Su Friedrich Is Seeing Red

By Andrea Richards

There is a moment near the beginning of Su Friedrich’s latest film, *Seeing Red*, when the protagonist (Friedrich) melts down, sobbing while filming a video diary about—of all things—her habit of baking for her roommates. Though what is seen on screen is simply a red torso with a lavaliere microphone attached, a voice recounts, “I spent a lot of years not having kids and doing . . . you know, eating out at shitty restaurants and doing my own work ’cause I thought I’ll be god-damned if I’m going to be a fucking housewife . . . and I have turned into a fucking housewife and I can’t stand it! What the fuck am I doing baking all the time? Why am I doing this?”

In the dark of the theater, I sink down in my seat, not just due to the rawness of the sentiment on screen but also because the contradiction is familiar. Is she calling me out for the three hours I spent this afternoon in the kitchen preparing an elaborate soup—a procrastination technique masquerading as necessity? I never wanted to be a housewife either, and yet there I was, making soup in the middle of a Monday. Why am I doing this?

This is often how a Friedrich film works: her poetic and probing meditations on specific aspects of her own experience (she’s an acute observer of domestic routine and familial ritual) reveal the subtle negotiations, hidden desires, and secret frustrations most of us glide over in daily life. In *Seeing Red*, one woman’s existential dilemma implicates all. When I sat down with the filmmaker a day after the West Coast premiere of the film, she talked about its prior reception in New York: “When I showed the film for the first time publicly, it had been almost a year since I’d finished it . . . The film started and people laughed and I didn’t expect that . . . I was really happy. I thought, oh my god, it’s true: We are ridiculous. We’re so filled with our sense of injustice and hardship and the struggles of life. But it’s all absurd.”

Renowned for her innovative use of autobiographical material—the 2006 retrospective of her work at New York’s Museum of Modern Art was titled The Personal Films of Su Friedrich—Friedrich continues to experiment with narrative form and a viewer’s expectations. *Seeing Red* is a tidy twenty-seven-minute film that interweaves three main elements—monologues (shot as video diaries), montages of red objects, and music (Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* performed by Glenn Gould). The video diary—that ubiquitous and banal trope on YouTube—is, in the hands of this avant-garde artist, reconfigured. Friedrich’s diaries deny the confessional form its usual casual identification by withholding the speaker’s face. It’s a simple, and paradoxical, device that shifts attention to what’s being said instead of who is saying it. (Friedrich has used similar distancing strategies in other films.) For Friedrich, an important part of making personal films is learning to keep your distance—“In the end what I’m concerned about is that the viewer experience something that has to do with them. And the only way for a person to think about themselves is to not be bombarded with me.”

It’s a balancing act she’s perfected in her two decades of work. Friedrich began making films in 1978. A member of the famed Heresies collective, a non-hierarchical volunteer group that published a popular feminist journal on art and politics from 1977 to 1992, she never questioned whether the personal was political. In her thirteen films, she’s lyrically explored her life, from her relationships with her mother and father (*The Ties that Bind*, 1984, and *Sink or Swim*, 1990) to a breakup with her lover understood through the lens of a used station wagon (*Rules of the Road*, 1993). Multifaceted in both form and content, her hybrid films (she freely mixes documentary and narrative forms) investigate subjects as wide-ranging as the ignorance of urbanites in the country (*The Head of a Pin*, 2004), dreams (*Gently Down the Stream*, 1981), and lesbian adolescence (*Hide and Seek*, 1996).

Unlike most of Friedrich’s films, the structure of *Seeing Red* came about “haphazardly.” While at work on another film (“about coffee,” she says), Friedrich’s increasing personal frustration was noticed by her partner, who encouraged her to explore that pain instead of a project she wasn’t feeling connected to. The result was a highly introspective film, with Friedrich recording her thoughts as video diaries and riding around on her bike to shoot red objects. (The first diary entry she shot was the baking one.) Friedrich explains that the process “just kind of came together over a period of six months, and it was really different for me. . . . I approached them [Seeing Red and an earlier film, *The Head of a Pin*] without that strict idea of how they could be structured and tried to be more open both in the way I shot and in the way I edited.”

Part of the reason for this shift is that Friedrich’s medium has changed. She shot her last two shorts, *Seeing Red* and *The Head of a Pin*, on video. As for most independent filmmakers, video is an economic necessity, but it’s a hard switch for Friedrich—celebrated for her technical virtuosity—to stomach. Her work often showcases the tactile beauty of 16mm film, making frequent use of sensual black-and-white imagery, optical printing, and even scratching on the film’s surface. While leaving her Bolex behind hurts, it’s also liberating: “I am finding that I am working differently now than I was in the past.
because of video, and maybe because of being older, and maybe because of having done films in a certain way for such a long time that at some point you have to challenge yourself—you have to stop doing Su Friedrich and see what happens.”

Seeing Red does feel like an exorcism of sorts, with the filmmaker flagrantly breaking some of her own cardinal rules, albeit ironically. As a line in the film suggests, she’s shooting red “because you know something like red doesn’t look good on video,” which is followed by the wisdom that “metaphors have to be handled carefully.” By giving us so much metaphor and so much red—endless variations on the same theme—Friedrich starts to break the framework that any one notion is the right one. It’s a bold statement of limitless multiplicity.

“I feel like I got around to saying something in this piece that I had probably been thinking about saying for a long time and didn’t know how to say, almost without planning I managed to do it, but I have no idea where that leads next, except there’s some way in which it’s kind of the culmination of my work—the work that’s been very personal,” Friedrich reflects. She mentions two current projects, one the aforementioned coffee film, the other about the gentrification of her neighborhood (Williamsburg, Brooklyn). Both, she admits, are less personal subjects, but “it’s kind of a strange feeling to think you can plumb the depths of your experience for only so long, and then maybe there’s a world out there to observe.” The filmmaker assured me that neither project will take a conventional form: “A lot of me rebels against doing a conventional documentary. I’m at a crossroads; I really don’t know what I’ll do. Until I do it.”

Friedrich’s films are available for purchase as a five-volume DVD collection from Outcast Films (www.outcast-films.com).