

## Barbara Hammer: *Tell me there is a lesbian forever...*

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Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *The Lover, off the road (after Barbara)*, 1972 - 2021 Black paint and metal chrome on BMW R5/5 motorcycle. Courtesy Company.

Centered in the gallery rests a motorcycle, a relic of someone whose absence has been palpable since she left the realm of the living in 2019. Barbara Hammer is the subject of a museum-quality show, albeit in a gallery, curated by Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Marking the opening of Company's new space on Elizabeth Street, this exhibition is steeped in rigorous research and careful preparation on par with any large institutional endeavor. Acutely aware that she herself would no longer be here to witness it, Hammer chose McClodden, without the latter's knowledge, as a possible curator for this show. Viewing exhibition-making as an art practice in

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its own right, McClodden has long been invested in research-based projects that use installation as a kind of portraiture. Primarily focusing on Black queer genealogies, the artist is known (among many other things) for her curatorial interventions focusing on the poet Essex Hemphill (*Affixing Ceremony: Four Movements for Essex*, 2015) and the composer Julius Eastman (*Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental*, 2017).

Anyone familiar with Hammer knows that the motorcycle played a critical role in the legendary lesbian filmmaker's life. It signified her ability to break free from patriarchal constraints, allowed her to pursue new horizons, and defined many of her romantic affairs. She rode together with her first girlfriend, a woman named Marie, and their relationship is beautifully captured in several photographs and a film on view in the exhibition. The motorcycle was probably Hammer's greatest love before she met the human rights activist Florrie Burke in 1986, with whom she would spend the rest of her life. Acquiring the exact model of motorcycle that Hammer owned—a BMW R75/5—McClodden spent six months having it drained of all liquids, taken entirely apart, cleaned, rebuilt, and refinished in mirrored chrome. Then, she gave the motorcycle “a white spiritual bath made of honey, white flowers, and efun,” in a ritual of care and dedication. Titled *The Lover, off the road (after Barbara)* (1972–2021), this motorcycle is McClodden's tribute to Hammer.

Around the centerpiece, Company's walls are adorned with framed photographs, film stills, and miscellaneous works on paper, while glass vitrines hold archival materials ranging from correspondence to snapshots and leaflets. The archive is a key starting point in McClodden's creative process, but due to the pandemic, the artist was unable to visit the Beinecke Library, which houses Hammer's papers, as access had been limited to Yale affiliates only. Serendipitously, McClodden's fiancée Mia is a PhD candidate at Yale, and was able to access the archives on her behalf in August of this year. Found in the vitrines is a combination of high-resolution scans and iPhone photographs Mia took, a move that works against the expected physicality of original archival material. For those of us who have experienced the intimacy of archival research, this poses a difficult question: What does it mean when you can't touch the objects you desire, but they are instead touched by your lover—also an object of your desire. How can touch be transmitted across different forms of intimacy?

The archival materials start in 1968, the year that Hammer decided to leave her husband Clay (whose eyes, as she writes in a letter to him, were “clouded by the patriarchy”), and run up until 1981, the year McClodden was born. A letter to Hammer from a woman named Corky Wick reveals the origin of the exhibition title: after listing all the reasons why their affair cannot continue, Corky writes in the margins, “Write me that you love me dearly and always will. Tell me there is a lesbian forever.” While I had never read these words before, they resonated profoundly. I have dedicated my career to a similar sentiment, mining archives to find proof that lesbians have always been there, holding on to the promise that they always will be. At the same time, lesbian identity has always been in flux, constantly shifting and redefining itself. Hammer's

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papers lay bare the journey of navigating one's identity in a society that aims to actively obscure it, working through angst and anger, and turning these emotions into creative forces.



Barbara Hammer, *Double Strength*, 1978. Silver gelatin print 4.38h x 5w in. Courtesy Company.

Seven of Hammer's films are spread out across Company Gallery. In the main space, *Double Strength* (1978) is projected high on the east-facing wall, conjuring Hammer's relationship with the aerial dancer and choreographer Terry Sendgraff. A small monitor in a hidden stairwell shows Hammer getting a haircut (*Haircut*, 1978), while the downstairs lounge shelters *Aldebaran Sees* (1969), the filmmaker's ode to the brightest star in the constellation of her zodiac sign (Taurus). Above the staircase leading to Company's lower level, *Pools* (1981) is projected—this is one of Hammer's most structuralist films, taking the camera into the swimming pools at Hearst Castle and studying the materiality of the water that fills them. Having descended into the black box below, one finds three films playing simultaneously; *I Was/I Am* (1973), *Marie and Me* (1970), and *Sync Touch* (1981). This clever film triptych allows the opportunity to take in the full scope of Hammer's aesthetic strategies, revealing an elaborate use of layering and an ethnographic approach that are very much informed by Maya Deren—a reference that McClodden confirms she shares as well.

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In her last interview before she passed away, conducted by Masha Gessen, Hammer noted: “we don’t want to forget the lesbian, and we don’t want her to be lost. She might not even be known in twenty years, as a population or as a language. A mode of being, a vocabulary [...] this is going to be lost if there’s no lesbian anymore. After a while, nobody will even remember.” An intimate portrayal of a multifaceted filmmaker, this exhibition is an active effort not to forget.