

"Burn" Magazine
May 1993
Australia

At nineteen Sadie Benning is setting the world alight as a dyke video wunderkind. Cherry Smyth takes a close look at the girl and her work

Imagine you're fifteen, queer and waiting in Milwaukee for life to happen. You pour your desire into diaries and a toy camera and drop out of high school. Four years later, your videos are being applauded in festivals from Honolulu to Finland, you've had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and you're invited to speak at major film and video forums at Sundance and Amsterdam.

At nineteen Sadie Benning is the name on every queer's lips, heralded as the rescuer of the dyke dimension in queer cinema performance. Her work, unlike the fag-boys' so-called queer rubric from *Poison to the Living End*, is microcosmic, low budget and pre-mainstream. Convinced that queer sounds better than lesbian, which always reminded Benning of "a cross between a lizard and an alien," she has skipped the lesbian phase and come straight out as a baby dyke into the eager arms of film/video critics and the lesbian and gay festival circuit.

Shot with a Pixelvision camera, her mostly black and



white work is highly textured, tightly framed, with the image inset in a black mount, which has been likened to a peepshow effect. Snippets of hand written texts are passed mechanically before the lens, giving life to words that haven't yet been braved aloud: "Girls can't get married"; "a friend of mine got raped by a black man. Now she's a racist Nazi skinhead." Raw it is, uncooked it ain't. The soundtrack is thick with the whirr of the camera running which evokes the sound of a projector, layered with a crude collage of messages from TV, '60s pop songs, telephone answering machines, a six-year-old's giggle, bedroom sounds like long hair being repeatedly brushed and the dull noise of traffic in a suburban street.

Fisher Price have since taken the camera off the market ensuring a lasting, unrivalled uniqueness to Benning's distinctive style. So, are we talking camcorder size, I ask her in Buffalo where she now lives?

"It's kinda small and plastic with big buttons so that kids

can touch them. It costs about \$90. It looks kinda like a space gun or something. There's no zoom or focus. It's really incredible — the focus is like the eye — automatic, with a huge depth of field."

Her voice is the matter-of-fact, everyday voice that tells stories in her work.

The means may be child's play, but the ends are laced with a wry and sophisticated knowingness. Although wooed by grants and taken under the wing of a production company, Benning still plans to incorporate Pixelvision into her current 16mm feature, *Girl Power*.

"I'm drawn to it because it doesn't look like film and it doesn't look like video. It's kinda got its own dreamy quality."

Her work is best viewed on a small monitor, rather than a video projector, to maintain its visual density, the sense of emotional claustrophobia and the original scale of production — one girl in her bedroom.

Benning admits that she has watched MTV for as long as she can remember, although she recalls this with



the reluctance of one who feels she has lost as much as she has gained.

"I've been sucked into it most of my childhood. It has really helped a lot of my generation to see imagery in a totally different way. Good music videos are totally art," she says with unusual passion. "Kids my age have been so bombarded with images they have less patience and have become more like time bombs."

So much for the avant-garde tradition of which her father is part. She is the daughter of experimental independent filmmaker James Benning whose best known works include *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977) and *Grand Opera* (1979). Rather than quote his work as an aesthetic influence she cites his lifestyle as important. "I wasn't raised with him, but I did know it existed — like you could be an artist for a living. He's never gone to Hollywood and been watered down and I really admire that."

Although in one video, she dreams of becoming a famous actor, Benning is still adjusting to the media

attention and acknowledges a certain vulnerability and surprise.

"When I first started making videos, it was definitely for myself." Early work is dedicated to "my mama" and to friends, while recent work is offered to "Bad Girls Everywhere".

"I didn't really realise there was a community that would consider this valuable or art. It was just these secret experiments in my room." Just when many lesbian and gay activists have dismantled the term "community", with its connotations of false homogeneity and replaced it with "communities of interest", here comes a nineteen year old who needs the term and uses it like family.

Early videos, like *Me and Rubyfruit* and *Living Inside*, are rough, frequently glitchy pieces that jerk and buzz with in-camera edits. *Living Inside* is a tortured confession of a kid who holes up with her camera against a homophobic world. Its pathos, however, often spins into dull, ironic humour. "I'm sitting the dog. I got

Girls, Videos and Everything

cont' from p 51

a pimple. I hate school. I only have one friend. Some people are sick and I'm one of them." Her pale face stares remotely into the camera, sometimes talking listlessly, at other times passing scrawled notes to a friend who isn't there, like, "It would be easy to die", which evokes the recent federal study of suicide which showed that thirty percent of all suicides in the US are lesbian and gay teenagers. Benning has worked unconsciously against erasure.

