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| Marie Menken (1910-1970) |
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| Marie Menken (1910-1970) was a New York-based experimental filmmaker who produced her main work during the 1950s and 1960s. Born in Brooklyn to an immigrant Lithuanian family, she attended the New York School of Fine and Industrial Arts and the Art Students’ League, where she was trained as a painter, her original vocation. After finishing her studies, she worked as a secretary to Hilla Rebay, first director and chief curator of the Museum for Non-Objective Painting (later renamed Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum). In 1936 she was granted a summer residency at the Yaddo artist colony in upstate New York, where she met Willard Maas (1907-1970), another resident, then a rising poet and editor. They married the following year and stayed together the rest of their lives in a complex, at times embattled, relationship that led to fruitful artistic collaboration. By Maas’s own account, their interest in film was spurred by their friend Norman McLaren, the Scottish animator who lived in New York during the war years before moving to Canada to direct the Animation Division of the National Film Board. |
| Marie Menken (1910-1970) was a New York-based experimental filmmaker who produced her main work during the 1950s and 1960s. Born in Brooklyn to an immigrant Lithuanian family, she attended the New York School of Fine and Industrial Arts and the Art Students’ League, where she was trained as a painter, her original vocation. After finishing her studies, she worked as a secretary to Hilla Rebay, first director and chief curator of the Museum for Non-Objective Painting (later renamed Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum). In 1936 she was granted a summer residency at the Yaddo artist colony in upstate New York, where she met Willard Maas (1907-1970), another resident, then a rising poet and editor. They married the following year and stayed together the rest of their lives in a complex, at times embattled, relationship that led to fruitful artistic collaboration. By Maas’s own account, their interest in film was spurred by their friend Norman McLaren, the Scottish animator who lived in New York during the war years before moving to Canada to direct the Animation Division of the National Film Board.  Menken and Maas’s first significant film is *Geography of the Body* (1943), which involved as well British poet George Barker. The film is a witty depiction of the human body primarily shot by Menken. Extreme close-ups taken through a magnifying glass attached to the camera lens render diverse anatomical parts by turns unrecognizable, sexually ambiguous, and disquieting. On the soundtrack, a surreal travelogue, written and read by Barker, narrates a hallucinated journey through exotic lands, equating the visual exploration of a radically defamiliarized body to an expedition through an enigmatic geography.  Menken’s next important film, *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945), applies the visual logic of *Geography of the Body* to a number of sculptures by Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The camera hovers gracefully over the surface of Noguchi’s sculptures, rendering them in captivating detail while withdrawing their wholistic rendering in long shot. The dissolution of wholes into partial, voluntarily fragmentary views is an overriding strategy that shapes as well *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957), *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961)—an impressionistic study of the Alhambra—and *Bagatelle for Willard Maas* (1961). A similar flair for fragmentation, used to percussive effect, informs Menken’s use of pixilation both in animations of sand, paper clippings, glitter, and beads (*Dwightiana*, 1957), and in her frame-by-frame actualities. Of these, *Andy Warhol* (1965), shows the artist at work at the Factory and at an art opening, and *Go Go Go* (1962-64) and *Excursion* (1968) are city films. *Go Go Go* follows the frantic activity around New York City; *Excursion* looks at Manhattan from a boat circling the island. Menken’s work is invariably precise, tightly conceived, and witty. She acted in some of her husband’s films (*Image in the Snow*, 1948, and *Narcissus*, 1956) and in Andy Warhol’s *Life of Juanita Castro* (1965) and *The Chelsea Girls* (1966). She was an important mentor to a number of younger artists and a subtle influence on other experimental filmmakers. Underestimated for years, her work has recently received some scholarly attention and has been the subject of significant museum retrospectives, and seems on its way to receive the recognition it deserves. Filmography: *Geography of the Body* (camera work) (1943)  *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945)  *Hurry! Hurry!* (1957)  *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957)  *Dwightiana* (1957)  *Eye Music in Red Major* (1961)  *Notebook* (1963) made up of sections that are at times shown separately: ‘Raindrops’, ‘Greek Epiphany’, ‘Moonplay’, ‘Copycat’, ‘Paper Cuts’, ‘Lights’, ‘Night Writing’, ‘The Egg’, and ‘Etcetcetc’  *Mood Mondrian* (1963)  *Andy Warhol* (1965)  *Wrestling* (1964)  *Drips in Strips* (1961)  *Go Go Go* (1962–64)  *Lights* (1966)  *Sidewalks* (1966)  *Excursion* (c. 1968)  *Watts with Eggs* (1967) |
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