



EVENT SEARCH

MOVIES & TV

MUSIC

THEATER

DANCE

ART & EXHIBITS

CLASSICAL

BOOKS

ART & EXHIBITS

MOVIES & TV

Vivian Kleiman's documentary 'No Straight Lines' hopes to give queer youth a role model

Andrew Gilbert | June 24, 2021 Updated: June 28, 2021, 9:10 am



Filmmaker Vivian Kleiman sits among stacks of comics and other reference materials for her work in her office in Berkeley. Kleiman's new film "No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics," premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival on June 12 and 13 and closes out Frameline 45 on Sunday, June 27.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Hungover and a little sleep deprived, Vivian Kleiman was still trying to process the previous day's overload of pleasure. After nearly a decade in the works, her documentary "No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics" made its world premiere June 12 at the Tribeca Film Festival "on one of those giant Jumbotron screens on a pier over the Hudson, next to a heliport, with tugboats and seagulls and drones buzzing by," she said. "Kind of perfect for a film about comic books."

Your weekly guide to Bay Area arts & entertainment.

[SIGN UP](#)

More In Art & Exhibits, Movies & TV



New Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco to open in...



Bay Area art spaces back on feet for fall, focusing on the traditionally...



SFMOMA's 'Joan Mitchell' is about the paintings, not the personal drama



Hung Liu, in one of her last interviews, reflects

It wasn't just the spectacular setting and the raucous afterparty that left her a little dazed and dazzled. The Oakland filmmaker was overwhelmed by the sudden, precipitous plunge back into society "with everybody coming out of such a long period of isolation, stress and loss," said Kleiman, who will be on hand when "No Straight Lines" screens on closing night of this year's San Francisco International LGBTQ+ Film Festival, a.k.a. Frameline 45, on Sunday, June 27, at the Castro Theatre.

"It was the first time for many of us to be around people other than friends on the front stoop," Kleiman recalled. "There were all the feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness and sheer delight in being in the company of others."



Filmmaker Vivian Kleiman reads "Split-Level: Dykes to Watch Out For" by Alison Bechdel, an artist featured in her new film "No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics."

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Inspired by queer comic artist and historian Justin Hall's pioneering anthology of the same name, "No Straight Lines" started as a fairly conventional history. But over the years it evolved into something more



on her artistic legacy



'New Time' at BAMPFA strives to show urgency and diversity of feminist...

akin to a cross-generational celebration, and in many ways the transitional moment of its New York premiere reverberated with the film's underlying story.

While focusing on five groundbreaking comic artists from the 1970s and '80s — Alison Bechdel, Howard Cruse, Mary Wings, Jennifer Camper and Rupert Kinnard — Kleiman tells a wider and deeper tale about the power of seeing one's experience represented in all its multifarious manifestations.

"I wanted to reach people through the heart, to create a living, breathing documentary film, with more emphasis on 'film' than 'documentary,'" she said. "My target audience was queer youth. I wanted to create a film that I needed when I was a queer youth, feeling isolated and confused."



Vivian Kleiman hopes that her new documentary can give queer youth a role model to look up to.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Kleiman experienced a cinematic epiphany in 2017 when she set up a white screen at the Queers & Comics Conference in San Francisco, the first West Coast event of its kind, hosted by the California College of the Arts (where Hall, the film's producer, is a longtime professor in one of the country's only comic arts programs). The idea was to do short,

impromptu interviews with young queer comic artists talking about the importance of queer representation. She had set up the shoot with little time for preparation “and it was one of the most dynamic days of filming I’ve ever done,” Kleiman said.

“Andy Black was the shooter for the entire film, and after that day he said, ‘That was amazing, but I haven’t got a clue how you’re going to incorporate it.’ We played with the footage, and I started thinking of them as my Greek chorus, opening and closing a scene.”

One of the artists she interviewed was 21-year-old Emeric Kennard, an Oakland-based trans man studying with Hall and Howard Cruse at CCA. After coming out as queer and trans in high school in rural Oregon, he came to see that telling queer stories through his art was “not just about my ability to process and see myself,” he said. “It might seem extreme, but it felt like a life-and-death issue.”



A stack of comics written by various artists featured in her new film, “No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics,” sits on filmmaker Vivian Kleiman’s desk at her office.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Hall, an esteemed comics artist himself, has chronicled the art form's rise from the margins to the center of American culture since he produced the first panel of queer comics artists at an indie comics convention in San Francisco in 2003 with "Dykes to Watch Out For" cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who went on to write the 2006 best-selling graphic memoir "Fun Home," which was adapted for 2015's Tony Award-winning musical.

"This is the right moment for this film," he said. "A very vibrant, interesting artistic underground existed for several decades where everybody knew each other, but right around the time my book came out, there was this incredible lateral explosion of material. Comics have gotten increasingly queer."



"No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics" is a documentary that profiles five LGBTQ+ comic book artists whose careers go from the underground scene to the cover of Time magazine and the international stage.

Photo: Frameline

"No Straight Lines" is by and large a Bay Area story that captures the heady moment when overlapping alternative communities converged in San Francisco. Bohemian poets and writers, radical labor organizers and cultural activists had fed a thriving underground publishing scene throughout the first half of the 20th century. When queer comic artists emerged from the underground comic scene at the end of the 1960s, the printing presses were ready to roll.

But the narrative power of “No Straight Lines” flows from another Bay Area wellspring, namely Kleiman’s collaborations and close friendship with Marlon Riggs, the brilliant gay Black filmmaker responsible for seminal works such as “Ethnic Notions,” “Black Is ... Black Ain’t,” and “Tongues Untied,” the latter which sparked a major battle in the culture wars of early ’90s. She was on the shoot with Riggs at Oakland’s Festival by the Lake when he collected the footage of Black men used in the opening sequence of “Tongues Untied,” a film he completed while fighting AIDS (he eventually died of the disease in 1994).

“He created that film with a fierceness and intentionality that was shocking,” Kleiman recalled of Riggs. “‘Tongues’ was created for a very specific audience, for Black gay men. At every cut the thought was, ‘Is this advancing the conversation among Black gay men? Or explaining to outsiders?’ The latter was cut, and the former stayed. I had that in mind making ‘No Straight Lines.’”

Fending off pressure to include the voices of academics and experts, Kleiman made the artwork itself the star of film.

“There are all sorts of flavors of queer comic,” she said, “but they’re mostly rooted in making the everyday stuff of our lives visible.”

Frameline 45 presents “No Straight Lines: The Rise of Queer Comics”:

6:30 p.m. Sunday June 27, Castro Theatre, 429 Castro St., S.F. Also available to stream through Sunday. www.frameline.org



Andrew Gilbert

Andrew Gilbert is a Bay Area freelance writer.