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Media Kids



Collier Schorr on
A Girl's Own Story

*I think I love you
but what am I so afraid of
I'm afraid that I'm not sure of
a love there is no cure for.*

—David Cassidy, "I Think I Love You,"
The Partridge Family, 1974

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had come out in high school. If I had told the girl I sat next to in band that I thought she had the most beautiful hands in the world and I would give anything just to touch them. If I had told people I was gay, would shy girls have crept up to me in the locker room after gym and confessed their desire to be kissed?

As I watched six little video tapes by a 19-year-old named Sadie Benning, safely packed up memories came flooding back. Benning's work is nothing less than a time capsule, autobiographical home movies that detail a girl's coming of age. At 15 she began to weave her diary entries into experimental narratives. All of her tapes use an intermingling of written and spoken dialogue. Little scraps of text function as answers to questions, as deadpan punch lines, or as a second voice with which to argue. Made with no specific audience in mind, they recall the exercise of speaking in front of a mirror or making out with a pilow—practicing before doing it for real. Benning sits perched before her camera as if it were a close friend and talks about falling in love, being a freak, quitting school, touching a boy's dick on a dare.

In *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, 1990, a phosphorus fist fills the screen. Opening, stretching, and clenching into a ball, it becomes a knot in your stomach. As Benning's hand tenses, she talks about "crawling the walls." "I want so badly to yell," she says, "but I don't want to cause a commotion. Attention makes me nervous." While casually eating her lunch in a fictitious restaurant filled with "800 million

other faces," she says, "You know, I've been waiting for that day to come when I could walk the streets and people would look at me and say, 'That's a dyke,' and if they didn't like it they would fall into the center of the earth and deal with themselves....Maybe they'd return, but they'd respect me."

Shot mainly within the confines of her bedroom, the tapes suggest the intimacy of a confessional, but one far removed from the arena of guilt. Sitting alone in this room, Sadie Benning is willing to tell you almost everything. It is this need to talk, to assert her newly recognized identity, that propels her forward. She made *Jollies*, 1990, as a time line, tracing the evolution of her sexuality. Two Barbie dolls kiss and mount one another, as Benning remembers the first time she wanted to touch another body: "It started in 1978 when I was in kindergarten / They were twins / and I was a tomboy / I always thought of real clever things to say / Like I love you." The camera rests on her lips, which part slowly and display a set of braces. She then remembers rolling around naked with an older boy, who later "jacked off" in her bathroom. "I never touched his dick again," is revealed in a childish scrawl. The second hand of a large clock begins a slow revolution, intermittently interrupted by the words "And then I started / kissing girls," spelled out in baby bracelet beads. The beads, which for some adolescent girls might represent a much treasured boyfriend, become a loaded stop sign. Benning then tapes herself and her girlfriend exchanging a series of unhurried kisses. "At 15 I thought about her every day," she states. "And that meant love."

Men's underwear sways on a clothesline in the opening shot of *A Place Called Lovely*, 1991. Police sirens blare in the background and you are now in Milwaukee, a city that used to be considered emblematic of the working-class American dream, but that, in the last decade, has seen its factories relocate in search of higher profits. *A Place Called Lovely* isn't. Posing under a long

blond wig in front of an American flag, Benning gushes, preens, and smiles blindly, expressing a hyperpride most often seen on the Republican campaign trail. Her voice replaces the missing national anthem, speaking of her grandmother's wish for her to become this girl, the good girl, because, as her grandmother tells her, "Bad things only happen to bad people."

These tapes, most of them made with a Fisher-Price Pixel (kid) camera, sputter and spit like drops of water on a hot iron. Secure and unconquerable one minute, angry and frightened the next, Benning tells the story of a friend who was raped by a "black man" and then films a handwritten text explaining that the victim became a "racist, nazi, skinhead." If you handled her videos you'd be covered in newsprint. They are dark and murky things that seem to ask, though never beg, for allies. There is a sense of controlled craziness in this work, in which the information she extols is still to be processed, and memory is truly a thing of the present.

Although much has been made of Benning's age and of the finesse with which she handles a camera, she is not a wunderkind. When, after a recent screening of her tapes at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she ambled up to the stage to answer questions, she seemed more like a shy kid asked to perform at a family gathering than an artist ready to defend and define a body of work. These tapes may be "art," but to judge them strictly from within the canon of experimental film and video is, in some ways, to undervalue them. It is important to keep in mind that Benning is representative of a multitude of teenagers who sit alone in their rooms drawing and writing poetry. She could easily be deemed the "everygirl/tomboy" if gay youth had a voice in any mainstream media. But, of course, they don't. And her messages—anguished, passionate, self-mocking—consequently take on the urgent tone of a survivor. □

Collier Schorr is an artist who lives in New York.

Left to right: Sadie Benning, *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, 1990, still from a black and white video, 8 minutes. Sadie Benning, *Jollies*, 1990, still from a black and white video, 11 minutes. Sadie Benning, *Jollies*, 1990. Sadie Benning, *A Place Called Lovely*, 1991, still from a black and white video, 14 minutes and 5 seconds. All photographs courtesy of Video Data Bank, Chicago.