

KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

Presents



Kamikaze Hearts

A Film by Juliet Bashore

2K restoration by UCLA Film & Television Archive

USA | 1986 | 77 mins | Color | English

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“Harrowing.” — *Time Out*

“Swift, complex and altogether challenging. A tempestuous, non-fiction love story. Bashore (is) a punchy, non-nonsense director with a wry sense of humor and compassion.” — Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*

“Alternately distressing, instructive, contestable, and fascinating. Offers a disturbing glimpse of the modification of bodies, feelings, and lives. Rarely has the alienation implicit in the porn business been so tellingly exposed.” — Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

“Vibrant, gritty, enthralling. — Lindi King, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“In Juliet Bashore’s *Kamikaze Hearts*...there are no taboos left to break. Only the camera, with verité charm, trembles during kisses here.” — Alisa Solomon, *The Village Voice*



Synopsis

Juliet Bashore's quasi-documentary plunge into the 1980s porn industry takes an unsparing look at issues of misogyny, drug abuse, and exploitation via the story of two women – the naive newcomer Tigr and her partner, the magnetic, imperious porn veteran Sharon Mitchell – caught in a toxic romance. By turns mesmerizing and unsettling, *Kamikaze Hearts* is both a fascinating record of pre-gentrification San Francisco's X-rated underground and an intense, searing love story. New restoration.

***San Francisco Chronicle* Feature On the Original 1986 Release**

By Lindi King

In the beginning of Juliet Bashore's *Kamikaze Hearts*—a documentary on the pornography industry—a young woman questions whether the movie is essentially truth or fiction. The answer, she determines, is unknowable. It's a multi level question," director Bashore elaborates. "How is it determined when these people's lives take on the role of performance? First, you have a situation where a totally intimate act is being performed publicly. Then you have actors essentially "on camera" even when they're off-screen. Who knows what's real and what isn't?

Kamikaze Hearts is a disturbing portrait of people who seem consciously willing to sink as low as possible. Bashore, a San Francisco filmmaker who spent two years chronicling a slice of the porn world, learned that the pay to on-camera participants is lousy, and any self-worth is quickly eroded away. More specifically Bashore focused on the lesbian relationship between two women—porn star Sharon "Mitch" Mitchell and Tigr, a young blonde consumed with an obsessive passion for the flamboyant actres. The result is a vibrant, gritty, enthralling sojourn into the largely uncharted underground smut market.

"What I wanted to know," Bashore says of her first film, "is how these people maintain their sanity. There's a lot of psychological rationalization. It's an industry that's the embodiment of schizophrenia." Captured in the web of the film is a crosscurrent of seemingly self-destructive motivations: Mitch and Tigr shooting up needles full of cocaine, then talking slurry-voiced and staring glazy-eyed into the camera. Mitch and a female partner perform a ritualized sex-dance in the red glare of a tawdry club, while Tigr jealously fights tooth and claw with another woman in the aisle—both moving to the same music and unintentionally presenting the depersonalization of sex and a hatred often masked as love. "It's like the moment in the film when Mitch asks Tigr if she liked the way Mitch slithered her body like a snake when they made love," Bashore says. "When Tigr nods in the affirmative, Mitch tells her she was practicing for a later [sex] performance. Tigr had been fantasizing about making a movie of Mitch. She saw it as the way to Mitch's heart, a kind of love song to her." Ironically, though, in the course of making the documentary, Tigr had to re-evaluate the relationship.

Says Bashore: “The magic moments of ecstasy exist entirely in their minds”—whether it be Mitch’s belief of herself as a consummate actress, or Tigr’s belief that their world is “beautiful and free,” or even Tigr’s belief in the true passion that defines her and Mitch’s love. Bashore sees Tigr and Mitch’s relationship as the quintessential alienated relationship, a mirrored image of what she sees occurring in society. “Why is divorce so prevalent? Why aren’t people committed? Why are so many women in their 30s unmarried? Mitch treated Tigr horribly,” Bashore continues. “She’s totally self-absorbed. Would sleep with other people, disappear.”



