



LYNDA BENGLIS: FEMALE SENSIBILITY, video, at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

On Video: Banality, Sex, Cooking

Long Beach

The Southland Video Anthology currently being shown at the Long Beach Museum of Art includes videotapes by sixty-five artists. Seventeen of the artists are women. All of the contributors' ages range between twenty-two and forty-five. Individual tapes run from a few minutes to over an hour, so it is impossible to view all the works offered even after half-a-dozen visits. An excellent article by Director David Ross in an accompanying catalog gives an insightful overview of the artists and a short background of video history. I shall concentrate here on the works of Lynda Benglis, Eileen Griffin, Susan Mogul, David Salle and Ilene Segalove.

In Lynda Benglis' *Female Sensibility* two women — Benglis and her friend — are seen from the neck up. Each woman, in turn, kisses and caresses the other delicately, gently. Both women remain controlled and unemotional throughout. Benglis' lips appear to be painted a chalky iridescent color, and they are outlined vividly in a darker shade which translates on black and white tape into parched, cracked lips. The background sound track spews frantic talk radio. We hear Bill Ballance and Stan, the Hullabalooer, unmistakably Los Angeles in origin.

Eileen Griffin's long documentarylike tape, *Sugar 'n Spice and Everything Nice*, penetrating-

Ruth Askey

ly explores the lives of male transsexuals. Interviewing psychiatrists, social workers and psychologists as well as men who function either partly or entirely as women, Griffin delves into their backgrounds and feelings. The tape begins with a long list of credits to the tune of the Munchkin music from *Wizard of Oz*. "Nicole — the Empress of San Diego" and "Dearie (Amanda) Model-Hooker" identify two of the men-turned-women. Many have spent large amounts of money on expensive plastic surgery for face, breasts and presumably genitals. One woman, who spent \$2,000 on her face and \$1,500 on her breasts, refers to herself as a "razor queen" (she carries a razor all the time) "because I'm not going to let any John mess up what I've spent so much money on." Another woman, describing her successful plastic surgery, said, "When women look at you then you know you've got it beat." Throughout the tape, the hooker-type comes off like a caricature of a bawdy vamp or at best(?) a glamour girl of the forties. Their mannerisms — fluttering eyelashes, hand cupped coyly under chin — reveal a definite male-oriented concept of femininity. The medically-affiliated men interviewed used words like "gender dysphoria" and "genital reassignment surgery," proving that euphemisms are alive and

flourishing in transsexual-land.

Susan Mogul's pieces take the banal and by seeming to make it important make it funny instead. In the first work she plays with a vibrator (under a table — she is seen only from the chest up) saying, "There is no man under this table; there is no woman under this table; there is only a vibrator." In between masturbatory interludes, she becomes the smiling, advice-giving "girl-from-Pacific-Plan," cheerfully discussing her problems with the vibrator batteries. In the second piece, *Dressing Up*, Mogul appears nude and as she dresses (all the while munching corn nuts) describes her wardrobe in terms of the bargains she was able to get, with references to the frugality her mother inspired in her.

In David Salle's *What's Cooking*, he brings the viewer into the kitchens of four of his friends. Each is asked in turn, "What's cooking?" After reciting the recipe to whatever is being prepared — an omelette, an Indian curry dish, a sandwich (!) — each proceeds to describe the bizarre death of someone close. Every death is explained in detail while the individual fixes his meal. The strange deaths described in a low-key, deadpan way make the viewer think that the stories could be put-ons. But, in fact, they are not. Salle explained that he wanted the individual speaking to become a "vessel, not a billboard" through which the stories evolve. He was unable to use one such piece because the artist/friend became so emotionally caught up in the telling that the flat, passive quality was lost. Although death



SUSAN MOGUL: DRESSING UP, video, at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

descriptions sound like heavy viewing, they aren't. Kitchens, omelette stirring and casual, chatty talk create a cozy, almost humorous atmosphere.

The banal lives women lead are effectively made deadpan in Ilene Segalove's pieces. All of her fourteen works are worth looking at. Most of them have to do with San Fernando Valley suburban living. We visit her sister's house where Mantovani-like music is piped through Muzak-style. The furnishings combine kitsch and genteelness to become a sort of *haut* Sears. As we are taken through the house, we get the lowdown on what it's like to add a room on. The new family room is completely dominated by the husband's pool table, under which the son's train set runs. Segalove's sister tells us about selecting the Polaroid shades, a "sofa-sleeper," and making needlepoint pillows. She laughs and says, "My husband is going to throw me and all my pillows out if I make anymore, so I'm going to take up macrame." In the immaculate kitchen she pours herself and the viewer a cup of coffee and explains how difficult it is to be the neighborhood's only "room add-on authority."

In Segalove's several pieces involving women, it seems that the very banality arises out of the uselessness of the women's lives. In another work an off-screen daughter seeks out her mother and asks her where to buy a steak, where to find a plastic planter, an area rug, a raincoat, etc. Her mother answers her specifically, "at Tony's" (for the steak), "Akron, May Company," etc. When asked "Hey mom, where can I find money?" her mother says, "Ask your father." Click.

In *TV IS OK* Segalove answers a series of questions from an imaginary Inquisitor about her license plate, to the sound of a gunning motor. "No my father is not a TV repairman / No my father is not a salesman / No my father is not a star / No my father is not an engineer... / I make video tapes. / I make peaceful video tapes."

Director Ross says: "The tapes included in this exhibition must be seen for what they represent, as well as for what they actually constitute as works of art. An appreciation of the work must be based in each individual artist's decision to either embrace or transcend the specific character of the medium, and transform the experience and consciousness of the viewer."

The exhibition, which originally was to close September 7, has been extended to September 20. □