

# ARTFORUM

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Ericka Beckman, *Out of Hand*, 1980, film still

**ERICKA BECKMAN, "Out of Hand,"** Collective for Living Cinema; **STUART SHERMAN, "Fifteen Films (1977-80),"** Anthology Film Archives:

ERICKA BECKMAN is one of the most accomplished of younger American filmmakers. The five super-8 films she has released since 1977 can be located at the "perceptual" edge of Poststructural Punk: they're not an absolute rejection of '70s formalism. Beckman's work has affinities to certain films of George Landow and the trickier sections of Robert Nelson and William Wiley's *The Great Blondino*, but basically she's an idiosyncratic original, with a full-blown style that's completely her own.

Like primitive cartoons, Beckman's enigmatic allegories are filled with nervous activity and comic violence, sexual imagery and syncopated energy, perceptual game-playing and ingenious homemade optical effects. Her major thematic preoccupations include competition, organization, initiation and "the coordination of the self in the physical world." There is something undeniably calisthenic about her vision. Beckman's *mise en scène* is characterized by sing-song voice tracks, jerky robot motions, repetitive gestures and the iconic use of sports equipment and cheerleaders. My first impression of her best film, the 1978 *We Imitate; We Break-Up* was of a high school gym class taught by Georges Méliès in a space designed by Giorgio de Chirico.

Hermetic even by the standards of her earlier work, *Out of Hand* is framed as though it were a dream. The action

pivots around a model of a pre-fab colonial-style house; the protagonist is a young man in white overalls who is searching for an unknown missing object. Everything is set in an ambiguous, interior space and accompanied by an abstract doo-wop mantra ("gotta gotta get it . . . gotta gotta get it") that sounds a bit like the early Mothers of Invention. As with all of Beckman's films, the dramatic narrative tends to recede behind the glitter of her special effects: the laws of physics are highly malleable, and much of the film is an Oskar Fischinger-like dance of out-sized tools, rotating cubes, and empty suitcases. Still, certain events can be isolated. The house is literally broken into; the protagonist runs away and comes back; he rummages through an old toy chest and then does (defensive) battle with a uniformed authority figure. An obscure ending has him shoveling air into an abstract, miniaturized furnace while three headless cheerleaders kick their legs and the chorus chants something sounding like "Let it slip—pass over."

Beckman frequently links her work to Piaget but, with its obsessive images of property and loss, *Out of Hand* is an Allstate Insurance commercial as it might appear to an autistic child. Less focused and more dogged than her earlier films, it does inspire a certain restlessness. One has the sense that Beckman may be the prisoner of her style. And as her work has some similarities to the "new psychodrama," perhaps *Out of Hand's* title has an unintended confessional ring.