Mitchell says her top idol is Ronald Reagan (“To be president and an actor, it must be a shot in the arm”), and it is this kind of skewed linking—the highest office in the land with the rush of intravenous drug use—that also defines *Kamikaze Hearts*. The documentary is a composite of incompatible extremes, a sort of desperate eroticism, with the crew and actors part of a make-believe extended family. Yet Prekious, a young woman who appears briefly in one scene, will commit suicide a few months later. And one jaded cameraman will admit, “I’ve never seen anything erotic in all my 15 years and 400 films.”

Bashore insists women aren’t forced into pornography. For Tigr, pornography means a “power trip over men,” because it is in this area that a woman can control another’s emotions, if only for the short time span of one scene. As Tigr said (she has since forsaken porn), stoned and almost incoherent at the end of *Kamikaze Hearts*: “There’s nothing left that gets me off. Do you know how horrible that is?”

About Director Juliet Bashore

Juliet Bashore was born in 1956 in Santa Monica, California, and raised against a backdrop of the 1960s by an aerospace engineer father and playwright mother. She attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, and received her MFA in Directing at the Conservatory of The American Film Institute. She has been nominated for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

While an undergraduate, Bashore's film work coalesced around an interest in outsider, transgressive, guerilla styles of filmmaking that exposed the intersections of fiction and non-fiction, and of representation and authenticity. Her studies and influences ranged from the French New Wave to the films of D.A. Pennebaker and Robert Frank, as well as the theater-making of Eugene Ionesco and Antonin Artaud, and experimental performance artists such as Laurie Anderson and long-time creative mentor Spalding Gray. Her undergraduate projects included documentation of a series of one-act Ionesco plays (with Ionesco in residence), as well as a document of the mono-maniacal soap entrepreneur Dr. Emmanuel Bronner. Her thesis project was a long-form documentary portrait *The Absurd World of Alan Clone*, about a polysexual outsider artist and itinerant house painter.

While pursuing her MFA at The American Film Institute, Bashore produced and directed a project featuring notorious drag king Shelly Mars based on an original lesbian reimagining of J.G Ballard's *Crash*, as well as *The Nervous Breakdown of Philip K. Dick*, based on an original script exploring the blurred lines between Dick's biography, his drug-fueled obsessions/delusions and his fictions.

After her studies, Bashore worked as an assistant to director George Csicsery on his acclaimed films, *Television*, *The Enchanted Mirror* (1981), and *Out* (1982), by Eli Hollander. She also worked as a producer and associate producer on early proto-MTV music videos at *Target Video*, *Videowest* and with video collective *Optic Nerve*. She co-founded *Third Rail Media*, a production company whose projects include rare documentations of legendary post-punk and no-wave bands Indoor Life, Tuxedo Moon, Chrome, and Arto Lindsay's DNA.

Kamikaze Hearts (1986) was based on the lives of Tigr Mennett and her lover, porn superstar Sharon Mitchell, set at the peak of San Francisco's "Golden Age" of porn. In 1982 Bashore met Tigr Mennett while working a day job with a local film crew on *The Nurses of the 407th*, a mega-budget pornographic parody of the TV series M*A*S*H*. Together with Mennett and producer Heinz Legler, Bashore raised funds for a straight documentary on "the business". When director Charles Webb (aka Charles DeSantos) withdrew his consent for their crew to film on his set, Bashore and Mennett used their production resources to finance an alternative production, the fictional porno operetta "Carmen" as a vehicle for Tigr's porn-star lover, Sharon Mitchell. Only Bashore, Mennett, and a handful of others knew that the film being shot was a dummy, and would never be released as porn. The result was not only a free-wheeling portrait of porn's liminal, outlaw space where queerness and transgression thrive, but of the porn world itself as a caricature of Hollywood.

In 1990 Bashore pitched a documentary project to the U.K. Channel 4 series *OUT* about a Marxist-Anarchist collective of drag-queen squatters living on the Mainzer Straße in East Berlin – ground zero in a war between East/West and neo-Nazi gangs/leftist activists just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ultimately Channel 4 commissioned a two-part investigation called "The

Battle of Tuntenhaus,” produced by Michael Wood’s production company MayaVision. 1992 she teamed up with filmmaker Constantine Giannaris to make the follow-up film that follows the events of the squat since the Battle of Mainzer Straße. The films became an important document and organizing tool for the autonomous scene in Berlin.

