Midlife Fury, Glowing In Glorious Red

By STUART KLAWANS

ITH almost a million personal videos now posted on YouTube.com, we may guess that people today find self-recording to be as natural as tooth brushing, though slightly more public. If so, then Su Friedrich once again stands out from the crowd. Despite her quarter-century’s experience in making intensely self-revelatory, formally complex films, nothing less than a professional crisis drove her to start a video diary.

“I’d been filming a lot of coffee pushcarts here on the streets,” she said recently from her studio in Brooklyn, “and decided to go on to South Carolina to film a coffee importer. Then I went to see coffee farms in Guatemala. I kept shooting and shooting, and the whole time I was wondering why, because I don’t make social documentaries. I wound up mired in the editing room with 40 hours of footage that I didn’t know how to use. That’s when my partner said: ‘You’re in such pain. You should make a film about that.’ I went straight to my room and got started, without thinking about what I would do.”

But as her fans know, the one thing of which Su Friedrich is incapable is thoughtlessness. Her video diary has now grown into a piece called “Seeing Red,” and when it has its New York premiere on Wednesday at the Museum of Modern Art, part of a four-day retrospective of Ms. Friedrich’s work, viewers will discover that she has mulled over her pained monologues until they have taken on a musical form.

Underscored by Bach’s “Goldberg” Variations, her complaints now play against the counterpoint of a wordless travelogue through Brooklyn. Sometimes bracingly expressive, sometimes serenely beautiful, the outdoor images interrupt and tease, echo and comment upon Ms. Friedrich’s bedroom outpourings, putting them into their artistic place.

“This is the latest chapter in what amounts to a chronicle of a woman’s life,” said Sally Berger, curator of the Modern’s retrospective. “All the passages are there in Su’s work, from childhood relationships with parents to the awakening of adolescent sexuality, from the political passions of youth to the doubts and reassessments of middle age.”

“Su has consistently used her own experiences as material for this work,” Ms. Berger said, “but the films are never simply autobiographical. The personal details come out meaning something more than themselves, perhaps a Roman Catholic upbringing has something to do with the aura of mystery that hovers over these films even at their most outspoken. Now 51, Ms. Friedrich was born in New Haven and has spent much of her life in universities (most recently Princeton, where she has taught since 1998), a background that helps explain why she became one of the most literate of American filmmakers.

And yet the arguing and position taking of academic life had little to do with her artistic breakthrough. In 1981, to find the subject matter for “Gently Down the Stream,” she plunged into her dreams.

For 14 spellbinding minutes, scratchily printed white letters appear, tremble and vanish in “Gently Down the Stream,” suggesting the kind of fragmentary scenes you half recall upon waking. As if rippling outward from these words, luminous black-and-white images evoke moods called up by the titles. Perhaps the most memorable of these images, drenched in lesbian eroticism, shows a young woman swimming alone in an indoor pool. The sense of desire is palpable, even when the shot of the woman shrinks to a frame within the frame, as if receding onto the back wall of a theater, or the sleeper’s skull.

In dreams begin responsibilities. For two of the major works that followed, Ms. Friedrich called herself to account for her feelings toward the most powerful figures in her mental life: her mother and father.

“The Ties That Bind” (1984) is a portrait of Lore Bucher Friedrich as a young woman in Nazi Germany (where she resisted the regime as best she could) and as a long-divorced office worker in 1980’s Chicago. In form, the film might be called a half-interview: the mother is seen and heard, responding to Ms. Friedrich, but the filmmaker is almost always off screen, with her questioning voice represented by those scratchy
Su Friedrich has found revelations in her past and her dreams. But what’s the deal with the coffee?

Inferences, coupled with off-center compositions (which give the impression that Ms. Friedrich was cocking her head to one side), make “The Ties That Bind” tender and melancholy, fluid and musical.

The film is confrontational only toward Su Friedrich herself. Would she have done as much in the 1930’s as her mother did? Was she doing nearly enough then, in 1984?

The questions cut deeper still in “Sink or Swim” (1990), Ms. Friedrich’s exploration of her relationship with her father, the anthropologist and linguist Paul Friedrich. Here the form is even more elaborate: a set of 26 short episodes arranged alphabetically from Z (zygote) to A (Athena, Atalanta, Aphrodite), narrated in the third person by an off-screen voice (which is not Ms. Friedrich’s).

As in “Gently Down the Stream,” the images are free-associative and allusive more often than illustrative, which gives the viewer some much-needed distance. The hyper-intelligent structure, with its subtle games and deceptions, is the container for a harrowing story about emotional and physical abuse, abandonment and endless longing, and also about kinship that is too strong to be denied.

As the critic J. Hoberman wrote, one of the paradoxes of this devastatingly confessional film is that it often “evokes a generic American 50’s”: which is to say, it is the story of one woman and also of many.

This sense of touching on shared experience comes through even in the commonplace titles that Ms. Friedrich chooses for her films. When she meditated on the intersection of her Catholicism with her sexuality, Ms. Friedrich called the film “Damned If You Don’t” (1987). Her quietly effective plea for the recognition of lesbian and gay marriages — made very simply, by recording wedding ceremonies at a Brooklyn church — is “First Comes Love” (1991).

A sometimes wistful, sometimes droll story about the breakup of a love affair, narrated through the vehicle of a lost station wagon, became “Rules of the Road” (1993). Recollections of lesbian adolescence in the 1960’s (combining fictional scenes with documentary interviews) are called “Hide and Seek” (1996).

With “Seeing Red” (2005), the title refers to the average, everyday fury experienced by Ms. Friedrich (and many other women) in midlife. But there’s a formal meaning too.

“I tell my students that red is the most troublesome frequency for video,” she explains. “It always bleeds around the edges. So in this piece I use it everywhere, doing exactly what I’m not supposed to.” The work becomes a scavenger hunt for red things: flowers, birds, toys, construction fences, backpacks, hair, shop signs and Ms. Friedrich’s entire wardrobe, all glaringly, gloriously red.

Ms. Friedrich’s films from 1978 through 2004 are now available in a freshly mastered, five-disc DVD set from Outcast Films, but because “Seeing Red” is too recent to have been included, curious filmgoers will need to visit the Modern to watch it.

As for her 40 hours of film about coffee, we’ve got that to look forward to. “I’m editing,” she said. “And it’s not going to be a social documentary.”