

IN THE MIRROR OF MAYA DEREN

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Directed and written by Martina Kudlacek. Produced by Johannes Rosenberger and Constantin Wulff. A Zeitgeist release. Documentary. Not yet rated. Running time: 106 min.

In this day and age it's hard to imagine a filmmaker doing something "revolutionary," as a ho-hum, moving image-driven exhibit at New York's Guggenheim Museum recently proved. But Martina Kudlacek's documentary "In the Mirror of Maya Deren" studies the life of the eponymous visual artist who was creating important, unique motion pictures way back in the 1940s. Maya Deren's use of slow motion to emphasize the beauty of the human body recalled the work of Nazi propagandist filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, and her cryptic, visually arresting imagery often resulted in something resembling visual poetry or recorded dream.

Along with the meticulously staged films she made in New York City, Deren enjoyed unprecedented access to Vodoun rituals and ceremonies when she visited Haiti numerous times between 1947 and 1955, and the footage she shot there is astounding. (Alan Parker may have gotten a peek at it at some point, so similar to it is his scene in "Angel Heart".) And while she never completed a Haitian project on celluloid, her experiences resulted in a book on the subject. The footage, along with audio recordings of Deren herself and interviews with Haitians and American artists who knew her, contributes to Kudlacek's presentation of her subject as a spiritually open, complicated woman, embraced by both foreign and bohemian cultures, who searched for meaning in her own life through the images she caught on camera.

And in the end, it's the included portions of Deren's films that are the best part of "In the Mirror of Maya Deren." One scene in particular stands out. It's fairly simple, just a slow-motion shot of Deren--who appeared in much of her own stuff--laughing and shaking her head as a spool of yarn leaves her outspread hands. The eerie absence of sound lends an ominous feel to the visual, suddenly broadening the unraveling to include not just the thread, but perhaps the sanity of the character herself. Deren's work is difficult to decipher, but the images are striking, and in many ways seem to point to an artist who struggled to make sense of it all herself.-*Jordan Reed*

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