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"Susan Mogul: At Home in Los Angeles"
by James M. Moran

Histories of film production, typically constructed as stories of "great men" responsible for innovations in studio management, formal techniques, and audio-visual technologies, frequently overlook the accomplishments of independent cinema in their celebration of mainstream Hollywood fare. This marginalization of non-commercial experimentation is, perhaps, not merely a reflection of the publishing industry's bias toward classical narrative, but also symptomatic of the ways in which traditional historiography writes out the contributions of women. Such an oversight is indefensible in any chronicle of artistic production in Los Angeles, where female film, video, and performance artists have significantly shaped the avant garde movements in this country, and continue to redefine and test their conceptual boundaries. The pioneering work of filmmakers such as Maya Deren (*Meshes in the Afternoon*, 1943), Sara Arledge (*What Is a Man*, 1958), and Chick Strand (*Soft Fiction*, 1979) illustrate the underlying content in much of women's cinema: the exploration of identity in relation to the self, the other, and art. These themes have come to preoccupy the avant-garde community itself (men included), and over the last twenty years, have been inflected and re-invigorated by a new wave of feminist artists.

This second generation of women filmmakers has also been centered in Southern California, where institutions of higher education have produced some of the country's seminal media programs and working artists: Judy Chicago (CAL Arts Feminist Art Program), Julie Dash (UCLA Ethnocommunications), and Ilene Segalove (UC Santa Barbara), as only a few examples. At a time when women's liberation expanded consciousness, questioned feminine stereotypes, and celebrated female sexuality, younger artists turned to more intimate interrogations of self—to autobiography, the body, and family history. The colloquial, the everyday, and the diaristic thus became dominant modes of expression well-suited to their concerns with women's work, domestic ideology, and non-canonical aesthetic production.

Like many artists working in this quotidian vernacular, home movies have had a pivotal influence on the work of Susan Mogul, if not an uncanny prescience. As the story goes, at age six, during the celebration of a 35th wedding anniversary party for her grandparents, a spry and eager young Susan began dancing with her mother, who handed the family's super-8 camera to her husband in order to capture this most typical home movie attraction. No sooner had mother and daughter adopted the smiling poses proper for their sex, did Susan boldly lift her dress, drop her panties, and expose her crotch to dad's paternal gaze. As Susan so fondly remembers this notorious episode, her mother deeply blushed, while the artist-in-the-rough laughed hysterically.

Appropriately, Mogul introduces a video sampler of her work with this interlude that functions as a witty, ironic allegory for the trajectory of her career over the last twenty-five years. From the past to the present, Mogul's provocative response to the camera and her love of performance have mediated her life and her art, at times blurring the distinction. Her self-exposure, the impulse of every autobiographical artist, has resulted in a necessary exhibitionism of the most private parts of her experience to the public eye. Yet unlike the home movie's paternal gaze so typical of the fifties during which it was shot, Mogul's own video self-portraits and ethnographies illustrate her feminist and feminine reappropriation of the apparatus as an act of self-determination.

Significantly, not until she had moved to the West Coast was Mogul able to achieve the aesthetic and literal distance she needed to investigate her New York, Jewish, and female identities against the liberating relief of the Los Angeles art scene. Growing up in the middle class suburbs of Long Island, she had never consciously identified herself as an artist. Coming to Los Angeles, Mogul finally found her artistic voice: "While I'm not obsessed with the city in and of itself, LA has been a place where I can explore the new sense of freedom it gave me. Here I can create my own reality—not that my reality is a fantasy—but one that is separate from my biological family. Ultimately, and ironically, it has been the place where I have sought a new family constituted by individuals from the different groups I belong to." 1.

