," said Gloria. Several segments of the conversation revealed the empty pretense of their so-called openness and intimacy.

"In the tape, my mother was very much the woman, the all-knowing woman, while I was the skinny little girl in her



A still from "A Portrait of Bonnie Lucas."

eyes. Part of the interview was a process for me going in the direction of being a woman in my own right. It was very important for me to get to that point, otherwise whatever art I produce would not be mine."

Deitcher has yet to be freed of her mother, a woman who appears, at least

on tape, to be a charming manipulator and hidden aggressor. The mother seems so hung up on upholding "family tradition" that, in the process, she loses the very family she attempts to hold together.

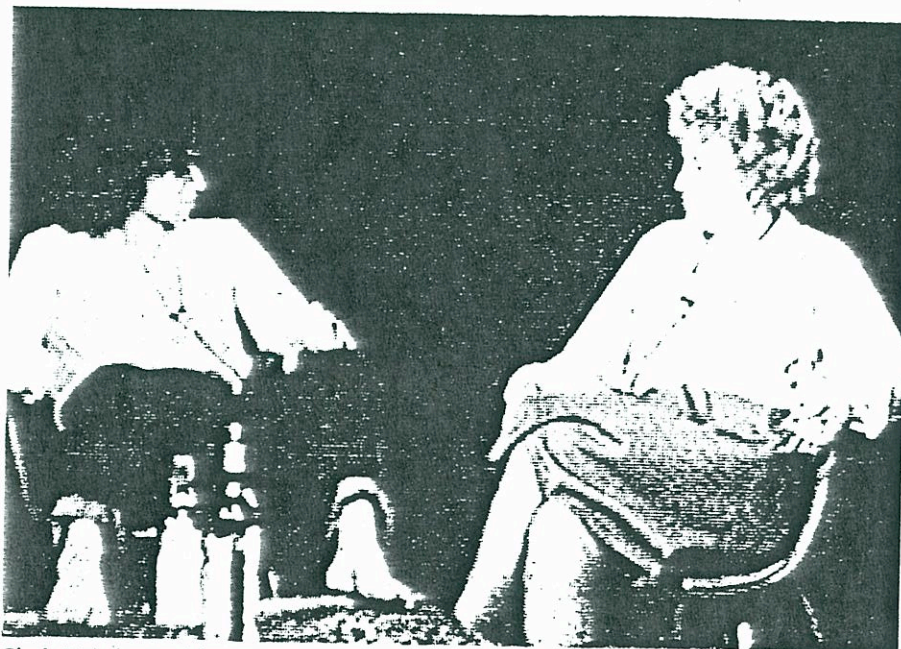
I believe it was an unconscionable act to have the tape shown on cable TV without the father having seen it first. "My

mother asked me not to show the tape to my father," said Gloria. If, according to the artist, *Coming Down the Home Stretch* was an eye-opener, why not make a similar tape with the father? The father-daughter tape would probably be as revealing. It might even give the maker and viewers another perspective on the Deitcher family saga.

At this stage of their interrelated lives, the mother appears to have pulled herself together more than the daughter has. Other viewers may arrive at other conclusions. That's what makes this tape so strong. It is deep enough to demand more than a quick, simplistic, surface interpretation. But it is also elusive because we are not privy to the full lives in question. We simply watch a 45-minute video segment, frozen in time, about very complicated, unresolved human dynamics.

This tape is more than a mere exercise in confrontation. Going beyond the boundaries of art, it touches on family relations, women's studies and psychology. The tape's subtlety distances it from the more egotistical, self-proclaiming, angry tapes made by some artists. Even if it's frustrating to watch, it engages us because it does not overtly and boringly proclaim: "Look at me, I'm unhappy."

Gloria Deitcher offers us an unadulterated, concentrated essence of life from



Gloria Deitcher and her mother in "Coming Down the Home Stretch."

one generation to the next without pontificating on what our conclusions should be. The tape's structure deftly weaves the past with the present. What lessons there are to be learned for the future are left for the viewer to divine.

There is tension evident in all of Gloria Deitcher's autobiographical tapes—the

tension of life in process. Her work waivers between sentiment and sentimentality, strength and weakness, taking and giving, naiveté and sophistication, resentment and self-discovery. Her work is self-referential, dealing with various levels of her consciousness. Video is her medium for self-actualization.