

Filming the Sabine Women

*How Eve Sussman
is turning a classic
David painting
into a movie*

BY CARLY BERWICK

Eve Sussman is busy cutting down 140 hours of video and film footage to—actually, she's not entirely sure. "What length are we trying to get it down to?" Sussman asks her editor, Kevin Messman. She had originally planned to edit the film herself, but it soon became clear that she couldn't comb through the mounds of footage alone. Messman, who has worked with filmmaker Todd Solondz and performance artist Laurie Anderson, is deftly splicing scenes on the computer.

"I bet it will be 100 minutes," Messman says.

"That's a good answer," says Sussman. (As it later turns out, the film's final length is indeed around 100 minutes.)

In her loft studio in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Sussman is pulling together footage shot in Berlin and Greece over the past year and a half for her film *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. She leads the Rufus Corporation, the international cast and crew of two dozen she brought together to make the feature-length moving-image update of Jacques-Louis David's 1799 painting, with an obsessive—but not iron—will.

Sussman is taking a painting that looks like a film still and making a film around it. It's a process similar to—but more elaborate than—what she went through for her ten-minute video loop *89 Seconds at Alcazar* (2004), which imagined the seconds just before and after the Spanish Infanta and her attendants came together for the single moment that would become Velázquez's *Las meninas*.

For *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, Sussman is transposing the story of the abduction of the Sabine women by the Romans to 1960s Europe. On a giant flat screen, which rolls across a massive jury-rigged track on the loft's ceiling, a tribe of men wearing black suits and skinny ties walk through Berlin's Tempelhof Airport. They move backward and forward near a luggage carousel piled with vintage suitcases as Messman toggles the keyboard.

In the kitchen, production manager Catherine Mahoney is talking to Stephanie Smith, curator of contemporary art at the Smart Museum of Art

at the University of Chicago. Smith would like to show *Sabine Women* in a group show at the museum in early 2008.

Sussman, 44, is at the other end of the loft, watching over Messman's shoulder as he works at the main editing computer. Dressed in jeans and a tank top, she is tiny but solid,

Carly Berwick is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



Eve Sussman in her studio.

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with black curls that she puts up in a loose bun and takes down again as she works. She is evaluating cuts in progress on the computer, staring intently at images culled from footage shot a year ago. On screen, women in tailored 1960s dresses start to



Production stills from *The Rape of the Sabine Women*: “Disintegration at Hydra” and “Girls at the Pool.”

ululate as dust rises in Athens’s historic Herodion Ancient Theater; they look like a scrum of Jackie Kennedys, but with loose curls and high ponytails. Their men are beginning to attack one another. In the myth, the women, won over by the

“honeyed words” of the Roman men and the prospect of motherhood, intervened as the Romans and Sabines fought over them and ultimately brought peace and reconciliation between the two tribes. In Sussman’s version, the abductors fight among themselves as the women try to separate them.

In September 2004 Sussman took her core group of six actors, who had worked together on *89 Seconds*, to Athens, where she, choreographer Claudia de Serpa Soares, and actor Jeff Woods auditioned 200 Greek actors in four days and hired 12 to join the company. They stayed together and rehearsed for several weeks. Through improvisation, the Greek actors got an idea of the performances that were required of them: loosely scripted, nonverbal, occasionally sung, highly mannered but at times naturalistic.

It didn’t come together, says Sussman, until she took the group to Brooklyn in January 2005. They rehearsed again, going through one of the most difficult scenes—the denouement, when the most intense violence takes place—on a windswept, freezing tennis court in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. “A lot came out of that in terms of people understanding the project,” Sussman says, “because a lot of the work is so abstract, and they are traditionally trained actors.” In contrast to David’s painting, Sussman locates the most visceral brutality not in the initial abduction of the Sabine women by the Romans, but in the eventual conflict among the Roman men, who presumably began as comrades, even friends, and ended up rending one another’s clothes and dragging one another through the dirt of the Herodion theater.

The most violent episode in the original myth is the abduction of the women. In Sussman’s version, the extremes of terror and frenzy come with the battle among the men—well-groomed midcentury Europeans.