Enrolling for six months in the germinal and influential Feminist Art Program at CAL Arts under the tutelage of Judy Chicago, Susan began to take risks and define her unique sensibility. Although not particularly influenced by the works or genres of her fellow artists in residence, she absorbed the climate of openness and support that this environment fostered. Encouraged to explore her female identity and sexuality, liberated from her family, and reborn as an artist, Susan recognized her new achievements through a most quintessential Los Angeles ritual: the acquisition of her first driver's license. Having suffered a near fatal automobile accident years earlier, after which she developed a fear of driving, Susan picked up the pieces of her past and pasted them together on a postcard collage announcement, "Mogul is Mobil," in which she and her car fly effortlessly above the Hollywood freeways. Both liberating and frustrating, the paradox of Los Angeles, like the dream of a flying car, has been a driving tension of her work. An outsider working in a man's world and residing in a Latino neighborhood, Susan Mogul may always be looking inside, but through the equitable lens of her personal experience and comic recollections, we may also glimpse something of ourselves.

Hollywood Mogul: Waiting at the Soda Fountain

Living in the shadow of the Hollywood Hills but working far from its studio gates, Mogul jokingly calls herself a "co-dependent filmmaker" at the mercy of private donations and government grants. The lure of "big time" success in the world capital of commercial entertainment and the desire for recognition by the established art world haunts much of Mogul's work, but in the guise of a friendly ghost rather than a Faustian demon. Susan's fantasies of success have always a comic, congenial twist, as in *Dear Dennis* (1988), a video letter to Dennis Hopper inspired by her discovery that they share the same dentist. The central irony of this witty piece is that, despite Hopper's popular persona as an innovative, sub-cultural filmmaker and performer, the actual distance between his so-called "independent" films and Mogul's experimental, non-commercial videos prevents Susan from finding any common ground from which to address Hopper other than the subject of dental work.

In the first scene, for example, Mogul brushes her teeth to the tune of "C.C. Rider," a play on Easy Rider, Hopper's claim to alternative fame, and opens wide to show the camera her cracked tooth that needs a root canal and a five-hundred dollar gold crown. The third, and best segment, introduces Susan reading in bed, hidden behind the pages of the *L.A. Weekly*, whose cover story about gang warfare is counterposed to Streisand's rendition of "Something's Comin" from *West Side Story*, playing in the background. Susan eventually lowers the paper to address the camera, and reveals a bruised and swollen face. She tells Dennis that she recently saw his feature,

Colors, in her east side neighborhood, and while she never offers her opinion of the film *per se*, she does imply that the riot which ensued during the screening ultimately saved her an expensive dental bill, as the problem tooth, which she raises for his inspection, has been conveniently knocked from her head. By putting *Colors* in a context juxtaposing a journalistic account of real city gangs with a pop song that romanticizes gang warfare as a musical fantasy, and by suggesting that the film's worth can best be measured in terms of its exchange value, Mogul subtly implies that Hopper's work neutralizes sub-cultural practices and renews their potential as Hollywood commodities.

In the work's final segment, set to a German rendition of "Mack the Knife," Mogul presents to Dennis a necklace made from her own teeth, a ludicrous piece of folk art that oddly is designed to attract Hopper's attention in the probable absence of his interest in her video. The entire premise is ridiculous, but Mogul's deadpan panache gives the work an ingenuous urgency that creates drama out of the mundane. And unlike the man whom her letter addresses, Mogul never sells out her integrity as an artist (or as a woman) in her efforts to earn recognition. The video retains her episodic, low-tech, unpretentious signature style and avoids trying to impress Hopper with flash and glamour. That Hopper has never responded to Mogul's letter is telling in itself; as a video whose diaristic vernacular resists cinematic appropriation and whose seduction denies sex, *Dear Dennis* exposes little that the man can sink his teeth into.

The ways in which women have had to present and even degrade themselves in order to impress men, gain attention, and succeed in Hollywood are lampooned in Mogul's performance video, *Waiting at the Soda Fountain* (1980). Set at the Columbia Coffee Shop, the piece parodies the rags to riches fantasy of Lana Turner, who, as the legend goes, walked up to a Hollywood soda fountain, ordered a chocolate malted, and became a star. Dressed in a beret and a bad attitude, Mogul masquerades as a "male" movie director who callously evaluates the auditions of the women in attendance, discarding those who fail to meet "his" stereotypical image of who they should be rather than who they are. The "wannabes" in the tape are all well-known personalities associated with West Coast feminist art, including Arlene Raven, Cheri Gaulke, and Nancy Angelo. As performance artists dealing with personal concerns, they have already developed recognizable ways of presenting themselves, but in the tape, they are pretending to be actresses who are pretending to be someone else. Forced to attend to hair and makeup, take dictatorial direction, conform to type, and enact humiliating scenarios, they give over-the-top performances which poke fun at women's traditional passivity.

