

encore

S E R I E S

ERICKA BECKMAN

We Imitate; We Break-Up (super-8, 1978). Sound. 30 minutes.

Cinderella (16mm, 1986). Sound. 24 minutes

Ericka Beckman makes movies that are playful in the most liberal sense. Boldly colored and cheerfully self-absorbed, they take their structure, rhythm, and imagery from games. Given the difficulties inherent in avant garde film production, Beckman's work is improbably optimistic--it seems to celebrate its own coming into existence. There is something undeniably calisthenic about her vision, which is characterized by exhortatory chants (mainly composed with Brooke Halpin), repetitive gestures, and the iconic use of sports equipment and cheerleaders.

Beckman's roots are in the art world. She began making movies in the mid 1970s using the then new technology of sync-sound super 8. Her first films were neither documentaries nor narratives, but rather idiosyncratic constructions that triumphed over the limitations of the narrow-gauge format with their ingenious homemade special effects. These remarkable early works have the vitality of primitive cartoons--and are similarly filled with comic violence and dreamlike condensation. As inventive as the filmmaker is, she's too obsessive for mere formalism. If Beckman's narratives are often cryptic, her work is preoccupied by a recurring core of themes--competition, cognition, role-playing, and what she's called "the coordination of the self in the physical world." In virtually every one of her movies, some young (usually female) individual learns, through trial and error, how to act in (or upon) the world. In the super 8 *We Imitate; We Break Up*, a set of life-sized marionette legs teach the filmmaker/protagonist how to dance and play a version of soccer, then chase her all over the lot when she runs away with the "loot."

Cinderella, Beckman's latest film (and her second in 16 mm), deals with the construction of gender. Although no less fraught with psychosexual tension than Walt Disney's version, Beckman's drops the fairytale's sibling rivalry and Oedipal underpinnings, reworking the heroine's situation as an allegory of female socialization. Cinderella's labors are dirtier and more strenuous than housework: the film opens in a clanging, fiery forge where she works the bellows and is mysteriously rewarded when a green crinoline dress appears gift-wrapped on the hearth. Packaged in the dress and a blonde wig (and looking remarkably like Kathleen Turner in *Peggy Sue Got Married*), Cinderella attends the prince's ball. But despite the exhortations of an anthropomorphized clock, she fails to grasp the rules of the game and, after twelve, the screen lights up with TILT!-like messages: "NOT HOME BY MIDNIGHT" and "NOT WITH THE PRINCE."

The heroine's education continues apace at a factory in which De Chirico-like robots assemble Cinderella dolls in green dresses. The doll is (literally) the heroine's model, while the factory suggests the machinery of social programming--specifically the entertainment industry. (The green dress keeps turning into green discs.) Observing this process, which is represented with a virtuoso combination of superimposed images and animated models, Cinderella discovers that "green is the currency" and resolves that "no dress will ever shelter me." By the end, she knows "just what to do." Once again in gown and wig, she dances with the faceless prince, and runs away at midnight (correctly leaving her shoe). She wins the game and then, in a mock Hollywood style production number, rejects it.

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