

Sarah Ema Friedland — Artist Statement

I found my primary medium, film, when I was twenty something years old and living in Cuba. I was there to continue my studies in women's health, but on a whim, I took a class in film theory at the University of Havana with the scholar Pedro Noa and my mind was completely blown. The possibilities of the form to both radically reflect and impact society bore a hole in my heart and shifted my trajectory forever. I went on to study at the International School of Film and Television in Cuba, a school that was started shortly after the Cuban revolution by a group of Latin American leftists and magical realist writers and filmmakers, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Surrounded by fields of grapefruits and orange groves, in the middle of the countryside, the school was a melting place for young filmmakers from around the world to study and make work together.

I share this history because my artistic career was birthed and nurtured by this experience and my works carry its imprint. As a filmmaker and artist, I am interested in exploring work that is radically political in form and content. I am a leftist and my work mostly takes up leftist causes – from access to abortion and the women's liberation movement to justice in Palestine. I am not interested in a didactic approach, but nor do I consider propaganda a bad word. More and more, my work is taking a very personal turn and uses intimate anecdotes from my life as political statements.

Film was not my first art love. As a young person, influenced by a mother who, in addition to working as a social worker, was a potter, I was a crafter and spent most of my free time getting my hands dirty and blistered by working with clay, found objects, glass, and metal. When I wasn't doing that, I was reading fantasy and sci fi, early on J.R.R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman, and later graduating to Ursula Le Guin, and Octavia Butler. I like to play, I like to get my hands dirty, and I like to build worlds. I often use craft in my work, whether by animating and collaging directly on film or by collecting and making props to film.

Operating on a firm belief that reality has been messed with since people started telling stories and writing histories, my work is rooted in non-fiction but often uses the vocabularies of speculative fiction and fantasy to tweak and reimagine reality. I want my work to be a tool that opens hearts and minds to a more equitable world. I believe that the best way to do that is by making work not only challenges conservative thought and values, but also uses experimental and playful language to challenge the way information is received. I see this as a political and playful act that simultaneously reclaims power from both dominant narratives and dominant modes of storytelling to make way for something different.