Mogul directed the affair as a three-hour on-location happening, providing scripted scenarios but calling for unscripted responses. This balance of structure and improvisation, these layers of reality and artifice, here exploited primarily for comic effect, find a more profound and mature expression in her later work. Her parodic impersonation of the movie director, while debunking the sexist imperatives associated with his power, disguises Mogul's latent ambitions to direct a feature film. This desire finds its concrete expression in the photo collage she designed for the coffee shop, entitled "Wandering Moguls Invade the Promised Land." Reduplicated en masse, the artist is featured as conqueror of Hollywood: reigning from skyscrapers, demolishing the Capitol Records building, and taking over tinsel town. The poignant irony, of course, is that Susan herself has taken over only a tiny soda fountain, now torn down, and remains waiting to this day.

Diary Essays: Everyday Echoes and Dreams

Since the completion of *Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary* (1993) and *I Stare At You and Dream* (1997),[2] Mogul has become more firmly identified as a "diary filmmaker." Yet, in contrast to the strategies of Mekas, Brakhage, and Auder, who operate the camera apparatus as an immediate extension of their subjective interaction with the environment, whose cinematic techniques strive to document time and place without the imposition of a supplementary consciousness, and whose footage privileges the present instant of composition over post-production manipulation, Mogul's strategies have always reassembled the heterogeneous moments of shooting in the service of prearranged scenarios or thematic concepts.

Mogul resists the literal mandates of autobiographical "truth to life." Her biography is her palette, whose colors she chooses according to the mood, effect, or idea she has in mind. All art that draws on raw experience, in her philosophy, is by definition a reconstruction, a tension between spontaneity and intentionality, "a way to figure things out in my personal life, or personal issues, or personal conflicts. It gives me a structure to look at my life, things, people." Mogul's diaries are meant to be published, communicated, received. Gregarious, her recollections turn outward, exploring personal identity and social relationships as mutually constitutive.

In her most recent pieces, shot in Highland Park, a primarily Latino neighborhood, Mogul culminates what is perhaps the most salient theme throughout all of her works—a search for home through a process of interpersonal communication. While retaining elements of the diaristic vernacular—digression, impression, intimacy, revelation—Mogul experiments with scripted improvisations, framing the presentation of non-actors within a narrative that endows them with double signification: at once real people in her neighborhood and figures of her poetic design. Their representation is not, therefore, a process of editing out, but editing in: the stories Susan constructs around her everyday meetings with ordinary folks inscribe their public appearances in her personal anecdotes, transforming the most mundane behavior as the stuff of private fantasy.

In this way, Mogul is able to uphold the ethnographer's integrity by presenting her neighbors as they really are, but of course only as she can see them. By framing their stories within her own scenarios about family, friendship, loneliness, and love, the particular becomes universal. Latinos and Jews, men and women, old and young are different, but somehow the same, refracted and refocused through Mogul's camera lens: "I look for the common denominators that I experience with other people. By focusing on personal connections, for what we've got in common, I've been able to smash stereotypical representations of Angelenos that have kept us apart."

For example, in *I Stare At You and Dream*, race, class, and ethnicity wash away when universal needs, such as filial recognition, come to the fore, linking everyone from Susan the artist and Ray the ex-con to Sam the college professor and Alex the aspiring poet. And when *Everyday Echo Street* premiered at Armando's, a local restaurant in Highland Park, people from inside and outside the community gathered together to observe a slice of life typically absent in media exhibitions.

Mogul's vision of her neighborhood is thus a rare alternative to the mainstream: "Highland Park is a neighborhood that has escaped Hollywood representation. It's not well-known like Beverly Hills or Watts. The inhabitants are neither universally affluent nor gang-bangers. So, in the tapes, you see, first, people who are

normally invisible in Hollywood productions, and second, three-dimensional human beings rather than caricatures." Take, for instance, Mogul's on and off boyfriend, Ray Aguilar: although first introduced as an ex-con, he reveals himself over the course of *I Stare At You and Dream*as "an intriguing very complex man, who is both tender and aggressive, hardworking and fun-loving, at times distant from me, but also quite close to his grandmother."