"when I started making videos I hadn't really come out to anyone but it was in my head. I began to talk in front of the camera because it wouldn't talk back or judge me. I started because of the lack of imagery I could identify with."

If, at twelve, Benning's instinct told her she shouldn't hold hands with a girl in public, by sixteen she knew that she could get beaten to death for her desire. Undaunted, in *Welcome to Normal* she announces that "I'm going to be a woman who loves women." She then repeatedly drives the question home: "What's the sence (sic) in life if you can't be who you are." One of her most successful pieces, this colour tape uses profoundly simple images to assert a powerful presence of lost innocence, of pollution. The kitchen with the TV playing may be cosy, but it's not enough. Benning tosses over a glass of milk which spills into a hundred metaphors for

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the baby dyke who seeks food, nurturing and sex. She grasps at it, draws her fingers through it, teases its taut edges like an infant discovering the sense of touch. Unlike much of the heterosexual video art tradition of cold, white males whose idea of vulnerability is expressed in endless variations of a flower, a pool of water, a flock of birds, here we glimpse a poignant helplessness barely masked by domestic banality. The honesty is neither coy nor mannered. This is followed by a sequence of a toddler chuckling through a loving home movie, suddenly made corrupt, suspect by unspoken questions provoked by the context. Is this a lesbian baby, a fag baby? Will it grow up to be what it wants? Finally Benning muses, "I wonder how many lesbians were born today? How many died, never knowing who they were, how many married, feeling empty and wondering why? I can't say how many, but that doesn't matter because one identity robbed is one too many."

Although Benning had her adolescent crushes on girls earlier than most dykes who come out as adults and then blush like schoolgirls, she still resents lost time: "I came out when I was fifteen and that's when my sexuality really began. I was acting like a six year old following people around, having puppy love at fifteen. But some people have a much larger period of their lives totally stolen from them."

Benning also feels ripped off by the education system. In *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) she flaunts a school portrait with a person torn out. "I never felt that I was

learning what I wanted to learn. It was holding me back and teaching me to be racist and hate my identity, teaching me all about my appearance and nothing about who I was. There's no reason to go to art college because I'm doing what I want to do on my own." In this tape again she ingenuously delivers a homophobic, racist America with pressing seductiveness. Images of black kids are flashed on the screen. A clip from *Psycho* is played and she checks out the cost of guns. In the final image she mocks patriotism with a slightly hysterical bleakness, placing herself in a blonde wig and goofy smile before an American flag, to grin and grin and grin.

By 1992, her work like *It Wasn't Love* is less fragmented, smoother and explores a narrative that promises Hollywood but ends up in the parking lot of a Kentucky Fried Chicken. She now has the confidence to reveal many different and divergent identities, from the '50s crooner who lip synchs to *Blueberry Hill*, to the bearded gangster who puffs a fat cigar. She is not afraid to be the big wiggled blonde femme who whispers to *Fever*. The tone is more self assured and the double entendres sexual rather than morbid.

"Permission? I forgot all about it. Trouble? I got in a lot of that."

In a delicious curve of her hand, she invents a cunt and sucking her thumb to become a cock, creates her most sensual, rude-positive sequence. Unlike many of her queer dyke predecessors who flash pussy to declare who they are, Benning is still wondrously discreet and achieves a subtle eroticism with what she has at her fingertips — as it were. The threat of criminality is now a pose. She's learnt the thrill of being an outlaw as she parades in front of a height chart for a police mug shot. She doesn't need to conquer the world, she's changing it from her room. As with the face-shaving sequence in *Jollies*, Benning twists the tyranny of gender and achieves what she wished for in her early, more confessional work — to be herself.

However, Benning is now trying stringently to resist a safe complacency she notices within the lesbian and gay film and video community (sic) and hopes to reach a wider audience with *Girl Power*.

"I want to get to people who never think they could identify with me. There's a well of images and feelings in our childhoods, regardless of gender, race or sexuality. I want more than anything for girls to feel good about their desires and about what they want to do, instead of knowing what men want. I want to commission an all-girl soundtrack and reach out to girl bands and zines."

A fifteen minute prelude to *Girl Power* has just been completed. It stars Benning as the Storyteller but includes other characters. "It's about desire and sexuality but it's also about being a girl. I happen to be a dyke and I'm not going to filter that out, but it's not going to be the main focus. When I was coming out I did become focused on it to survive, but it's now a smaller part of who I am."

Benning's main fear as she approaches her first feature is not of selling out, but of knowing how to maintain control over her highly commodifiable product.

"I don't want to become something that can be a fad or killed, you know what I mean? So I'm being careful every step of the way not to become a media extravaganza." Having been weaned on the electronic image, she will continue to teach it to talk the way she wants — intimate, deadpan and true. ■