

Legends of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op

There were many *Legends of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op* and I am reminded of working at the Co-op in 1979 (not long after I arrived in Sydney from Melbourne) and the Co-op employing a Women's Film Worker and a Black Film Worker. Madeline McGrady, who was the Black film worker, was putting a projector and 16mm films in the back of a station wagon and driving out to Aboriginal communities to screen them. Legend! I was working in Dispatch at the time cleaning and sending films out all over the country and I remember regularly cleaning squashed mosquitoes off the prints.

The Sydney Filmmakers Co-op opened its doors in St Peters Lane, Darlinghurst, in 1973 with a film distribution business and a small cinema. It was where groups like the Sydney Women's Group and the Feminist Film workers met. Where film workshops and talks by visiting filmmakers and invited academics were held. It was where I found 'my tribe' if you like... and I did like.

It was set up by filmmakers for filmmakers and had its origins in the Ubu film group, who made wild and wonderful experimental films in the 1960s. There was a myth at the time that audiences were not interested in experimental or documentary films, so there wasn't a market for them. The Co-op proved them wrong. These myths clearly served the interests of the American distributors and exhibitors who dominated the sector at the time and, to a large extent, still do.

This is why it is so important for us to have a Cinematheque like this in Sydney devoted to film culture. One that offers audiences the opportunity to explore

the complex riches of film history, a history that includes rather than excludes marginalised voices, that tells stories of oppression and of resistance and of heroic battles that have been won. The rich and powerful don't always win. Go see *Rocking the Foundations* in the next session today. I can't think of a better example. It is stories like this that remind us of our collective strength, our power. We live in dark times and unless history is retold over and over again, it's forgotten.

This program includes a forgotten filmmaker, Ayten Kuyululu. An expatriot Turkish filmmaker, opera singer and actor who I confess I had never heard of until Ruby Arrowsmith-Todd programmed her film, *A Handful of Dust*, in this program. Thank you, Ruby!

Why had I never heard of this filmmaker? Why had she been left out of the feminist film histories I was so familiar with? The film is about two Turkish migrants who meet here in Sydney and fall in love, only to discover that back in Turkey their families are involved in a bitter feud. It had been made in 1974 with a grant from the then Experimental Film and Television Fund. It had screened at the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, and had screened in competition at the Sydney Film Festival. And it wasn't her first film.

She had made films in Turkey and Sweden before coming to live in Australia with her husband and three children, as a voluntary migrant in 1971. She co-scripted and directed *A Handful of Dust* as well as playing the main role and she went on to make a longer feature drama, also about the migrant experience, called *The Golden Cage* in 1975, International Women's Year.

That year the Sydney Women's Film Group organised an International Women's Film Festival at the Capitol Theatre here in Sydney, and screened *The Golden Cage*. It was the first fiction feature directed by a woman in Australia since Paulette McDonagh directed *Two Minutes Silence* in 1933, although I doubt anyone realised this at the time. In subsequent popular accounts of the 'new wave' of Australian cinema, it is Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career*, made three years later, that is granted this distinction. As far as I can tell it was David Stratton who pointed this out in a 2021 article called *Ayten Kuyululu: The Forgotten Pioneer of Australian Cinema*.¹

So why did she disappear from view?

The late academic and cinephile John Conomos argued that her work and the work of Italian filmmaker Giorgio Mangiameli in Melbourne, who also struggled to make films about the migrant experience...

*"...pose many unsettling questions about Anglo-Australian colonialism and our related cultural, pedagogic and theoretical frameworks of representing cultural otherness."*²

In a journal article, published in February this year, *A Caged Nightingale sings: the Australian films of Ayten Kuyululu*, Melbourne film academic Adrian Danks argues that her films...

¹ <https://turkishassociationsa.org/avustralya-sinemasinin-unutulmus-uncusu/>

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17503175.2026.2629093#d1e144>

“did not fit neatly within existing definitions and expectations of a national, feminist, ethnic, urban or gender-centred Australian cinema.”³

I understand the 16mm print we will watch today has a magenta tint, which means it’s deteriorating and should be restored. I hope someone from the National Film and Sound Archive is here today because, if it isn’t restored soon, it will be lost.

We Aim to Please, the short that screens first, has been restored. It’s a film about female sexuality and the representation of women, which I made collaboratively with performer Robin Laurie in Melbourne in 1976. It too was funded by the Experimental Film Fund, with a script now lost that bore absolutely no relation to the final film. But that’s another story. It screened at the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op in 1977 in a program of short films by women called *Women Waves*, which then toured the country, screening in all major cities.

We Aim to Please was different too. It was wild, anarchic and highly performative. Robin and I, who both appear in the film, were actors at the Pram Factory theatre in Melbourne, which was another collective, but this time of actors, directors and theatre workers. We had discovered feminism together and, fired with revolutionary fever, decided to write a manifesto demanding the end of the sexist, racist, capitalist society. We called ourselves the Anarcho Surrealist Insurrectionary Feminists or AS IF. We were inspired by various radical movements of the time, including the French Situationists who coined

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17503175.2026.2629093#d1e144>

the slogans *Be Realistic Demand the Impossible* and *Imagination Seizes Power* during the May 1968 uprising in Paris. And the American WITCHES (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), who demonstrated outside bridal shops and beauty pageants. We had seen the films of Maya Deren and Godard and had read John Berger's marvelous *Ways of Seeing* which had opened up a new way of seeing to us.

We printed the AS IF manifesto in our lounge room, screen printed a poster (hoping people would think there were thousands of us) and put out two magazines or zines. Then we made a film, *We Aim To Please*, as the third issue.

We Aim To Please has also recently been 'rediscovered', not just in Australia but also in Europe where it has screened on numerous occasions in the last few years. Mainly due to two feminist curators, Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, who dug deeper into the global histories of second wave feminism and found it for their 2022 exhibition *No Master Territories: feminist world making and the moving image* at the HKW museum in Berlin. Most recently it screened at the Rotterdam Film Festival in a feminist retrospective and in Paris at La Clef, an artist run cinema.

I hope you enjoy both the films. And I am sorry there won't be a Q&A as there is so much more to say. But let's let the films speak for themselves in all their raw and exploratory energy and desire to both speak and be heard.

Margot Nash

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