After living in the neighborhood for fifteen years, the artist herself comes to know its inhabitants more intimately through the creative process. For instance, in *Everyday Echo Street*, Mogul dramatizes her discoveries by formally dividing her piece in roughly equal halves, the first representing her initial isolation, and the second, her re-integration. A single, Jewish, middle class artist living in a Latino, working class neighborhood of closely knit families, Mogul introduces herself once again as the outsider, far from home, family and friends. Memories of loss haunt her: the young lover who died in a car wreck; the sale of the house on Long Island in which she grew up; the week at Grandma Sonia's on Long Island where, abandoned by her parents during their vacation, she did nothing but look out the window. Now forty years later, Susan continues to look out windows in Highland Park, a vantage point allowing her to observe her surroundings, but from a private space and self-imposed distance. The impulse to film from her window, she confesses, began when a man she was dating went off to Italy for a month, but never returned. In the meantime she watches pigeons making love on her roof, self-conscious of her loneliness. Even when Mogul and her camera leave her apartment window and move about the community, we see the neighborhood primarily from her first person point of view, one with which we identify and whose effect causes a radical separation: "our" self looking out upon the other. Susan's presence is marked only by her absence in the scene, as her disembodied voice foregrounds our awareness of the camera between her and her subjects.

The video's second half, however, registers a subtle but perceptible change, largely because Mogul more frequently begins to appear in front of the camera, which she has handed to a hired assistant. Her presence in the frame thus splits our identification between her and the viewfinder, so that rather than watching with her from the outside, we now join her as a member of the community, her invited guest. We follow her to the local grocery store, post office, gas station, and restaurant, where soon we grow to understand that Susan's minor exchanges—the greetings, courtesies, jokes, and small talk—make up the fabric of her everyday life. The UPS man who delivers a package and a smile to her door, the waitress who brings her a burrito and a piece of juicy gossip, the postal clerk who stamps her letter and wishes her the best—these people whom she encounters every day, who she can depend on, are after all, we come to realize, much like members of a family.

The echoes of home have reverberated full circle, as Susan recognizes that what she's been missing has been out on the street all along. Setting her sights beyond her apartment window, she pursues the neighborhood men, transformed by her camera's aggressive gaze into objects of her desire. Visited by Grace, an aging, unmarried friend content to live alone, Susan can face a similar prospect with equanimity. Bumping into Mark, an amateur photographer and Polish survivor of World War II, she discovers that she's not the only Jew living in Highland Park.

Consequently, in *I Stare at You and Dream*, an unofficial "sequel," Mogul explores in even greater depth and with greater familiarity the close relationships she had developed while shooting *Everyday Echo Street*. "As I began

to identify with the stories I was telling, I felt inspired to explore our lives together." Interweaving her own point of view with those of her subjects, Mogul creates a community tapestry – at once specific to its class and ethnicity, and universal in its emphasis on the search for love and meaning among family and friends, within work and art itself. Each longing for connection, but fearing abandonment, Susan and Ray, Rosie and her daughter Alex, mirror each other in their need for self-affirmation and recognition attained through various interpersonal bonds. As Alex writes so poignantly in one of her poems: "But knowing your existence depends upon my stillness, or movement, or both/like breaths in between/I stare at you and dream." Reflecting this desire, Mogul's camera details her long standing friendship with Rosie, her creative affinities to Alex, and her conflicted feelings for Ray with an often naked honesty. As a testimony to this intense closeness of her newfound, "makeshift" family, by the tape's end, in which she looks back upon home movies of her childhood, now long ago and far away, Susan may once again confirm that "although Highland Park is 3000 miles from where I grew up, it feels very close to home."

1. Susan Mogul, personal interview, 27 February 1998. All subsequent quotations are from the same interview.

2. *I Stare at You and Dream* was produced in association with the Independent Television Service(ITVS) with major funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.