

Resplendent Visions

by Ara Osterweil

Betzy Bromberg began making films in the late 1970s in New York City, around the time that I was born. So I cannot say that I remember the New York one glimpses in her early punk films, or the young women whom we see navigating its thrills and pitfalls. Yet I do recognize them in their painter's cut-offs and pink leopard print pants, pounding the pavements of the Lower East Side. For the most part, they are artists and guerrilla girls posing as ingenues, topless dancers, and waitresses—whatever it takes to avoid the domestic responsibilities of being someone's "old lady." Sexy, rebellious, and on the move, they're in search of freedom and they'll ride anything to escape confinement—whether it be the back of some Hells Angels' Harley through the skyscrapers of Manhattan, or shotgun in a girlfriend's car as it whips through more ancient canyons.

Bromberg, who often appears in her early films, has a documentarian's attention to detail, and a rapt devotion to radiance. Somehow, she manages to keep the subterranean in tension with the sublime. The audio-tracks of her early films mix snippets of found sound—interviews, radio broadcasts, and pop songs thrumming with desire—with the stoned ramblings of the young women she records. Collaged together by this scavenger angel, they kaleidoscope the unconscious of an America longing for release as it transitioned from the shattered dreams of the 1960s to the doom of neoliberalism's new world order.

Despite their ear for apocalyptic discourse, Bromberg's films are less orgasmic than they are malingering. Her first 16mm film, *Petit Mal* (1977), offers a portrait of a young artist friend intent on preserving her autonomy despite the often-entangled demands of sex and rent. The title, which conjures Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) while dodging the predictable climax of *la petite mort*, seems to suggest the pathologies of coming of age within patriarchy. Yet it also refers to a type of seizure that involves a brief loss of consciousness accompanied by quasi-purposeful movements and blank stares. Understood poetically, these momentary flashes in consciousness might allow one to look anew, with wonder if not full comprehension. This potentially epiphanic state of seizure is an apt metaphor for Bromberg's early style of filmmaking, in which glimpses of an illuminated consciousness interrupt jagged handheld camera movements that revel in the grit of urban decay. Watching these punk paeans, I am transfixed by the unfolding mysteries captured and then blinkered away by her camera—from a close-up of stiletto heels strutting like an exquisite corpse, to a snake curling luxuriously in front of a window flooded with late afternoon sun. What is the meaning of such fleeting phenomena? One cannot help but note the serpent's warning that the world is full of perils for young women searching for knowledge. Yet despite the nascent feminism of her early work, Bromberg's films are never didactic. Rather, in their voluptuous attention to the ways that light caresses surface—including the snake's skin—they track the emergence of a profoundly rich, cinematic phenomenology.

Heeding the eternal siren song to “go West,” Bromberg left New York for Los Angeles to study filmmaking at CalArts with experimental filmmaker Chick Strand. Her films immediately became imbued with the rugged landscapes of the West and the misfits who drift through their greasy spoons. But she also discovered the desert, where her more mystical visions first unfold. You can sense the transformation in her 1980 film *Soothing the Bruise*, which Bromberg commences by choreographing headlights so that they dance in the darkness like runaway stars. By the end of the film, however, one feels the upending force of the revelatory as it struggles to break through the raunch. Bewitched by the painted hills of the desert, Bromberg spins them wildly through a fish-eye lens. Like the strippers often glimpsed in her early films, the camera is putting on a tawdry show for a distracted audience.

Somewhere along the journey to the resplendent visions that characterise her later masterpieces, Bromberg learned that to approach the sublime, you need to slow down and stop spinning. Of course, that does not mean that she ever sought to capture the world “as is”. Rather, she learned to harness her renowned technical wizardry to a more metaphysical search for illumination. *Az Iz* (1983), a jazz meditation on the desert, is the first of Bromberg’s film to chart this orphic course. Through experimental printing that transforms the arid landscape where three musicians play into a luminous sea of lapis, the film summons the divinity hinted at in its title. I’d bathe my soul in a slice of Bromberg’s blues.

As Bromberg’s optical imagination became captivated by the transcendent possibilities of light and landscape, her cinematic language metamorphosed into an exquisite form of painterly abstraction. She replaced the hand-held camera, collaged editing, and found sound of her youthful films with slower and more meditative explorations of visual phenomena accompanied by trance-like sound compositions. The overall effect is what Kandinsky described as visual music, in which the colour of sound and the sound of colour resonate in mystical harmony. Bromberg’s most luminous images achieve that nearly indescribable splendour for which I am forever searching. Call it the divine ravishment of the senses.

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