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Indecent Desires

The Meeting of Two Queens

Doris Wishman and Peggy Ahwesh

BY ELENA GORFINKEL

“What’s so great about Doris Wishman?” Doris Wishman asks Peggy Ahwesh in a quintessentially irascible Wishmanian gesture, simultaneously a self-negation and a demand for affirmation, even if one can’t tell exactly which. One extended reply to the question is found in the recently reprinted zine *The Films of Doris Wishman* (Light Industry/Inpatient Press), edited and produced by experimental filmmaker Ahwesh. A long-time devotee of Wishman, Ahwesh made the zine in 1995 as an accompaniment to screenings she curated in San Francisco at the Roxie Cinema and the Other Cinema. Made with a print run of only 75 copies, it featured program notes, an interview excerpt with Wishman, drawings, ad mat images from film pressbooks, quotes, and essays on the films by Keith Sanborn, Blossom Lefcourt, Joel Shepard, and Ahwesh. Ahwesh also screened Wishman’s work as part of a 1997 series she programmed at the Whitney Museum of American Art called *Girls Beware!* For Ahwesh, Wishman’s delirious, rickety,

shoestring-budgeted, sexually dystopian films were wellsprings of a purely independent expression of “what it means to be female.”

Wishman was one of the only women directors working in '60s sexploitation production, and by the time of her death in 2002 she had directed approximately 30 films. A cult revival of Wishman's work on VHS by Something Weird Video in the late '80s and early '90s facilitated the circulation of her oddball sex melodramas among a scruffy gang of schlock-cinema enthusiasts on the psychotronic scene. Wishman made her films in a largely male-dominated cottage industry of sex-film production that capitalized on the loosening of obscenity laws, precariously toeing the line of sexual permissibility as the '60s wore on and legal precedents shifted. Moving from a series of nudist-camp films shot in Florida, among them the sci-fi idyll *Nude on the Moon* (1962), in which scientists find telepathic nudist “moonatics” when they take a trip to outer space, Wishman shifted to the mode of black-and-white sex and violence-themed “roughies” along with the rest of the sexploitation rabble in the mid-'60s, making some of her most brazen, disorienting, and hauntingly iconic works. In films like *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965) and *Another Day Another Man* (1966), the alchemy of unbidden female desire mixes woozily with a punitive patriarchal logic in which women, grasping for happiness and pleasure, wander through a world whose inexplicable laws constantly shift under their snazzily stillettoed feet. In *Bad Girls*, Meg Kelton, the eponymous “bad girl” but also a bored and neglected housewife, kills her attempted rapist, the janitor of her building, by smashing a large ashtray over his head, then flees out of guilt and shame to New York City, fearful that her husband may find out. In New York, sexual assailants keep reappearing in the form of other deceptively kind but ultimately despicable men, with Meg's bid for escape turning into a spiral of perverse repetition.

The Films of Doris Wishman makes us confront the challenges and surprises within the history of women's filmmaking practices through a “meeting of two queens,” the queen of '60s sexploitation and the doyenne of '90s New York underground cinema. That meeting took place in a sex shop. Ahwesh travelled to Florida in 1994 after she and M.M. Serra learned Wishman was living there and working at a sex novelty store, the Pink Pussycat Boutique in Coconut Grove. A video interview of that meeting is transcribed in the reprint, which recounts their conversation, full of joking, teasing, and play, as Ahwesh and Serra (along with punk musician Tom Smith) pepper Wishman with probing questions about her body of films as well as her love life as she tends to the shop's customers. They film the purchasing of a dildo, then ask Wishman to sign it, and she, playing coy, refuses. If experimental film and sexploitation are areas of practice not frequently considered together or as linked phenomena, what a delight to discover that these two paragons of their respective modes hashed out life and work amidst a cornucopia of sex toys. (*Sex Toy* [1971] and *Dildo Heaven* [2002] are two of Wishman's most memorable film titles.)

The zine is a beautiful reconstituted object of retrospectively tinged cinephilia and of the pleasures to be found in the curatorial ephemera of microcinemas. It is also a dense time capsule: in reading it, one enters a portal into the allegiances, fascinations, and aesthetic commitments of the avant-garde and underground

film scenes in the mid-'90s. The publication gives a core sample of Ahwesh's own intellectual and aesthetic interests in this moment and a concatenation of Wishman's films and their world. Sexploitation films themselves, frequently thought of as capsules of a largely derided mode of filmmaking, were rarely explored with much gravity or depth within “serious” film culture either then or now.

