

Schneemann's hands
across the sky



Marielle Nitoslawska

▼ Film

The Body Politic

Carolee Schneemann's naked truths

BY R.C. BAKER

Early in the documentary *Breaking the Frame*, Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939) displays for the camera a headless chipmunk; we can infer the culprit through an abrupt edit from the bloody carcass to a cat sunning itself on a windowsill. Director Marielle Nitoslawska's faith in the power of imagery over pedantic exposition rewards the audience with a heady catalogue of Schneemann's luscious paintings, expressionistic collages, hand-illustrated journals, visceral photographs, and excerpts from her corporeal films. The chipmunk murder occurs in the upstate New York farmhouse where Schneemann has spent much of her adult life; crammed with artworks and mementos, it is almost as much a star of the documentary as the artist herself. (She is too forceful a presence to be a mere subject, and the sometimes murky shots of dried-up frogs, animal jawbones, feathers, and other preserved fauna that share space with her archives can seem like props from a psychological thriller.)

Schneemann tells Nitoslawska's camera how she saved her babysitting money to visit an art school in Philadelphia,

where she "smelled heavenly, intoxicating oil paint," experiencing a "delirium of something wonderful." Nitoslawska achieves her own form of engaging delirium by marrying kaleidoscopically edited archival footage with overlapping conversations and an eclectic musical score by Schneemann's onetime lover, the avant-garde composer James Tenney.

Schneemann began painting seriously in the late 1950s, and you can see the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Robert Rauschenberg's formal chaos in her work. But, chafing against a misogynist art world that, like much of the rest of mid-century America, saw women as mothers first, homemakers second, and not much beyond, Schneemann was restless to move past the confines of her canvases and "the exclusive male avant-garde" to embrace the desires and torments of the human body. In *Fuses* (1965), she painted and layered collages upon 16mm film of herself and Tenney making love. Briefly excerpted here, *Fuses* was a big influence on such major contemporaries as Stan Brakhage; Schneemann has said that she wanted her 18-minute tour de force to "put into that materiality of film the energies of the body,

Breaking the Frame
Directed by Marielle Nitoslawska
Possible Movements
Opens January 31,
Anthology Film Archives

so that the film itself dissolves and recombines and is transparent and dense — as one feels during lovemaking." Sumptuous and carnal, *Fuses* was borderline illegal; Schneemann tells a laughing audience how one of the "kind-of gangsters" who developed the negatives said of the cumming scene, "Boy, if I tried that on my wife, she'd kick me out to hell."

Schneemann's relationships were volatile. An abortion she had (illegal at the time) is addressed in the documentary through photos of her and Tenney, a beautiful couple immersed in art, as she narrates: "Simple. Horrible. Profound." In 1975's *Interior Scroll*, she pulled a ribbon of text from her vagina, including a statement from a male filmmaker: "There are certain films/we cannot look at/the personal clutter/the persistence of feelings/the hand-touch sensibility/the diaristic indulgence/the painterly mess/the dense gestalt/the primitive techniques." His unwitting paean to Schneemann's gifts could also describe her serial enlargements of grainy newspaper photos of people jumping to their deaths from the World Trade towers, splayed figures to which she ascribes "our own vertiginous grief, rage, and sorrow."

At one point in the film, Schneemann sums up her various permutations of paint, anger, joy, and naked flesh: "It's not a provocation. I have this sort of naïve streak where I think I'm going to show them something they need to see."

SUMPTUOUS AND CARNAL, FUSES WAS BORDERLINE ILLEGAL.

TRACKING SHOTS

The Time Being
Directed by Nenad Cicin-Sain
Tribeca Film
Opens July 26, Quad Cinema

Why are painters such downers in the popular imagination? Is it van Gogh's bloody ear? Soutine's reeking ox carcasses? The abstract expressionists drinking themselves to accelerated graves? In *The Time Being*, director Nenad Cicin-Sain and co-screenwriter Richard N. Gradstein give us Daniel (Wes Bentley), a depressionist—to coin a movement—who paints black-and-white pictures of rotting fruit. Despite his unappealing subject matter, he complains about poor sales and becomes estranged from his wife, who is fed up with Daniel's moony lassitude. (His roomy studio and their spacious California digs won't win him sympathy from struggling New York City artists.) A mysterious patron, Warner (Frank Langella), summons him to film sunsets and playing children, and Daniel soon realizes that this dying man has an artistic secret. The characters are as leached of tone as the film's chiaroscuro sets and grisaille paintings, although Langella is certainly game, at one point crawling before a canvas in the baggy pants and dirty feet of a Caravaggio figure. Daniel reconciles with the wife and kid and his paintings gain color, but Warner's clichés about artistic struggle—"Artists don't have families," "I'm going to die alone. I'm perfectly willing to pay this price"—leave Daniel's fresh horizon feeling contrived. There is no joy in art's struggle here—just crying. The film's creators could learn from Joyce Cary's novel *The Horse's Mouth*, wherein fiction's most fully human painter, Gulley Jimson, proclaims, "I felt I could paint. As always after a party. Life delights in life. . . . Next morning, of course, the canvas looked a bit flat. As always after a party." **R.C. BAKER**