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Natasha Maidoff, with sons From imagination to reality



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NATASHA MAIDOFF'S EXPRESSIVE DNA

Chautauqua West

BY BETTY BAILEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM DIEPHUIS

With family in the US and Italy, it's no wonder that Venice filmmaker Natasha Maidoff's work is celebrated in both countries. Her films are part of the permanent collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum. They've also been screened at the Guggenheim Museum and at the Luigi Pecci Modern Art Center in Tuscany. Maidoff shares her work with the world but she looks for inspiration at home in Venice (CA).

"I discovered this great spot, where you could walk to the beach, you could walk to the post office and the bank. There was a great vocational mix – artists, architects, masseuses, carpenters — and the flexibility of ideas. We would work with each other. There was this cross pollination going on. And it had a Chautauqua spirit — where creative minds and artists come together to make a better place."

The child of two artists, New York born Maidoff says that "Chautauqua spirit," with its emphasis on education and culture, was always part of her life. "When I was nine, my dad moved to Florence," she says. "He had been a Fulbright scholar and had been there in the 50s so, in the 70s, he decided to move there full-time. In Italy, we always had interesting people around from the arts in Europe. We had long dinners with 12 people at the table and three course dinners."

Her father founded Studio Arts College International, a school for English-speaking artists. Sadly, the school did not survive the global pandemic. "He is a really brilliant painter who was very inspiring to students from all over the world. He's 89, he's still painting and lives in Florence."

While her father headed to Italy, Maidoff, along with her mother, and brother Jonah, moved to Maine. "It was really rural," she says. "We didn't even have a gas stove; we had a wood stove so we had to chop wood. We raised our own stock, goats, chickens, horses, and pigs Ham and Baloney. We had five milking goats at any one time. The farmers who lived around us were interesting people of every discipline. They had intellectual curiosity and had creative pursuits because of this curiosity."

Her mother earned a Ph.D in Art in the Environment from NYU. Her focus is "environmental education, Maidoff says, "as seen through the perspective that children are showing through their art.. "She's written books and published them. She is also an artist, sculptor and painter. She loves the earth, loves planting. She's very connected to nature."

"Everyone has their own creative DNA."

In high school, Maidoff attended the Putney School, a boarding school on a working farm in nearby Vermont. "The core of their values was that education isn't just what you read in books," she explains. "It's living on a farm and taking care of animals and bringing in food. That's the way I was raised — to not take anything for granted about what's on your plate and what it took to get it there."

It was in Maine that Maidoff first became familiar with a Super 8 camera. It was a gift from her step-father. "I was 11 and the fact that he gave it to me, and not my brother, made all the difference," she says. "I had to figure out how to use it and what to say. I had to do it all in camera — first, shooting what was there, then doing magic tricks, making things disappear. Then I started making stories."

She took her camera with her to Oberlin College and Conservatory, where she studied creative writing. "I started making my first full short on the super 8," she says. "It was called *Young Girl in a Small Room*. She (the girl) is frustrated because she has kids too young but, in the film, the kids are her stuffed animals. I'm still trying to figure out what I was trying to say, I just had to say it. When you're younger, you create things because you have to. When you're older, you understand more about what those things are about."

During her Oberlin years, Maidoff was part of a performance troupe that toured in Italy, San Francisco and Colorado. "My last two years there," she says. "I also started writing plays. It made sense to me as a performer."

Her decision to attend film school came later. "My brother's friend at USC had just sold a screenplay and he said I should study screenwriting." She earned an MFA from the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. "I did screenwriting there and made a film that won the Spotlight Award," she says.

That thesis film, *Is There a Cure for My Friend*, was based on a personal experience. "My best friend became HIV positive in the 80s and we both thought she was going to die," Maidoff explains. "We made it (film) about the journey of finding a cure." That film is now part of a permanent collection at MoMA.

To supplement her income as a filmmaker, Maidoff worked as a journalist. "Both my parents were artists and my idea was to make a living as an artist," she says. "I knew it was a challenge from watching my own parents' careers." She credits the artistic, beachy community of Venice as a source of inspiration. "My house, and the people who live here, have been featured in quite a few of my films."





One film set in Venice is *The Orange Orange*, 9-minute short that's part of a permanent collection of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The film follows a young woman who loses her house key and finds herself on a journey of self-discovery.

“It’s the most important job and the most difficult.”

“Being part of Venice has been a huge part of my identity as an artist,” she says. “It connects me to who I am and who I want to be. I’ve done a lot of work at Electric Lodge and Beyond Baroque. Venice has allowed me to express myself creatively and the work I’ve done takes on social issues or feminist issues or class consciousness, in some of my more recent work. The environment becomes a character. I wouldn’t be who I am without it.”

Not only is her home featured in her art, her art is, now, on display in her home, thanks to an installation of “hybrid media art” built by local artist, Tom Hollier, and framed by carpenter Hugo Garcia. “I call it, “Live Cinema! The Cowgirl,” Maidoff says. “It’s three different screens imbedded into a painting of a horse. When the technology is turned off, it looks like a painting. When the media is turned on, it becomes something else with images, words and sounds. You have to get closer to investigate.”

Looking at Maidoff’s work, you start to notice recurring motifs and themes. “Everyone has their own creative DNA, their personal aesthetic,” she says. “I think that we have certain things that we gravitate to and we build on what we’ve done before. You do a lot of sketches before you paint. My work is like sketches for the work to come.”

Two of her projects, *The Fullest Day of Summer* and her newest pilot *Opiate Orphans*, deal with the opiate crisis from the perspective of kids. “They’re not addicts, they’re trying to grow up in that environment,” Maidoff explains. “I got to know one of the characters in *The Fullest Day of Summer* and, over the

course of the day, I found out she was living in a car. Both of her parents were addicts and they had lost their family home."

Maidoff's 1914 Craftsman-style house has been home base since 1995, with the exception of four years spent as a visiting assistant professor at Ohio University's film school. Before that, she taught documentary filmmaking and gender and film classes at the University of Redlands. She also spent some time as a stylist for films. "I was using that as a way to support myself as an artist in those years," she says. "Then, I got pregnant and had a child so I used my creative skills to engage the community."

"Venice lets me express myself creatively."

With two small children, Maidoff put her talents to use by teaching parent-and-me dance classes in Venice. "It's been a great place to explore my own creativity and to expand," she says, "where I could lead a whole troop of kids down the parade to the kids' section at the Abbot Kinney festival."

Her two sons are not so little anymore. Nolan (21) studies marine biology, astronomy and politics at Santa Monica College. "Nolan is sort of genius level intelligence," Maidoff says. "He's insatiable curiosity. He reads all the time. He's one of those people who has the potential of discovering something important."

Keaton (16) attends Palisades Charter High School. "He's really good at math and history and pretty much anything he puts his mind to. He wants to be a lawyer and politician and help get Universal Health Care passed. I think it was inspired by his 4th grade teacher in Athens, Ohio who took them on a field trip to the Ohio Statehouse — an architecturally inspiring building."

"They're smart, kind, engaged, caring, and perceptive," she adds proudly. "Having children was the most profound thing I've ever done in my life. It's the most important job and the most difficult one."

Maidoff is currently a lecturer at Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts and also works as a creative coach. "We all question whether or not our work is valuable," she says. "I help people get past that and focus on the work and what's important to them. I get people to ground themselves and realize that they do have something to say."

Through her coaching, her films, and her involvement in the community, Maidoff helps keep the Chautauqua spirit alive. "I'm naturally very curious about who I'm going to meet," she says. "When great minds come together, there's a sense of adventure. You don't know what's going to come next." ■



Family photo