But Ahwesh *did* take Wishman seriously, not just as a genre stylist but as a film artist—likely something Wishman would scoff at. (“Why are people interested in me?” she retorts, in Ahwesh's recounting.) There are filmmakers who wrote about or produced homages to their idols, older filmmakers they admired: Rohmer, Chabrol, and Truffaut on Hitchcock, Bogdanovich on Welles, Wenders on Ray. But what is unique about Ahwesh's zine is the Wishman that Ahwesh conjures there, both in the array of material assembled to piece together Wishman's “odd and original” films and in the spirit of its investigations. There have been many Doris Wishmans constructed by the cult discourse over the years: Wishman as a sly but nice New York Jewish grandmotherly-type in shades and polka dots; Wishman as a “novelty” or historical exception à la Dorothy Arzner in narratives of independent cinema and women's film history; Wishman as a plucky and peculiar metteuse en scène, making films as required by this small industry's formulas; and, in one of the most skeptical feminist accounts, Wishman as herself a subject and victim of the patriarchal systems her films aimed to describe as well as work within.

Who is the Wishman that emerges here in Ahwesh's eyes? A figure at once mercurial, mysterious, but also funny, bossily pragmatic, obstinate and reticent, and a raconteur fond of gimmicks, great film titles, pseudonyms, and women's underthings. But more than the quirky biographical human seen in these pages, it is her brutal, salacious, and oddly droll films that continue to mesmerize. As Ahwesh writes, “Doris' storylines twist and turn through themes of sexual fear, rapists and seducers, good girls gone bad, warped desire and various dystopic views of sexual relations. The films offer the prerequisite weirdness of the genre but they have a seedy underlying resonance of the fear of and hostility toward women in our world which Doris describes in her own profound and tawdry way.” Wishman is thus seen through the veil of Ahwesh's own aesthetic reckoning with female abandon, chance, and risk in her filmmaking—a way to image female sexuality through other means and methods, from improvised performance to found footage. In Ahwesh's own films from this period, the Deadman trilogy—*The Deadman* (1989), *Nocturne* (1998), and the Wishman-dedicated *The Color of Love* (1994)—she channels the “inexplicable force” of sexuality, crafting images of women seeking states of Bataillean self-dissolution as they grapple with and bury the corpses of terrible, inconvenient men.

Seen against these concerns, Wishman's films appear in a different light. They attend to the unseen, ineffable gravity of the social and ideological norms that govern family, reproduction, and romantic myth, making her films' women protagonists their absurd victims, asphyxiated under this crushing weight. Pursuing pleasure or seeking happiness, women's bodies (and occasionally men's) are the site of what Michael Bowen has called “somatic be-

trayal” in her films, in which the flesh rebels or betrays its subject. Wishman’s films of the ’70s especially tilt into this terrain and incorporate an element of horror. In *The Amazing Transplant* (1970), a man, hoping to improve his self-confidence, grafts his dead friend’s penis onto his body, and driven by his new member, unsuspectingly becomes a serial rapist, incited by the twinkle of gold earrings. *Double Agent 73* (1974) concerns a spy (played by stripper Chesty Morgan) who gets a camera implanted into her left breast, which compels images of the breast-camera engulfing the screen, assailing its victim and spectator in its disruptive flash. Yet the camera is also a time bomb, designed to self-destruct. Wishman cannily remodels the onscreen body to the necessities of an exploitation formula, unwittingly producing perverse exercises in screen theory along the way.

What mode of reading these two filmmakers together can emerge through Ahwesh’s capacious curatorial and editorial frame? What does the friction between their films produce? In promoting the zine, a series of double bills have been curated at the Museum of Modern Art, Light Industry, Metrograph, Cine Marfa, and the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, fortuitously placing Wishman and Ahwesh’s work in conversation. Comparative possibilities emerge: *The Deadman’s* anarchic barroom orgy scene, led by an unsheathed and feral Jennifer Montgomery, newly dialogues with the absurd cinematographic geometries of Wishman’s camera as it spins around to follow Meg’s predicament in *Bad Girls Go to Hell*, trailing a rotten corpse she too has left behind, a force that impels her getaway from the scene of the crime.