Bashore’s obsession with distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, representation and authenticity extended into the realm of the “Uncanny Valley” of character animation with the co-founding of pioneering production company Modern Cartoons. Modern Cartoons was dedicated to leading-edge development of virtual-reality software and hardware, utilizing proprietary motion sensor technologies in service of character animation. These technologies are now a staple of VFX and animation for the feature film and game industries. Modern Cartoons debuted the first-ever full-body motion-capture character at SIGGRAPH ‘92 (*Dr Scratch*, with lyrics written and performed by Ice-T). Pet projects include *Mr High Hopes*, an animated non-binary porcelain doll with the voice of Truman Capote who appeared on *The Howie Mandel Show*. Modern’s productions for clients and networks include NBC, HBO, SONY, Eidos/Universal, The Game Channel, MTV and Miramax Films, and featured live, real-time performances with characters including Lara Croft, Crash Bandicoot, Spyro the Dragon, the M&Ms as well as a PBS Kids animated series. In 2005 Bashore was controversially fired from directing the first Modern Cartoons feature, an animated children’s film for Miramax entitled “The Great North Pole Elf Strike” for portraying Santa’s elves as gay.

Director Interview

Excerpted from “Kamikaze Filmmaking: Reality of the Unreal” by Jenny Link

Film Art Foundation’s *Release Print*, April 1987

TW: sexual assault

Juliet Bashore’s *Kamikaze Hearts* had its world premiere at the Roxie Cinema last November 8 as part of FAF’s second annual Film Arts Festival. This “fictionalized documentary” about lesbian lovers working in the pornography industry sold out two houses and was variously described by critics as “vibrant, gritty, enthralling” (Lindi King, *S.F. Chronicle Datebook*), “tawdry, exhibitionist, and shallow” (Judy Stone, *S.F. Chronicle*) and “a feather-ruffling feminist film” (Elizabeth Pincus, *Film Month*).

The following interview with Bashore, conducted in one evening at the studio of the film’s editor, John Knoop, and at Tu Lan, a Vietnamese restaurant on Sixth Street, was an attempt to understand the disturbing effect which *Kamikaze Hearts* had on me, and to answer questions about the intentions and ambiguities of the film in both style and content.

— J.L.

What films or filmmakers influenced this film in particular?

I'm thinking of Robert Frank. He's about the only person I can think of—but I usually don't think of films in particular or filmmakers because I was thinking more of ethnographic films. Herzog's documentaries, I suppose—ones that distance you from the subject. His documentaries create a distance that suggests you might have an absurd world view; and then Robert Frank because he would juxtapose units of life, he would let the camera roll. He takes, or collects—documents isn't really the right word, it's not reportorial at all—but he films what is going on in a situation over a period of time, and then puts the material together.

Is that what you mean by “fictionalized documentary”?

Yeah, *psychodrama*. It's unrehearsed. It's a drama in a way—but not theater. It's an enactment, or a catharsis for the participants from whose own lives the scenes are abstracted. Tigr and Mitch play out their own roles. My purpose was to study the relationship, to film it and then factor out from that material what's essential, to see where there is a film in it. I filmed the relationship. The roles were there already. I didn't create it or stage the scenes. It was real. What they would do was hang out but hanging out was always with a camera. They would play these little scenarios out, and pretty soon the characters they would invent and the stories become metaphors for themselves. I'm cutting in more clips or “home movies” like the one from the first reel in which Tigr tells the story of their first encounter in *Sulka's Wedding*, and these little stories—voice-overs and clips of them together—will be used like a backdrop to the film.

Can psychodrama be cinema verité then? Is it real?

Yes, of course. It's naturally real. The camera never pretends it's not there. You may not be aware as an audience member of the exact origin of the dialogue, but I don't know if that really matters. I mean especially in this case—in relationships. Relationships are cyclic. People have the same conversations over and over again, and within a story there's a beginning, and an end—and it's usually a cyclic thing. So you can ride that cycle.



I'm not sure I understand. Do you mean that psychodrama plays out a pattern or story that is already there?

Exactly. Here's an example: if you have two people and there's always an issue about who takes out the garbage, and you're there filming, you'd say, perhaps, "Why don't you guys argue about the garbage?" So they start, and for the first minute they're pretending to argue, but then one of them says, "But you *always*..." and then they're into the argument.

