

## A Peaceful Existence on 'Echo Street'

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TELEVISION

**W**hen it comes to taking risks, public television usually teeters perilously on the cutting edge of convention.

Thus, public-station KCET's decision to air Susan Mogul's "Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary" is as refreshing as her 1993 film itself, in which she and her Highland Park neighbors co-star as an extended family.

The kind of "family" we should be seeing more often to offset TV's constant depictions that equate Angelenos with warring factions in Haiti.

Throwing praise at Mogul's film can raise unrealistic expectations for such a low-budget (\$20,000), inelegant documentary whose very petiteness is what makes it perfectly tailored for the small screen. Yet this video journal—or "docu-poem," as Mogul calls it—is indeed something to

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cheer, at once loads of fun and the kind of intimate insider's journey through a Los Angeles neighborhood that you seldom see on television.

Although Mogul said by phone recently that her film has no social agenda, it tends to unify segments of society rather than polarize them. It's 32 minutes of seductive ordinariness—an affirmation, home-movie style, of just how transfixing the peaceful, everyday trivia of life can be.

More transfixing even than nightly news footage showing Angelenos as victims or oppressors.

Actually, Mogul is a kind of outsider/insider, a former New Yorker who has lived in Los Angeles for more than two decades, the last 13 years alone in a one-bedroom apartment on largely working-class Echo Street, a rare Jew in a section of town that is predominantly Latino.

**P**articipant as well as observer, she is seen leaning out her window in a sort of signature stance, as if inhaling the neighborhood that she is about to chronicle so affectionately on videotape with her hand-held camera. "My name is Susan, and I live alone," she says at the start of the film. "I'm 43, and I've spent most of my adult life living alone."

Well . . . not entirely alone. In addition to the 13-year-old neighbor practicing her violin, we meet Mogul's friends, the Sanchezes, who operate nearby Armando's restaurant, and Eddie (the Animal) Lopez, a talkative ex-heavy-weight boxer with spaces in his front teeth beneath an enormous mustache. We meet the guys at Abdul Shell station, the Gonzalez sisters, the "UPS guy" and the mailman.

And we see Rick—who "lives there across from the mail boxes"—ask Mogul out for a platonic evening of country dancing. She accepts, and this scheduled date provides an opportunity for her to tenderly recall the death of a boyfriend in a car crash years ago.

Everyone on camera here seems remarkably loose, as if speaking only to Mogul, not her lens. "I was dealing with people who are a part of my life," Mogul said on the phone about the comfort level of her subjects. "And I don't think people took me seriously. You know, here was little Susan with her camera. Sometimes being a woman can work to your advantage."

More than merely a friendly neighborhood tour, though, this is a highly personalized film threaded by the filmmaker's self-effacing wit and candid introspection about her life as she settles into middle age.

Mogul's exploration of her self-identity began at an early age, as evidenced by old home-movie footage of her parents' 35th wedding anniversary party that introduces a separate, unaired video sampler of her other films. While dancing with her mother in front of the camera her father is operating, a 6-year-old Susan suddenly lifts her dress and pulls down her underpants.

Her self-exposure now assumes a different form. From her window tonight, she observes male and female pigeons "doing it," and jokes (apparently) about being jealous. "They have such a good sex life. They *have* a sex life."

**S**oon, however, we're introduced to a man Mogul met in the produce section of Ralph's. He becomes a romantic interlude, although Mogul frets when he waits

more than a week to phone her after their first date.

Part of the film's whimsical charm comes from Mogul's willingness to face the camera herself in unflattering moments. Looking like a candidate for embalming, she says after pulling herself from bed: "It's 8:30 in the morning . . . without coffee."

No one else does *that* in front of a camera.

"My work has never fit neatly into any category," Mogul said when asked to define what she does. "It's really about filming this everyday banal stuff and looking at the uniqueness of it, the absurdity of it, the humor of it."

Uniqueness, absurdity, humor—presented by Mogul in ways that are accessible to middle-brow audiences. Maybe that's not so risky after all.

■ "Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary" airs at 10:30 tonight on KCET-TV Channel 28.