We might also see it in the frissons of a double bill that considers how fantasy itself gets enfleshed and made material in the juxtaposition of Wishman’s *Indecent Desires* (1968) and Ahwesh’s *She Puppet* (2001). In the former, Ann, a stylish young office worker, lives alone in ’60s New York, its landscapes and interiors etched in the cloudily flat greys of 35mm black-and-white stock. She entertains her turgidly square fiancé Bob for dinner, walks the city streets with her friend Babs, hangs out in her apartment in black lace undergarments, and looks at herself in the mirror while she puts on her stockings. Zeb, a creeping malcontent living nearby, has discovered a doll and a ring in a trash can, which he has obsessively placed on a mantle. One day he sees Ann crossing the street with a friend and connects the woman and doll in some indexical realignment, a hex of likeness. The doll and woman superimpose in the image, fused suddenly in a laminated spell. Doll and woman, bonded into one being, become subjects to the degenerate’s steady torments and ministrations. Ann, gripped by an unseen force, feels herself being groped and assailed by an unknown entity, invisible hands touching her. Zeb stalks her, skulking at her windows, and, infuriated that she has a man in her life, becomes obsessed with lashing and torturing the doll. Ann slopes into an internal agony: like a hysteric, she thinks she is going mad as the ghostly molestations escalate, from cigarette burns to whipping. Retreating, she breaks it off with her fiancé, eventually dying, strangled by the invisible throttling of Zeb’s voodoo will. What better account for the psycho-social feeling of patriarchy’s claim on a woman’s bodily and psychic autonomy could be staged than this piece of *maudit*-chiller-critique?

Thirty-four years later, Ahwesh’s *She Puppet* figures a different punitively handled avatar drawn from another popular detritus heap, the world of video games. Before machinima existed, Ahwesh captured her own playing of *Tomb Raider*, editing together the looping spectacle of Lara Croft as emblem and cathexis, object and subject, self-extension and marionette. Croft, the perennially capable soldier-labourer, a malleable instrument, navigates nested and circuitous worlds, crudely fantasied spaces rendered as caves, palaces, valleys, mountains, prisons, seas. She grunts, dies, gets up, and fights again, but also drifts and stutters, pauses and baits, her paroxysmal body caught in a loop of mathematical iterability, woven by the thread of an offscreen player-director. In the shift of representational and platform regimes, Ahwesh keys in on an impulse lodged within the interactive imperatives of video games—imperatives not so far afield from cinema’s old designs on the object material of bodies as the performers that make things, and cinematic universes, move. In Croft, we see moving-image embodiment as alternately screen (for desire’s projection), prosthesis (for our will to act and move in her stead), and conjuring (of a fantasy of being and having), all in the play of a receding, elusive sense of the spectator’s supremacy.

The avatar is a femme, Wishman and Ahwesh tell us together, long before Siri, Alexa, and the operating system in *Her* (2013). Whether incarnated doll or rendered action-hero, she undergirds the very *animation* of the moving image, its trilling pleasure and surfeit of control. Here she exists for grasping, directing, moulding—shaped to the cut of a desire external and alien to her. Being plastic, being code, and being woman are seen by Wishman and Ahwesh from the perspective of the she-object, a revenant drifting through diegetic spaces in which that incantatory promise of some tenuous agency is a diaphanous, seductive mirage.

Ahwesh’s perspicacity in reviving and considering Wishman’s significance to film history allows us to recognize these two queens as bricoleuses, who cut and are cut from the same cloth. They are montagists and resuscitators of scraps and fragments, shapers of women’s most complicated gestures and states of feeling, exploiters of the paradoxes of capitalist patriarchy that itself exploits sensation, bodies, and consumer goods. That tawdriness could be profound is something that Ahwesh’s gaze on Wishman’s films—full of lounging women in black lace panties, negligees and stockings, and cutaways to shoes, vases, paintings, and décor—lays bare. Instead of the propertied implications of a director’s aesthetic characteristics and its inheritances as articulated in some opaque idea of “influence,” Ahwesh’s zine reconstructs a different set of relationships that have long attended the revival, rediscovery, and nurturing of alternative histories of women’s film practices. Who cares for and remembers women’s filmmaking from and of the margins? As Ahwesh’s zine-homage reminds us, it often falls to women filmmakers who are themselves working in those margins. *The Films of Doris Wishman* suggests that we are actually looking in all the wrong places to find the new and “missing” women directors. They have always been here, in the crevices of film history, making their films and tending to each other, in solidarity, affinity, and mischief, all along.