Maybe psychodrama is not exactly the right word. I just mean that it's not dramatized and it's not fictional, and that the camera is a given in the situation—that it's ethnographic. And ethnography in a way is not a documentary. A documentary's something that's on the news. Ethnography studies the culture in order to describe it, and then factors something about the culture out of it. I was reading the *San Francisco Examiner* yesterday and on the back page there was a contest for "Best Story of 1986." You choose, say, between Chernobyl or the Shuttle crash, vote for the best "story." That's what I'm talking about; this articulates the problem so clearly. That's exactly what I'm interested in—the *fictionalization* of life. Or, another example: let's say you make a film of kids playing house. Is that a documentary or a fiction? It is a documentation of the narrativization of life.

Ethnography as the act or action of determining a relationship, or relationships, in culture?

Yeah, and in *Kamikaze Hearts* I'm trying to think of people as being curious, or intelligent; as interpreting the world; that if you give them information, they will conclude something from it. It's a different audience that wants to be filled up or put in a trance and be allowed to go away for an hour and a half. I would like to think of people as being sort of anthropologists at heart. That's unfortunately not the case.

Are you responding to any one film or any one way of filming a subject in *Kamikaze Hearts*? I'm thinking of one kind of feminist film like *Not a Love Story* (1983, Bonnie Klein and Anne Henderson) or even Marlene Gorris' *Broken Mirrors* (1985) in which the prostitutes are so victimized?

Am I responding to anti-pornographic films? It's a response that often I think it's less effective to conduct yourself as though the reality you're critical of is a microcosm.

You're using the sex industry, then, as a microcosm in which to study the culture?

Right. It's a backdrop; it's about the world. *Kamikaze Hearts* is not meant to be didactic. What I was thinking of is that I don't think pornography is a thing. That wasn't important at all. I thought of the porn world as a *symptom* of something. Eradicating it is not the objective. It's a great metaphor for what I think is the issue, and that's the alienated state of the culture.

What seems specific about this generation is that it's about the only time in history that I can think of, where there hasn't been one *primary* model for relationships that people duplicate unconsciously. Right now we have this very weird situation where there's a plurality of possible models, and no model that's specific at all—that's Mitch and Tigr. They're floundering looking for some kind of context. At this moment in time, everyone's in a quandary. There is a sense of loss. *That's* pornography. And the sex industry really crystallizes the strangeness of there being a complete difference between love and a love relationship, and fucking. I thought it was sort of silly to conclude that people were affected in a very direct way, or that men go see pornography and then go out and role play things they've seen in these movies, and then women get raped and are psychically terrorized. I thought that was unrealistic. That didn't seem like an issue worth addressing; however, strangely, I was walking down the street in Santa Monica this summer about seven in the morning going to get a cup of coffee. It's a beautiful sunny day and I'm in a great mood. This fellow ran up to me, and I turned around and he sort of smiled and waved and I sort of smiled and waved and I turned back—and as soon as I turned back, he grabbed me by the hair and said, "O.K. get over here, get over here right now." He *dragged* me into this parking lot, saying, "O.K., bitch, you're gonna be my slave" (whack, whack, whack, whack). He was a psycho, right? It was your classic psycho attack, and what he did was use *exclusively* graphic words. It was porno text—I mean I know that's what it was—people in life don't speak that way. He used "those" names for the body parts and his way of commanding was actually like listening to a porn director. He basically did the Chinese finger puzzle approach. The more you struggle, the tighter it gets. I recognized the script, I had seen it before. We can have a picture of that for this—of a sunny day and a psycho! (laughing)

He picked the wrong person. (laughing)

But it was pretty terrifying. He had crossed this one border of behavior and it was very clear that he was on the verge of the next, which was total violence. The other interesting thing was that it really had nothing to do with sex. His objective, or the way that I read it, was that he only wanted to grab a woman and humiliate her in the deepest way that he possibly could—and, anyway, it turns out he does this all the time. So I was wrong, yeah—about that. I think there *is* a correlation—on some level. The question is would he then just find some other text?

But *Kamikaze Hearts* is not specifically about that correlation—if it exists?

