

Chiara Clemente Dreams Big

Child of New York royalty, this first-time feature director focuses her art film on five female voices in *Our City Dreams*

By Bill Powers



Like charms on a bracelet, director Chiara Clemente strings together vignettes of five female artists (Swoon, Ghada Amer, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramovich, Nancy Spero) so seamlessly that you almost forget they are different people. One from Egypt, another from Serbia, the youngest a Floridian, all women, all now New Yorkers: this delicate fluidity is such a coup because going strictly by her subjects' backgrounds you might think you're reading an Ellis Island directory. However, the real success of *Our City Dreams* is Chiara's ability to discard the bell curve of traditional nonfiction storytelling and instead embrace the verse/chorus/verse structure of a rock 'n roll anthem (although the soundtrack is decidedly more Chet Baker).

Growing up the daughter of painter Francesco Clemente, Chiara could have taken the easy way with her feature debut, turning the camera on her own clan as we've seen in *My Father The Architect* or

that Alice Neel doc made by her grandson, Andrew, a few years ago. *Our City Dreams* does not succumb to this category of ancestral self-discovery and even manages to sidestep the pitfall of becoming a feminist propaganda tool by concentrating as much on the struggle of aging gracefully as she does on gender bias. About halfway through the film, Kiki Smith comments on the problem of retrospectives and how they are an inherently reductive showcase, given the limits of space and time in condensing a person's lifework. The same critique could, no doubt, be leveled against biopics and here is where Chiara's fluency with the familiar shines.

By taking slices of these women's lives — pre-opening jitters, the relationship to their families, their life beyond the gallery walls — and highlighting the universal elements of an artist's existence, she allows the viewer a greater understanding of how each woman subverts these challenges, whether it's riding a freight train cross-country or

telling dirty jokes. Another great painter, Marlene Dumas, once told me that to draw something is to show its resistance — skin against flesh, an individual against the system — and here again the same art world insight is applicable to filmmaking.

Our City Dreams opens with twenty-something Swoon wheat pasting her cutouts on construction site scaffolding, while riding her bicycle into a stiff wind, and ends with a physically fragile Nancy Spero blowing out the candles on her 80th birthday cake. What Charlie Kaufman has achieved with *Synecdoche, New York*, Chiara Clemente has done for contemporary art, transcending the vanity of navel-gazing to the higher ground of lives examined both thoughtfully and poetically. When asked about her childhood, Chiara has said before that she grew up tiptoeing around her father's paintings. With the release of *Our City Dreams*, she needn't tiptoe any longer.

Our City Dreams opens Feb. 4 at *The Film Forum* in New York. **u**