

## **Sugar**

*Sundance Film Festival*

*By Robert Koehler*

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A woman crawls out of a tiny refrigerator in a cramped, filthy apartment and discovers a corpse that may be the woman herself-- and these are only the first moments of "Sugar," an extremely unsettling vision of private terrors by filmmaking collaborators Reynold Reynolds, Patrick Jolley and Samara Golden. Pic, hanging between drama and experimental non-narrative, plays like a fever nightmare of any New Yorker who's lived in a one-room living box, and thus could find a responsive but itchy audience among midnight movie denizens in big city markets.

The increasingly horrific experiences felt by a woman (Golden), who now lives -- if that's the word -- in a dingy apartment recently occupied by a fellow named Anthony (Nelson), seldom proceed logically but rather in a dream-state, and sometimes in dreams within dreams. After examining a body she pulls out of a hiding place, the woman can be observed from a disturbing point-of-view -- perhaps by Anthony, who may be hiding and watching her from the other side of a metal grill and sounding more and more like a caged animal.

Anthony's surveillance grows more menacing as the woman tidies things up, plays back a long list of his unanswered phone messages and goes through his unopened mail. J.G. Thirlwell's portentous music feeds a paranoid mood as her dreams (in color) begin to dominate and blend into the everyday. She imagines spitting out teeth and Anthony attacking her, while the act of washing and tending to the corpse (which is made to seem like her doppelganger) suggests an act that's at once caring, sensual and macabre.

The film sustains the tension between extremely different tones for a remarkable length of time, as if co-directors Reynolds and Jolley had taken control of audiences' collective subconscious. While midnight movie fans will spot the direct echoes from "Eraserhead" and other weirded-out nocturnal mind trips, hip viewers will also spot links to other recent inward-looking and defiantly semi-underground films such as Jennifer Reeves' "The Time We Killed" and James Fotopoulos' "The Nest."

Pic is a triumph of lower-than-low budget filmmaking, with mainly one thesp (Golden in an outrageously demanding performance that indicates a commitment above and beyond the call of duty), one extremely messy room (with a spooky thick-glass window looking out onto a crowded Manhattan street) and a complex visual and aural design involving camerawork that appears to crawl under the skin and Bruce Odland's and Sam Auinger's stunning sound design.

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