



GIRLS ON FILM

FILMMAKER CHIARA CLEMENTE KNOWS ABOUT GROWING UP IN ARTLAND. HER LATEST DOCUMENTARY, *OUR CITY DREAMS*, FOLLOWS FIVE WOMEN ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN PURSUITS AT WORKING THE DREAM IN NEW YORK

When most 13-year-old girls in 1990 were pining for Guess jeans or Discmans for Christmas, Chiara Clemente had her heart set on a video camera. "I've wanted to make films ever since I was little," says the eldest daughter of Italian painter Francesco Clemente. Her parents obliged. They gave her a Sony Hi8, and she quickly convinced her high-school teachers that she could complete assignments cinematically instead of writing papers. For her thesis project, she made her official directorial debut with *BOYZ: You'll Want To Take Them Home With You*, a thirty-minute study of the opposite sex. Clemente interviewed a slew of young dudes she met in New York and Amalfi, where her family decamped every summer. "You start with what's familiar. My interest then was boys," she says coyly.

Fast-forward to the present. Clemente, now 30, has been holed up in the editing room, racing to meet submission deadlines for the Sundance and Berlin film festivals. Publicly, the petite, raven-haired beauty is regularly spotted in fashion magazines dressed to the nines and on society pages alongside her turban-wearing beau, the jewelry designer and actor Waris Ahluwalia. But privately she has spent the past three years realizing her childhood fantasy: to direct a feature-length film. *Our City Dreams* is a behind-the-canvas meditation on five notable visual artists living and working

in New York—all women, all transplants, all about a decade apart in age, and all at very different points in their careers. "I wanted to know, 'Why are you still here?'" says the fledgling auteur.

To a degree, the documentary is autobiographical. "Making a film about artists is about the creative process, which is my own process. So it becomes personal in that way," Clemente says. But she is quick to emphasize that her subjects speak for themselves—no omniscient narrator, no secondary interviews, just these five women in their hoods telling their own New York stories. *Our City Dreams* is also a bit of a homecoming. After graduating from Pasadena Art Center in 2000, Clemente moved to Rome, where she directed a series of shorts about artists for the television channel RaiSat Art. She says she's always been plagued by a schizoid cultural identity. She returned to New York in 2004 because she felt it would be more conducive to filmmaking, but she knew it would be tough to assimilate: "It sounds cliché, but coming back on the plane, I started thinking the easiest way for me to rediscover New York was through a camera. I'm looking at New York through these artists' eyes."

More precisely, she's looking at it through the lens of her Sony HDV Camcorder as she pounds the pavement with 30-year-old street-art sensation Swoon, wanders Spanish Harlem with Egyptian-born embroidery "painter" Ghada Amer, accompanies legendary sculptor Kiki Smith on a bike ride through Tompkins Square Park, hangs out backstage at the Guggenheim with performance artist Marina Abramovic, and celebrates the 80th birthday of multimedia activist Nancy Spero in her studio apartment kitchen. The city is the sixth subject, with panoramic shots of bridges and buildings, subways and studios, set to an original soundtrack by Thomas Lauderdale of the band Pink Martini.

Clemente's psychological X-rays are frequently heady and poignant, as when a very frail Spero says, "At this stage, one thing that's gratifying is people ask me what I'm working on. In the old days, I was dying for people to ask what I'm working on." But there's also the occasional comic relief. In her dressing room at the Guggenheim, wearing a red robe and her long brown hair in curlers, Abramovic introduces herself to a passerby, saying, "Meet Sophia Loren."

Conceptually speaking, the five unique tales make a composite

portrait of an artist—something not so unlike Todd Haynes's splintered approach to Bob Dylan in his recent fictional biopic, *I'm Not There*. "I wanted to observe the different phases, from the beginning to the end of a career, to get the spectrum of a life of an artist," Clemente explains. Which is something she knows intimately, having spent her formative years living in her father's downtown studio "There were always artists there—we just walked around them," she says. She even braved making a film about her father in 2005, *Three Worlds*, tracing his journey from New York to his hometown of Naples to Madras while preparing for an exhibit. The experience was, as might be expected, emotionally fraught. "Parents want to keep you at 12 years old," she muses. "He finally called at three a.m. one morning after watching it for the fifth time and was like, 'I got it!'"

It's tempting to view Clemente's pursuit of the creative mind as a reckoning with her youth and to connect the dots between her cinematic portraits and the larger-than-life portraiture by her father. "I've never thought of that before, but I guess there is that," she says. "Documentaries are usually not about the images—they're about your characters, not turning off your camera for fear of missing anything. For me, it is like painting a portrait. Every brush stroke is important. There's a visual composition I stick with."

It's no surprise that her icons are all highly aesthetic narrative filmmakers: Fellini, Antonioni, Almodóvar. "I'm very color oriented," Clemente continues. "I think that comes from spending time in India with my family and with Waris. Although after I moved back to New York, within three months, I had all this black in my closet!" If she has rediscovered her way into the New York groove, the city seems to have responded in kind. "I don't know what it is, but I swear, everyone always asks me for directions," she laughs. "It's going to be a scene in one of my movies someday." **Zoë Wolff**

Chiara Clemente in NYC, November 2007
Photography Matthu Placek Styling Gabriel Feliciano
 Makeup James Kallardos for L'Oréal Paris Hair Lisa-Raquel for Redken Photo assistant Shinobu Mochizuki Stylist assistant Angela Hau Dress Anne Klein Jewelry House of Waris Location Paul O. Colliton Studio, Inc.

For information: www.ourcitydreams.com