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A Video Artist Who Talks Through a Keyhole

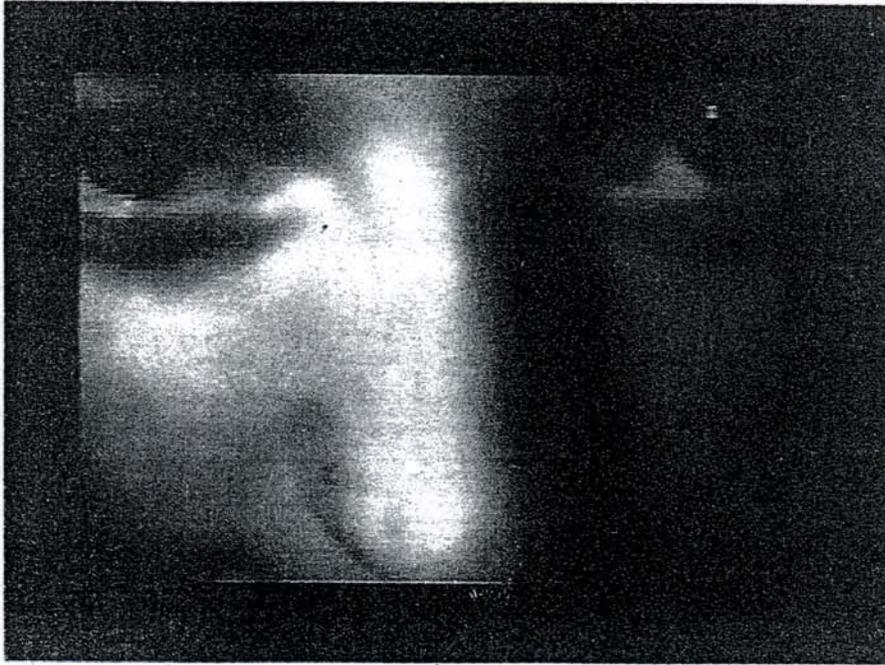
BY ROBERTA SMITH

SADIE BENNING IS BARELY OLD enough to vote, but her artistic career is doing just fine. The youngest person ever to be included in a Whitney Biennial, the 19-year-old Ms. Benning is becoming famous for her singular, offhand way with videotape, on which she has captured the unfolding of her own adolescence. "It Wasn't Love," her tape at the current Biennial, is a cryptic, romantic tale of a flirtation between two women.

It all started about four years ago when she was 15 and received a toy video camera for Christmas from her father, the experimental film maker James Benning, himself a veteran of five biennials. A week later, after a harrowing New Year's Eve (a friend was hit by a car and there was a shooting in her Milwaukee neighborhood), Ms. Benning found herself home alone and needing to talk. She turned to the camera, liking the fact that "it didn't judge me — it just sat there and recorded what I said." She started spending a lot of time in her room, not writing in a diary or musing before the mirror the way many adolescents do, but using the camera as a kind of diary-mirror.

The results: ingeniously pieced-together narrative collages incorporating images of photographs, toys, and sentences written on scraps of paper, as well as snippets of home movies of Ms. Benning as a toddler. But mostly it's the artist's face, so close to the camera that she seems to be talking through a keyhole. One tape, called "Jollies," weaves together different sexual experiences, culminating in her realization that she is gay.

The first people to take a serious look at Ms. Benning's tapes were her father's film students at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (her parents are divorced). One of them was organizing a touring video festival and invited her to be in it. Since then, her work has been seen by a widening audience



Sadie Benning in "Jollies," a tape that weaves together sexual experiences, culminating in her realization that she is gay.

of film and video buffs in festivals and theaters around the country, written about in small magazines and in newspapers, and screened at the Museum of Modern Art.

The word prodigy has been liberally applied, and she has been hailed as an exponent of "New Queer Cinema." She also recently received a Rockefeller Foundation grant. John Hanhardt, curator of film and video at the Whitney, who selected Ms. Benning for the Biennial, said he was especially impressed with "the immediacy of her image-making, how she fills the frame with herself and her identity. She's an exciting new talent."

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cess in stride, in an interview from her temporary home in Buffalo, the voice on the telephone is the same straightforward one that threads through the videotapes. She sounds both freshly scrubbed and worldly.

She confesses that her seemingly casual video style is achieved by boiling down hours and hours of tape. "I shoot all the time," she explains, "storing up a library of images." As for inspiration and influence, she was annoyed by the images she saw on television and in Hollywood movies. "They're totally fake and constructed to entertain and oppress at the same time — they're meaningless to women, and not just to gay women. I got started partly because I needed different images and I never wanted to wait for someone to do it for me."

Ms. Benning said she is still not sure what comes next in her life. She's not interested in going to film school, although she would like to make a feature film. Has Hollywood called? "Yes," she said, "but it's too weird to talk about."

UP AND COMING: Sadie Benning; A Video Artist Who Talks Through a Keyhole

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