

NYC THEIR MUSE

Filmmaker zooms in on artists' lives in the city

BY ROBERT DOMINGUEZ

Documentary maker Chiara Clemente had to leave New York City to finally appreciate it — as her muse. Born in Rome and raised in Manhattan since she was a little girl, Clemente is known for chronicling the artist's life on film. Her father, surrealist painter Frances-

co Clemente, was the subject of one of her early movies. But it wasn't until Clemente moved back to the city, after spending nearly a decade in Los Angeles, that she realized just how much New York had both inspired and molded her as a visual artist.

"It was my city, but I never loved growing up here," says Clemente, 31. "Once you're back, though, you never want to leave it again. In coming back, I rediscovered New York through my camera."

And in doing so, she also discovered the theme of her next documentary. In "Our City Dreams," opening at Film Forum on Feb. 4, Clemente traces the lives and careers of five like-minded artists — women who came from other cities or countries to live and work in New York, feeding off the city's unique energy to forge successful careers here.

"New York was the inspiration for the film even before I knew which artists I would include," says Clemente. "What better way to tell a story about art and the city than having artists of different ages connecting in the sense of coming to New York and making their dreams come true?"

Shot on film and video, "Our City Dreams" showcases each artist, ranging in age from 31 to 82, as they tell their unique stories, with the streets of the city serving as a common backdrop.



Chiara Clemente chronicles artists who came from other lands in "Our City Dreams."



Performance art (l. and above) is Marina Abramovic's forte.

PHOTOS OF SAN LUCA FILMS/FIRST RUN FEATURES

Marina Abramovic, 62

Born: Belgrade, Serbia
Abramovic came to New York from Amsterdam after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, hoping to establish the same level of success here with her avant-garde performance art. She quickly made a name for herself

with "Seven Easy Pieces," during which she spent seven straight nights performing a series of outlandish works in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum.

HOW NEW YORK SHAPED HER ARTISTIC VISION
"What is so great about New York is that you can feel the intense energy of this place

every day. It is different here. Everywhere else, it is like moving in slow motion. That intensity reflects in your works. Once you live here, you can't live anywhere else."

BEST PART OF BEING AN ARTIST HERE

"I moved here looking for a neutral place to live with my husband, who is also an artist. I admired New York from a distance, but I was scared and never wanted to live here. But in seven years here, I have done more in my career than in my entire life. It is shocking to me how well I have been received here. New York is at the center of everything."

ADVICE TO STRUGGLING ARTISTS

"Do not be afraid of this city. There is such a waterfall of energy in this place, and it can be a hard place to live. But it is very valuable for an artist to be in a place that is difficult to live in. It should never be too easy."



Kiki Smith, 55

Born: Nuremberg, Germany, raised in South Orange, N.J.

Best known as a painter and sculptor, Smith works in several mediums, including prints, drawings and installations. Her provocative works often address social and political issues from a feminist point of view. She has been living in the city for more than 30 years.

HOW NEW YORK SHAPED HER ARTISTIC VISION

"I came here as a youngster before I was an artist and seeing the works of art here was influential to me as a teenager. Just walking down the street and seeing



Sculpture, by Kiki Smith (l.), shown at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Photo by Mariela Lombard

something like a Buddhist temple surrounded in neon inspired me."

BEST PART OF BEING AN ARTIST HERE

"The most unique and profound thing about being in New York is to be surrounded by so many people trying to find their own unique vision or voice. As an artist, it's very supportive to be in that environment."

ADVICE TO STRUGGLING ARTISTS

"Don't quit your day job! Learn the various avenues of economic support for yourself. A big part of being an artist is how strongly you can live [while] living in artistic uncertainty."



Swoon, 31

Born: Daytona Beach, Fla.
A street artist whose specialty is paper cutouts of real people that she pastes on public walls, Swoon never gives her real name, and doesn't like to reveal her face in pictures, to avoid prosecution for vandalism. She came to the city a dozen years ago to study art at Pratt Institute.

HOW NEW YORK SHAPED HER ARTISTIC VISION

"I've been in the city 12 years now, but when I first moved here, I remember everything about the city impacting my senses, and shaping the way that I worked — from the art and culture that I was being exposed to, to the esthetic of the city itself. I loved to observe the city in the ways that it felt like an organism growing up from the banks of the rivers and the harbor, or like an ecosystem teeming with so much life, even while being this sort of hard place."

BEST PART OF BEING AN ARTIST HERE

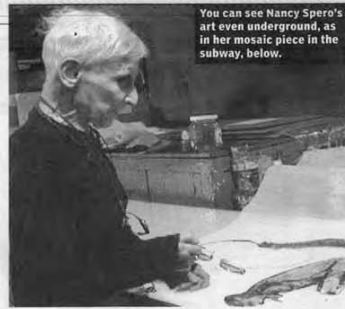
"I love watching the people and feeling the immense amount of energy condensed into one location. The real impact of the city on my work, though, was when I decided to start pasting images into the collage happening out on the street. I was very influenced by all of the layers of graffiti and advertising and bits of imagery all fighting for survival out on these semi-public walls. It seemed like a vital artform in and of itself."

ADVICE TO STRUGGLING ARTISTS

"It's from a good friend, who, when I was having a moment of doubt, said, 'You have to make the good thing first, and then the world will find a place for you. Don't wait for permission, or recognition. Just make what you love, and when it's good, the world will open up for you.'"



Swoon (above) does paper cutouts of real people (top). Di San Luca Films/First Run Features



You can see Nancy Spero's art even underground, as in her mosaic piece in the subway, below.

Nancy Spero, 82

Born: Cleveland
Known as much for her activism as for her art, Spero moved to New York in 1964 from Chicago and quickly made a name for herself with a series of drawings and paintings protesting the Vietnam War. The widow of painter Leon Golub, Spero's work has been celebrated around the world.

HOW NEW YORK SHAPED HER ARTISTIC VISION

"If you're an artist, the suburbs of Chicago are perfect for pulling you down. You end up kicking and screaming, trying to escape a rather closed environment. Like myself and zillions of others that come from someplace else, you see there's a closeness of everything here, but it's set up in such a way that there's enough breathing space to be creative."

BEST PART OF BEING AN ARTIST HERE

"New York seems to be the place from which to launch a really big career, if that's what one wants. I used to think it was so wonderful in the old days to have that opportunity for somebody to see what my art was all about."

ADVICE TO STRUGGLING ARTISTS

"Be frugal. New York is very expensive, so you've got to find a good place to live and a terrific [artist's] space for yourself where you're not eaten up before you even start to work here."



Ghada Amer, 45

Born: Cairo
Mixing embroidery with eroticized paintings, Amer's work explores the woman's role in both Western and Islamic culture. She lived most of her life in France and moved to New York in 1996.

HOW NEW YORK SHAPED HER ARTISTIC VISION

"It's much more of a place where I can create. It's not so much about being inspired by the landscape or anything like that. It's more about New York giving me the freedom to express myself."

BEST PART OF BEING AN ARTIST HERE

"I started out as a painter, but in France they're not very enthusiastic about painting. There's more freedom here to do what I want to do. And with the kind of art that I do, I certainly can't express myself in Egypt as I do in the West."



Ghada Amer at work on one of her erotic painting embroidery (fragment at left).

ADVICE TO STRUGGLING ARTISTS

"In New York, you need to keep doing what you are doing and it will turn out to be fine, because [success] is part of the American experience."