No, my intention in the film was the reverse: to suggest to people that it's not appropriate to criticize pornography; that what is appropriate is to analyze the context out of which pornography erupts, and to see if it isn't an expression of something deeper that's ill. I mean it's fascinating that the whole fear of failure, the success obsession, the sense of self-fear, self-deception, it's just this culture—that's how I think it reads, that's the important point. Pornography is natural for this culture.

What is your definition of pornography? Is *Kamikaze Hearts* pornographic?

I used to try and get people to tell me what is pornographic. I didn't mean what would qualify as "not for sale" in 7-11's. I meant what you would consider, deeply offensive. It has something to do with "sex for sale" and is about "sex for sale" rather than about sex or eroticism, or about a relationship. It's a deal. So it's exactly that: it's that point where alienation is defined—by a deal—you make a *deal*. I'm thinking of this movie *Salo* (1977) by Pier Paolo Pasolini because it's the Marquis de Sade but in the context of World War II. These fascists round up a group of kids as sexual slaves. What's really interesting about the film is that the relationship of the film to the audience is seductive, it draws you in, it's kind of sensual. They're gradually forced to do more and more humiliating things. It's hideous hideous stuff, you know, they force them to crawl on the floor like dogs with chains and eat shit with glass embedded in it—I mean it's really horrible—but what's interesting about the film is that it draws you in, it draws you in, and you're kind of open and receptive and then a painful thing: it *punishes* the audience. It has a sadistic relationship to the audience. It punishes you for responding to the film—it humiliates you—as if to say, "Oh, you fell for *this*!" It slaps you in the face and it works that way scene by scene and also within the film as a whole. Pasolini was completely brilliant. I think my film isn't pornographic because it does not reward expectations of the voyeur. It thwarts them, so I would say it's not pornographic. It's a little bit sadistic. I think it forces you to deal with your dissatisfaction at *not* getting that *thing*.

Perhaps the film speaks to the nature of voyeurism, that it cannot fulfill one sexually or emotionally.

Exactly. It leads you in and then it causes you to deal with the schizophrenia of the situation. It's like falling in love with somebody who's a psycho. So I wouldn't think *Kamikaze Hearts* is pornographic. I wouldn't think it was pornographic even if it were more graphic. I know that I am going to make the rape scene (a porn scene Mitch performs) a more disturbing sequence. I'm moving it to the late middle of the film. It's the only scene I'm moving. The way it played in the earlier cut was more of a tease, but I want to show what's really going on with Mitch and the whole crew. It will be a picture of the crew riveted by the fact that there's a man (porn actor) beating Mitch on the floor, and a study of Mitch. In that scene she's probably more incarnate than anywhere else in the film. So that even if it had images that were in technical terms, pornographic, within that context I don't think the rape scene would be pornographic. What I would be doing is different from what pornography is intended to do. By the time a voyeur is confronted with this rape scene, it becomes a *confrontation*. What makes it not pornographic is that you will have gone beyond seeing people playing roles or performing a show for you. At a certain point you're not watching these people doing pornographic sex, you're watching real people—and then it's no longer pornographic. For the voyeur, it would be a confrontation. It has to be; it can't have depth of personality and still work as pornography. You have to get distanced from the characters to have it work as pornography. So this scene, and the movie as a whole can't operate as pornography because you don't have the distance of the voyeur; you don't have the protective distance anymore.

But we are distant from Mitch throughout the film?

Right. You don't know Mitch, so it would have to play as Tigr watching Mitch, which it does.

We're always watching Tigr watching Mitch. The film and the scenes are about Tigr's experience of this. We see everything through Tigr's reactions and in her eyes. That's what gives meaning to it—or breaks down the distance between us and Mitch.

That's what hurts the voyeur.

Does the ambiguity and confusion in *Kamikaze Hearts* between what is theatre and what is life make it flawed filmmaking?

It's all consistently the same thing, which is people playing out their situations, but is it flawed? Absolutely, but if it is the flaw in the film, it's because it's the flaw in their relationship. If we don't know what was real, it's because they don't know what was real. It's conspicuous absence—the imperfection is *necessary*—knowing that there is a flaw in something says that the structure around it is defined.