

Collective for Living Cinema, helping to keep the artist-run organisation operating for more than two decades. She was also a founding member of the artist-run screening organisation, the Los Angeles Independent Film Oasis, which ran from 1976 to 1981. “Basically,” Halpern observed, “as at the Collective, we were a group of desperate filmmakers who needed to see work.”

Halpern had only recently started receiving international recognition for her extraordinary body of work. At an artist retrospective at the International Peripheral Film Festival in A Coruña in 2022, she premiered a suite of 13 shorts, many of them fresh out of the lab and brought in a suitcase from LA.

The Great Sadness of Zohara by Eric Freedman

The following article was originally published by the Viennale, October 2007

Alienated from her orthodox community in Jerusalem, a young woman opens to the world of the spirit. Surrounded by strange sounds of the *other side*, she is drawn into remote and increasingly desolate regions of Arab lands. Her journey, like a mystical quest through her own inner landscapes, culminates in her return to Jerusalem. There, indelibly marked, she confronts her deeper loneliness, and devastating sense of exile. *The Great Sadness of Zohara* was Nina Menkes's first 16mm production, created while she was a graduate student at UCLA. Sisters Nina and Tinka Menkes traveled alone through North Africa and Israel, carrying their camera, film, costumes, and clothes in regular suitcases and using public transportation. The total cost of the project including travel was under 7,000 US-Dollar.

While all cinematic endeavors are inevitably about manipulation, Menkes' work manipulates in a sophisticated, subtle and perhaps mystical way. The mysticism evoked by Menkes can also be found in Maya Deren's work; both artists use the tools of cinema to sculpt new forms of narrative. Their films are not formal exercises in reductivism, but spiritual exercises—mantras guiding us towards a new language—or perhaps outside of language. ♦

Acropolis Cinema presents:



Film Elegy Book launch with Laura Paul Films by Amy Halpern and Nina Menkes

December 7, 2024 - 2220 Arts + Archives

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Celebrating the publication of Laura Paul's *Film Elegy*, a poetic reflection on celluloid and the author's relationship with the late Amy Halpern. Today's event will feature a book signing by Paul, followed by a 16mm screening of Halpern's *Falling Lessons* (1992) and the 2K restoration of Nina Menkes' *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (1983), as well as a Q&A with Paul and Menkes.

About the book:

Laura Paul's *Film Elegy* is a document of personal loss and the decline of celluloid. Modified from 16mm and formatted to fit the page, Paul's book asks to be viewed as much as read. Punctuation evokes flickering light, sprocket holes, and cutaway shots, layering photochemical processes as rhapsodic undertones.

Framed by Paul's friendship and apprenticeship with the late filmmaker Amy Halpern (1953–2022), the book speaks to the communities and legacies of screen culture. It honors the encounters between spectators and films as well as the attachments formed between them—what Godard calls “the relation with me looking at it dreaming up a relation.” As our dreams of the screen flicker, *Film Elegy* projects words in silver gelatin.

About the films:

Falling Lessons (Dir. Amy Halpern, 1992, 16mm, 64 min)

A stunningly sensual, life-affirming experience from a major experimental film artist that is open to myriad meanings. *Falling Lessons* is a rhythmic montage of almost 200 faces, human and animals, that Halpern pans vertically, creating a cascade of visages suggesting that while individuals express a range of emotions they remain ultimately enigmas. The glimpses of life going on around all these faces have an unsettling, even apocalyptic quality, and the film forces you to consider living beings and their value collectively rather than selectively. Halpern's rich, inspired mix of sounds, words and music complements her images perfectly.

The Great Sadness of Zohara (Dir. Nina Menkes, 1983, 2K restoration, 38 min)

Nina Menkes' second film was shot on location in Israel and North Africa. It traces the solitary, mystical journey of a Jewish girl (Tinka Menkes), who leaves Jerusalem for Arab lands. The film was created entirely by the two sisters, who traveled alone, stayed in cheap hotels and used public transportation, completing the entire work for under \$7,000. *Zohara* won awards at the San Francisco and Houston International Film Festivals and was named one of the decade's best films by director Allison Anders.

TRT: 102 min

In person: Laura Paul and Nina Menkes

Amy Halpern by Sophia Satchell-Baeza

The following article was originally published by Sight and Sound, September 21, 2022

Hands beckon us in the films of Amy Halpern. They invoke and they conjure, summoning us from the dark beyond of the film frame. In several of her rich, poets and associative 16mm shorts, hands

move deliberately through gestures like a rhythmic dance or, as Halpern herself described it in the synopsis to her short film *Invocation* (1982), a “temporary sculpture”, casting shapes and shadows in the darkness.

Halpern often used bodies in her films – her own and those of friends and collaborators. Her only feature, *Falling Lessons* (1992) is a kinetic montage of almost 200 faces shot in vertical tilts. Featuring filmmakers such as Alex Cox, Julie Dash, Shirley Clarke, Chick Strand and Michael Snow, it functions on one level as a group portrait of a social scene, not unlike Warhol's Screen Tests. But it's also both a formalist study of eye contact and an indictment of police violence against the Black community in LA. Musician Ornette Coleman would call it “a healing film... it should be shown in mental institutions, to the patients and the doctors alike.”

This interest in physical gesture and corporeal movement can be traced back to Halpern's training as a dancer. Born and raised in New York, as a teenager Halpern performed in the Lynda Gudde Dance Company and was a student of Anna Sokolow and Meredith Baylis. But she grew increasingly frustrated with the limitations of dance as a medium for self-expression. Though she didn't consider herself an actor, Halpern was naturally charismatic and would go on to perform in colleagues' work, making a particularly memorable appearance in Strand's feminist masterpiece, *Soft Fiction* (1979).

Halpern briefly studied at the State University of New York in Binghamton in 1970, whose cinema department was then a hotbed of avant-garde activity. Experimental filmmakers Ken Jacobs and Larry Gottheim taught there, while Peter Kubelka, Michael Snow and Stan Brakhage passed through its corridors. Halpern immersed herself in the experimental film scene there but left after six months to make her own work. Sustaining herself as a typist while making films at night, Halpern started working on 8mm but soon moved to 16mm, which became her preferred format.

Like many avant-garde artists living in Los Angeles, Halpern wound up working in the Hollywood industry, though she often found herself the only woman on a lighting or camera crew. Spanning commercial and artist's film, Halpern was a cinematographer or gaffer on mainstream features, including *Godzilla 1985* (1985) and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), alongside music videos, commercials and documentaries.

Committed to anti-racist filmmaking, while at UCLA Halpern worked on films by directors associated with the LA Rebellion, including Charles Burnett, Barbara McCullough and Julie Dash. Dash, who Halpern assisted on her 1981 short *Illusion*, tweeted after her death that: “At UCLA she was truly a member of the LA Rebellion.”

Halpern had a lifelong fascination with the movement and substance of light, and multimedia collaborations opened a new path in her art practice. Between 1971 and 1973, she was involved in Ken and Flo Jacobs' paracinematic 3D shadow-play company, the New York Apparition Theatre, manipulating shadows and coloured light. From 2015, she worked with Single Wing Turquoise Bird, the legendary West Coast psychedelic light show, which her husband David Lebrun helped establish. Lebrun and Halpern often worked together; they set up the film production company Night Fire Films to produce documentary features and animated projects, including Lebrun's *Breaking the Maya Code* (2008).

A passionate programmer of experimental film, Halpern was actively involved in the