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Denise Iris
Photo Credit: Michelle Aldrege

NYFA speaks with Denise Iris (NYFA Fellow in Video, 1998, 2004, 2010) about her most recent project, *Minimentals*, and her upcoming involvement in the Lumen Festival, a nontraditional, interdisciplinary film festival featuring performances, videos and installations. The event takes place on Saturday, June 15, 2013 at the Lyons Pool in Staten Island, NY.

As a filmmaker, where does your work begin? Could you describe the different stages of your creative process?

My work is an ongoing practice. I shoot, record sound or edit almost daily, whether it's for a specific project or not. My films can begin with anything: an image or a sound, a story, even a mood. Instead of having an idea that I execute, I enter a state of focused observation. Things soon reveal themselves, while at the same time everything familiar becomes alluringly alien. In this state of perceptual innocence, there is a free flow between input from the outside world and dreamlets bubbling up from my imagination. During the edit, I recontextualize the footage completely, often finding an unexpected new meaning. I try to stay open to serendipity every step of the way because accidents are often better than what I plan.

Having been a recipient of three different NYFA Artists' Fellowships, how has your work grown and evolved since your first fellowship in 1998 to your most recent fellowship in 2010?

The early work was about exploring my relationship to the medium: I made everything from experimental films, influenced by the critical theory I was reading as a semiotics major at Brown, to more traditional documentaries and narrative shorts. The recent work is an organic synthesis of these approaches into my own voice. I feel both freer and more in control moving between all three. Maybe the biggest change is that I used to think in terms of getting my ideas across, but now I focus on the experience I want the audience to have - emotionally, intellectually, even spiritually - and how to create the context for that experience.

As a native of Romania and an immigrant to the country do you feel that you have a different perspective on American culture? If so, how do you approach this perspective in your films?

I am both an insider and an outsider to American culture. For many years I experienced this as a painful inner split, but now it feels more like a treasure. It has given me a combination of empathy and critical distance. Growing up under the communist regime, it seemed to me that Romanians had a sort of collective inferiority complex in relation to the opulent, glamorous West. I know what it's like to have your nose pressed up against the window. Even though I don't feel that way anymore, I can easily put myself in other people's shoes, especially those who feel left out in any way.

On the other hand, Ceausescu's Romania honed my anti-propaganda radar to a very high degree, which prompts me to consider everything with a measure of skepticism. I try to incorporate this perspective into my films through an affinity for multiple meanings, paradox, and a tone that blends gravitas with humor.



Still from *Minimentals* (2012)

Your most recent works are called “Minimentals.” Can you explain the philosophy behind these short minute length films and how you arrived at such a unique and idiosyncratic medium?

Minimentals is a term I coined for my ultra short films that celebrate the mundane: the opposite of “monumental” entertainment. They explore fleeting moments, ephemeral insights, and that fluid zone between reality and imagination. They rest on the premise that ordinary surroundings can come alive with wonder, as they did when we were children, if we only stop and pay attention. Having grown up in an environment with little media, I can still access that state of immersion; unfortunately, today's profusion of handheld devices makes it harder to reach. I created *minimentals* specifically for mobile screens, using the very technology that hijacks our attention to give viewers an experience of heightened presence.

These pieces were also born out of my frustration with traditional film production, its cumbersome logistics and fallow periods between projects. I craved a way to stay engaged with the medium on a daily basis, to be able to sketch and explore like a writer, painter, or musician, without the high stakes of a conventional film shoot. To me, making *minimentals* is not just about the end products; it's a practice for rediscovering the world with a sense of playful reverence.

Where do you draw your artistic inspiration from?

From in-between moments, half-formed thoughts, people-watching, long walks, my fellow artists' beautiful creations, the little creatures we share our urban spaces with, ecstatic poets, utopian activists, music, dancing, long swims in lakes, alchemy, weather, smells, colors, dreams.

What are you looking forward to viewing your work at the Lumen Festival on Saturday?

we're looking forward to viewing your work at the Lumen Festival on Saturday, June 15, 2013, curated by NYFA's Director of Programs, David C. Terry. Can you talk a bit about the festival, your work, and what we should expect to see?

I'm super excited to be a part of Lumen: a trippy playground of art and technology, what a perfect way to have my work showcased! It fits right in with recent efforts to take my films out of the traditional screening room and into new contexts. I'm showing 10 *minimentals*, some brand new and some that I rarely show. It's a new approach for me, experimenting with the curatorial process instead of drawing on my "greatest hits." For example, I recently did an improvised collaboration with writer Sejal Shah in which we responded to each other's work in a live jam in front of the audience. I hope to do more of these transdisciplinary pollinations.

As an artist who's constantly pushing the boundaries of their medium, what can we expect next from you? Are there any new projects you're currently working on?

I have several projects in the hopper. For one thing, I've been developing a live interactive event around *Minimentals*, a hybrid screening/performance/artist talk in which the audience and I plot a course together through this large body of work. It's improvised and vulnerable, but also hugely satisfying. It raises questions about the curatorial act and gives people a peek "under the hood" at the creative process.

I am also working on two separate modular film projects - larger explorations that can be experienced as whole pieces or as a series of 4-5 minute nuggets. They are both speculative reveries, one about the Rainbow Gathering and the other about a polar explorer who gets taken over by his doppelganger from a future when the ice caps have melted.

The reason for the modular form is to take the film medium into new contexts, creating distinct audience experiences. How is it different to watch this project in modules on an iPad vs. an immersive gallery projection or a sit-down screening? I'm not simply talking about showing the same piece in different ways, but about having each context add something new to the film experience - something specific to it - and then creating resonances between them. It's an expanded cinema for today's multiplatform media landscape.

As a side project, I am looking to expand my blog into a conversation about the artistic process and a place of creative exchange with my audience, fellow artists, writers, colleagues and collaborators.

What kind of impact has winning the NYFA Artists' Fellowships had on your work and career as a filmmaker?

The impact has been huge every time: professional affirmation, material support to do my work, a relief of financial pressures, and a sense of community with other artists. As one of the few fellowships that is not project-dependent, it has given me the space to experiment and enabled me to take creative risks. Thank you!

*A few of Denise's "Minimentals" are available to [watch](#).
For more information on Denise Iris, please visit her [website](#) .
To learn more about the Lumen Festival visit the official Lumen [page](#).*

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