

Handing a Feminist Parable to a New Age

By S. JAMES SNYDER

The Sabine women have experienced many transformations through the centuries. Some artists have considered them the essential players in the birth of the great Roman civilization, while others have regarded them as woefully sympathetic figures, abducted from their homes and forced to live at the whims of their captors. Still others have pointed to an intersection of these themes — regarding the Sabine women as both victims and saviors, as divine creatures torn between loyalty to their fathers and loyalty to their husbands and newborn children.

The story has served as source material for countless artists' explorations of such weighty topics as Roman mythology, femininity, marriage, and war. In the filmmaker Eve Sussman's hands, its meaning takes a more modern turn, contrasting the ancient storyline with the 1960s feminist movement and linking the aura of Rome's glory days with the allure of modern-day luxury and decadence.

The legend goes as such: Shortly after the founding of Rome, Romulus and his men quickly realized they would have trouble populating a great city by themselves. So they negotiated with the native population — the Sabines — in the hope of marrying their women. When the Sabines declined, the Romans raped (a term which in this context means abducted) the women, convincing them later to marry Roman men and mother the children who would lead Rome into the future. When the Sabine men finally staged a counterattack months later, it was the Sabine women who positioned

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themselves to stop the bloodshed, throwing themselves in between their fathers and husbands to bring an end to the slaughter.

Through the ages, from Nicolas Poussin to Pablo Picasso and others, artists have been intrigued by the story's moral ambiguity — some focusing on the violent abductions of the women, others envisioning them as brave souls who sacrificed themselves in the name of peace, and a select few depicting their intervention as a futile death wish.

Ms. Sussman, however, best known for her acclaimed video-art work "89 Seconds at Alcazar," which wowed audiences at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, crafts her



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MASS OF HUMANITY An untitled still from Eve Sussman's 'The Rape of the Sabine Women.'

THE RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN

IFC Center

"Rape of the Sabine Women" as an interpretation of the 1799 Jacques-Louis David painting "Intervention of the Sabine Women," updating the myth to the 1960s. She abandons the conventional themes of marriage and family to focus instead on the fetishization, accosting, and annihilation of the Sabine female — and through them, the implosion of this utopia. In this way, her film, which will be presented free of charge for the next week at IFC Center, is perhaps the bleakest of all the fable's tellings.

A self-described "sculptor who shoots video," Ms. Sussman's artistic vision has evolved from early inanimate installations to works of film and video, focusing since 1989 on experiments that feature the casual expressions, gestures, and movements of everyday life. This time around, to a wordless soundtrack, she uses a cast of hundreds in dividing the "Sabine" legend into five vignettes, matching her ominous images with the disorienting sounds of a professional coughing choir and a brooding bleak score by Jonathan Bepler. (Mr. Bepler will perform with a number of other musicians at tonight's premiere.)

In the early scenes of the film (though Ms. Sussman is quick to identify her work not as an entertainment-oriented movie but an intellectually designed piece of video art), the Romans are cast as government agents in Greece's Pergamon Museum, authoritative figures presiding over the land of

the treasures of the past. The museum's only employee, a lone security guard, makes timid, tepid movements while the black suits and glasses stroll about freely, observing and reaching toward sculptures incapable of defending themselves or interacting.

This stilted drama between men and stone opens up to the hustle and bustle of a meat market, representing the feast the G-men are about to savor. It's here, with the backdrop of carved meat and screaming butchers, that the first women in the film appear, glimpses of colored dresses against a barren black, white, and red landscape. One by one they are abducted, the rape depicted with hands grabbing hands and arms wrapping around arms.

A disorienting calm follows, as Ms. Sussman's ever floating camera settles on a modern 1960s dream house on the shores of the Aegean Sea. Women sip drinks, chat, and laugh while men slowly move in to woo and conquer. It is here, amid cocktails and swimming pools, that the splendor of ancient Rome is evoked by the trappings of modern wealth and luxury.

But this sensuousness is only temporary. Moving away from the formal perfection of that seaside home, the final act of Ms. Sussman's vision is one of existential destruction. As a procession of women willfully line up at the beach of a film crew and make their way into Athens's outdoor Herodion Theatre, a singer on stage performs a requiem for the carnage to come: a line of women pushing their way into a line of men, both genders falling to the ground in an orgy of violence.

As the fog sweeps past the surging sea of flesh, Ms. Sussman an-

nounces her choice to embrace the darker truths of the Roman myth — the women's intervention as a meaningless act.

In a fascinating move to expand the work's reach to mainstream audiences beyond the confines of a museum, Ms. Sussman's telling of the "Sabine Women" tale was reportedly developed through the improvisation of both the cast and crew. Yet while some scenes feel spontaneous and unexpected, Ms. Sussman's stream of indelible images feels carefully considered and perfected.

In the film's earliest segment, the opposing themes of the timid security guard and the ominous intruders who threaten to touch and destroy the museum's sculptures take the fore. Later, Ms. Sussman mixes fleeting shots of the women in the meat market with slabs of beef on display in the background. At the peak of Rome's dominance, she constructs the house party as a war of space, the men watching the women from afar before edging ever closer and challenging each other for a woman's affections.

Even those who walk into this experiment unaware of the myth or its history will sense in these visual compositions a subtext of masculinity at war with the vulnerable female, of an isolated utopia eroding into inescapable anarchy. In this regard, Ms. Sussman has succeeded in capturing the myth's power with the mechanics of film. She has broken the Sabine women out of their static place in history, unearthed a pulse, a passion, and a new perspective, and brought them, literally, to life.

Through February 27 (323 Sixth Ave. at West 3rd Street, 212-924-7771).