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Juggling Gender, directed by Tami Gold, 1992. 27 min., avail. in VHS. Distributed by Women Make Movies, Inc.

Juggling Gender, directed by Tami Gold, is a provocative video that explores gender identity, feminism, and femaleness. The videotape ambitiously addresses these complex themes through the singular story of Jennifer Miller, a woman who happens to have a beard. By focusing on Miller's androgyny, Gold examines the issue of gender classification in the context of a society that is uncomfortable with ambiguity. *Juggling Gender* raises more questions than it answers, wisely steering clear of facile explanations or solutions.

The videotape is framed by reflexive scenes in which Gold strives to contextualize the piece by articulating the impetus for her inquiry. Gold shares with the audience her intent to address the meaning of feminism. The introduction seems gratuitous, however, functioning somewhat like Hitchcock's signature MacGuffin—as a device that distracts us from the primary through-line of the film. This portrait of a woman with a beard who describes herself as a feminist lesbian circus performer necessarily confronts issues related to gender, identity, and feminism, thereby rendering Gold's voice intrusive and self-serving. Gold's presence does service the interviews and observational sequences. By retaining her voice, she provides insight into the relationship between Miller and herself, helping to assuage concerns about exploitation.

Gold wisely takes her camera onto the streets of New York, thereby allowing spontaneous interactions between Miller and anonymous passersby to unfold. During these scenes, appearance challenges

an expectation of unassailable gender delineations. These scenes effectively convey the internal and external dissonance created by Miller's identity as a woman in confrontation with society's reaction to her as a man. The street scenes establish the reality of Miller's daily struggle with curiosity and overt hostility. In telling illustration of Jean Rouch's "camera as catalyst" theory, a "man on the street" is attracted by the filming situation and rudely interrupts an interview in progress to ask Miller (upon realizing that she is a woman) if he can caress her beard. The man's callousness is shocking, and the scene allows the viewer to feel morally superior. The curiosity and voyeurism of the viewer can be sublimated through the actions of those on screen, and we are given license to look at Miller with an unreciprocated gaze.

The strongest material in *Juggling Gender* emerges in straightforward talking-head interviews. Miller is quite forthcoming about the emotional pain generated by her appearance as she was growing up. The intimate loft setting used for the majority of the interviews provides a comfortable space in which Miller can share her stories. In this location, we hear the powerful story of how, in adolescence, her beard created divisiveness in a previously close relationship with her grandmother. A haunting anecdote about the precautions she must take when using a public bathroom speaks volumes about the gray area to which Miller is condemned. In a final incisive interview, Miller confesses that she would like to think of herself as a woman like other women, but she is not permitted this simple assumption because so many people respond to her as a man.

The substantive interviews are compromised by the less compelling observational material extracted from her "performance art." Miller defines herself as a lesbian feminist circus performer, but the scenes featuring her in this role are arbitrarily integrated into the video, function-

ing as little more than punctuation devices separating sequences. The performances fail to amplify the underlying themes of the video, and they are often surprisingly sophomoric. More central to the piece are the brief rehearsal scenes and accompanying voiceover in which Miller reveals the motivation behind her decision to opt out of the mainstream and become a lesbian feminist performer. In contrast to the multiple scenes featuring Miller in her own show, a highly effective performance emerges from her role as a freak in a Coney Island side show. As "the amazing bearded lady," we see her use the opportunity to empower herself. She is stalwart about her decision to participate in a freak show, and she uses that forum to confront the politics of gender when conversing with the gawking freak show audience.

Juggling Gender combines conventional documentary approaches with stylized video techniques. The literal use of "frame" is appropriated from one of Miller's performance pieces (which includes a frame as a prop) and is integrated into the talking-head footage to provide a transition between scenes. It allows Gold to "frame" Miller's world and to separate it from that of the viewer. A more controversial manipulation occurs when Gold films Miller taking a bath. The use of slow motion privileges the audience. The viewer is encouraged to gaze unwaveringly at the shocking juxtaposition of Miller's naked breasts and her substantive beard. This scene, more than any in the film, raises the issue of voyeurism. Miller knowingly submits to the camera and seems at ease in the sequence, but one does wonder if she was aware of the degree of intrusion facilitated by the use of slow motion.

In the film's powerful conclusion, Miller addresses the inherent conflict created between society's ideal of femaleness and the reality of her own androgyny. This issue was foreshadowed in an earlier sequence that explored her encounters with

electrolysis at various times in her life. Although Gold's narrative voice does return at the end of the film, Miller is ultimately given the last word, uttered in the context of a performance: "Freak, freak, maybe, maybe." The subtext of "freak," implicit in the video, is overshadowed by the more salient themes of gender identity, feminism, and sexuality. The issues raised in the tape are complex and, like the paradoxical image of Miller's breasts and beard, linger in the viewer's mind long after the video ends.

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