Love becomes a violent competition, subject to base passions, in contrast—or in reaction—to the cold, affluent, purist modernism all around the couples, who seem to be prisoners of their own glamour.

Working Habits

After the women are seized in a Greek butchers' market, Sussman explains, "there's this utopian dream of extended family, which takes place in this 1961 International Style house in Greece. Instead of the Sabine butchers coming back to avenge themselves, the men turn on one another. We don't have the happy ending of the myth. It's about this utopian modernist dream gone awry."

"A lot of our research was looking at magazines from that period," Sussman says, referring to the 1960s. "They are really trying to sell this lifestyle. There was this perfection to everything." The filming itself took three and a half weeks in May



Sussman and editor Kevin Messman at work at the computer.

2005, in Berlin and various locales in Greece, including the house Sussman referred to, the seaside home in Athens built by the well-known architect Nikos Valsamakis.

In the climactic scene, glimpses of de Serpa Soares and composer Jonathan Bepler are caught on camera as the male actors start ripping off one another's shirts. The sound was recorded live, but Bepler remixed it in Berlin, and this past spring Sussman returned to Berlin to finish the sound with him. Many of her collaborators are based in the German capital, including de Serpa Soares, a photographer, and several of the sound men. "It's a cheaper and calmer place to work," she comments.

In the Brooklyn studio, Sussman screens a short trailer—New Line Cinema cofounder Michael Lynne provided some initial funding, along with grants from German and Greek sources—and moves on to more scenes: men gliding warily through Berlin's Pergamon Museum; the Romans stalking Sabine women in the Athens meat market; men and women drinking cocktails in the Valsamakis house.

Sussman is initially wary about the idea of the group show at the Smart Museum. "The problem is the coproducers," she says. Early funders get priority on showtimes, which are still

being determined. (The Smart Museum eventually joined as coproducer.) A version of the film is being shown through September 24 at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art, which was a cosponsor, and at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof museum next January. This version is more or less complete, except that it will not have undergone the full color-balancing that Sussman deems necessary.

Stephanie Smith leaves, and the entire staff—by this point, three assistants, a film editor, a still photographer, a visiting French artist, and Sussman—walk six desolate blocks to Diner, the eatery of choice for South Williamsburg. For most of the lunch hour, Sussman quizzes Messman on how to get a high-fidelity transfer of the video footage onto DVD—which generally doesn't allow for the kind of image quality Sussman likes.

Sussman, her director of photography, and her second principal photographer recorded scenes on different types of cameras, each of which has different advantages. Five different formats—from super 16-millimeter film to high-definition video, which accounts for most of the footage—are mixed together for an effect of extreme lucidity and sharpness in some parts and swift, chaotic movement in others.

After lunch, the studio settles into a calmer rhythm. The wind rattles a wall of windows. Sussman sits at one computer, hunting for specific scenes, while Messman sits in front of the main editing computer. Images flash across the hanging flat screen above. At any given point, a stopped piece of footage looks like an artfully composed still: a woman's face stretching around the vowels of a wordless song, men marching through the airport.

Another assistant, Josh Kolbo, appears, bearing new limited-edition prints from both videos. Sussman makes him return again and again to the computer until the color is saturated enough but not too "Technicolor." On about the fifth sample printout, she says, "Pull a little more detail into the dark shadows."

"I told the printer I'd drop these off by Friday," Kolbo pleads.

"It takes the time it takes," Sussman responds. "Nobody's going to complain about the details in the shadows, but I will know."

Two hours later, she checks in with Kolbo; he is not done. "I would bring in the midtones here," she instructs.

Late in the evening, with the Manhattan skyline defined by city lights, Mahoney has made her plans for the night, Kolbo has finally been released, and Messman has finished notating scenes on the computer. Sussman will continue working, alone, in front of the computer, making cuts and highlighting seconds of footage that have potential. She will be here until 2 A.M. or so. "Between 9 P.M. and 2, I'm pretty much guaranteed I'm not going to be bothered by anyone," she says. Her day is just getting started. ■