

Dinah In Color

April 2008

Queers Make Movies

And feel good about it!

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Award-winning Author
Alexis De Veaux



"When they're up there on that stage with their film being screened, they become role models, and people in the audience begin to see them in a totally different light."

Interview by Erin Ehsani

If a painting can inspire entire social movements, picture the transformative potential of film. "You think of visual art and one painting can move us. Imagine many, many frames of images," says **Madeline Lim**, a filmmaker and executive director of the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP). "By the time it's projected on the screen all of our emotions are magnified. That's the power of the medium."



But with a hefty price tag for production, underserved populations have limited access and representation within film. Lim founded Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project to change the landscape of queer cinema. By offering intensive 16 week film production workshops, QWOCMAP seeks to "increase the visibility of queer women of color, authentically reflect our life stories, and address the vital social justice issues that concern our communities."

With a focus on the contributions of Asian Pacific Islander women, the 2008 Queer Women of Color Film Festival will also feature internationally acclaimed filmmaker Pratibha Parmar as a panelist. Parmar's veteran success in film spans twenty years, and includes the influential documentaries *Khush*, *Warrior Marks*, and her first feature-length film, *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, which recently sold out at San Francisco's Castro Theater.

Over 93 films have been made through QWOCMAP since 2000 and screened at the annual film festival where the participants are acknowledged as emerging filmmakers. Lim describes the four month intensive workshop and annual event as transformative. "When they're up there on that stage with their film being screened, they become role models, and people in the audience begin to see them in a totally different light."

Mainstream movies have historically excluded authentic representations from the queer community. Recognizing the power of media, the government challenged Hollywood to censor cinema to reflect "morally acceptable" standards. The Production Code, enacted in 1930 and later morphed into the ratings system, restricted both portrayal and references to same sex relationships—citing it as "sexual perversion." Consequently, LGBT characters either existed in subtext or met untimely fates before the credits rolled.

Lim cites *The Fox* as an example. Released in 1967, *The Fox* chronicles the relationship of two lesbian women

whose contented life is disrupted by a man and subsequent marriage proposal. One of the women dies in what Lim describes as an effort to "underscore the message of upholding straight, white, Christian marriage."

However, it's not just the lack of representative images; it's also the negative or destructive portrayals of queer characters. Sharon Stone's character in *Basic Instinct* (1992) roused controversy among the queer community for her depiction of a bisexual woman as a homicidal murderer.

"If there were 200 other images of bisexual women who were not murderers that would be great," says Lim. "But

Queers Make Movies

because that's the only one going around the world, it becomes problematic and challenging."

But with more recent releases like *Transamerica*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and the Michael J. Berg award-winning documentary, *Red without Blue*, Lim acknowledges the progression of queer cinema. "The fact that we have queer characters alive at the end of the film is a big deal."

Lim's own dream of making films began as a teenager when she began considering arguments with her girlfriend as good film material. But as the daughter of working class parents, and in the changing political climate of Singapore, she didn't have access to filmmakers as role models. The dream was put on pause. She co-wrote a feminist play, became a community organizer, and produced an illegal underground feminist lesbian newsletter, until fear for her life forced Madeline to leave the country.

When she arrived in the U.S. at age 23, she pushed the play button on her dream and started taking night classes while working full time. Fast forward to 30 when Lim enrolls in

the film program at San Francisco State, the only queer woman of color in her class. She graduated valedictorian and began winning awards for her work. Traveling the international film festival circuit, Lim recognized that she was only one of a handful of queer women of color filmmakers. Years later, QWOCMAP was born, and Madeline Lim started training 40 new filmmakers each year. The program produces about 30 new films each year, a sizable shift in the landscape of queer cinema.

"If we're not taking action and making films about our life, who else is doing that?"

Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project

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