

*On view at Toronto's Images 90 festival*

# Video visions: an artist explores women's lives

BY HEATHER McLENNAN

The Globe and Mail

**D**URING the Second World War, a woman has an affair and dances with her lover. After the war, the North American love affair with consumerism takes hold, and the same woman can be found dancing with her vacuum cleaner.

Such is the vision of Vancouver video artist Sara Diamond: irony, humor, documentary, reconstructed social history, feminist theory and drama come together in her work.

Diamond, 36, is in Toronto to show five of her videos in the Images 90 film and video festival at the Euclid Theatre. (Tonight at 7 p.m., *Ten Dollars or Nothing!* will be shown, followed by the premiere of *The Lull Before the Storm*. Tomorrow, there's *Keeping the Home Fires Burning*, followed by *Influences of My Mother and Heroics*.)

Diamond's art is shaped by a fascination with cultural history, especially as it pertains to women. When she began working as a video artist, Diamond found few sources of information about Canadian working class women's history. So she started original research at Simon Fraser University, earning a degree in social history, with a minor in communications theory.

Her training in history led her away from straight documentary toward a blend of documentary and fiction. Documentaries, "with their emphasis on social movements and moments of crisis," can be exciting, she said. But they also limit and exclude, as they work to persuade their audiences to accept a particular idea or vision. But history is slippery. The truth is largely a matter of perspective.

"I don't want to say, 'This is the experience of women during the Second World War,'" said Diamond. "That position has excluded too many people. Native women and women of color can look at the finished product and say, 'That's not our experience.'"

Diamond was drawn to video because it was new and unfettered by conventions: "There weren't a



A scene from *The Lull Before the Storm*; video artist Sara Diamond: irony, humor, drama and a fascination with cultural history.



lot of established practices and there were no stars. I was more interested in the small screen because there isn't the ostentation you find in filmmaking."

In *Ten Dollars or Nothing!* (1989), Diamond explores the history of women cannery workers in B.C. during the 1930s. The video focuses on a real-life native woman, Josephine Charlie, who worked in the canneries from the time she was 10 years old. "It was important that this was her history.

She was given space to narrate her history."

Keeping the Home Fires Burning: Women, War, Work and Unions in British Columbia (1988) deals with the experiences of working women during the Second World War. It uses photographs, personal recollections and a troupe of non-professional actors who build a drama around a social issue to conjure a sense of an era.

The postwar years are the focus of *The Lull Before the Storm* (1990). In it, Diamond uses "wacky" material — soap opera, situation comedy, an intrusive narrator-commentator and dance sequences — to highlight the consumerism of the time.

Diamond's most personal video is *The Influences of My Mother* (1981). The artist's mother died when Diamond was 10, and the trauma blocked her memories: "I was functional. I was coping. But I couldn't remember her.

"As I got older I felt compelled to document the struggle to understand my mother and her time." Diamond says the piece is not always easy to watch. "During the first part of the tape, I dredge

up all this rage about her rejection of me — it's really a 3-year-old's reaction. Psychoanalysis tells us that anger at the maternal figure is something all kids go through. But I was arrested at that stage because she died."

Even though it was meant as a personal opus, *Influences* highlights experiences common to other women. "People tell me it's about mothers and daughters in general. They say the something missing that I felt in losing my mother is there even if the mother is alive."

Diamond is now working on a companion piece about her father, who is very much alive. She says that while many feminists are primarily interested in reclaiming the maternal, exploring the paternal relationship is just as important.

That view is in keeping with Diamond's ideas about feminism. Her work, she says, expresses a feminist viewpoint, but doesn't stop there: "My work is involved in a larger history that takes in class, race, culture and esthetics. It isn't just a separatist feminist voice."