

Our City Dreams (2008)

First Run Pictures

Marina Abramovic's performance piece "God Punishing."

5 Artists Inspired and Shaped by a Place

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS

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New York City offers inspiration and haven to five female artists in "Our City Dreams," a lyrical documentary about the intersection of location and imagination.

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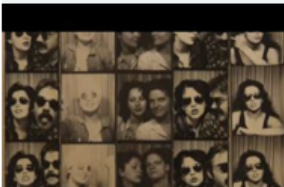
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"I did art because I didn't want to die," says the restless painter Ghada Amer, who responds to the repressive culture of her native Egypt with vast embroidered canvases celebrating nakedly intertwined female figures. Less erotic but equally confrontational are the arresting woodcuts of Swoon, whose expressive, full-size portraits of street people are cut laboriously from plywood on the floor of her tiny apartment.

Allotting scrupulously equal time to each of her subjects, the director, Chiara Clemente, makes smooth transitions among styles, mediums and personalities. Beatific sculptures by Kiki Smith give way to painted bloody phalluses by Nancy Spero.

Throughout, the women are encouraged to explore the pull of their adopted city, and watching the Belgrade-born artist Marina Abramovic perform selections from her grueling, gargantuan work "Seven Easy Pieces," it's difficult to imagine any space but the Guggenheim as hospitable.

Nevertheless, one of the movie's liveliest sections follows the limber Ms. Abramovic (possibly the youngest-looking sexagenarian to exist outside of Hollywood) to Phuket, Thailand, to prepare for her post-tsunami piece, "God Punishing." If I can wield a bullwhip with that degree of enthusiasm when I'm 60, I'll be a happy woman indeed.

OUR CITY DREAMS

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Directed by Chiara Clemente; director of photography, Theo Stanley; edited by Martin Levenstein; music by Thomas M. Lauderdale; produced by Ms. Clemente, Tanya Selvaratnam and Bettina Sulser; released by First Run Features. At Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 1 hour 27 minutes. This film is not rated.

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