

‘Serendipity’ Review: Intensely Personal Cancer Doc Makes Case for Art as Best Medicine

Berlin: Prune Nourry's feature directorial debut is part personal reckoning, part career overview, and entirely intimate.



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“Serendipity”

Prune Nourry

If anyone else made the observations that frame artist [Prune Nourry](#)'s feature directorial debut, they might read as insensitive or even crass; in Nourry's capable and curious hands, that's never the case. It certainly doesn't hurt that “[Serendipity](#)” — an accurate title for a film that digs into the deeper nature of the term — is about a woman taking hold of her destiny in the face of terrible circumstances, but Nourry's careful unspooling of her documentary's narrative keeps its deeper revelations from feeling salacious.

The film is indeed about serendipity and unexpected connections, but it's also about seeking out those things when it might be easier to look through a darker lens. It's a film about Nourry's personal battle with cancer, and how her own work prepared her for what was to come. But it's mostly about finding beauty in horrible circumstances, a cliched idea that Nourry turns into something unexpectedly honest.

Nourry's initial aim is powerful enough: She'd like you to be right there with her, as she quietly lays on a stretcher, gets wheeled around a hospital and pushed into rooms by silent professionals only to be greeted with continual bad news. The camera rests next to her, and the effect is immediate: You're there, beside her, and the the confusion and disconnect baked into Nourry's own experience — no one tells her where she's going, asks how she is, there's so little in the way of affirmation — soon becomes part of the audience's experience with the film itself. Thank goodness that Nourry herself is so open; when that first sequence ends, she's happily breathing life back into the film.

Part art film, part non-fiction testimonial, "Serendipity" stems from Nourry's previous work (the project was inspired by her book of the same name, published in 2017 as part of a solo show), and Nourry pushes the simple idea into unique spaces. Yes, saying that someone's entire life has led them to a roundly awful experience seems a little reductive and a lot obvious, but Nourry subverts the concept.

Nourry's work, much of it performance-based, has always been cross-disciplinary and engaged with the female body; that she'd make a film about her experiences with her own body comes as no great surprise. The film's unpredictability lies in Nourry's ability to package a personal hurdle as both an iteration and survey of her professional work.

The filmmaker stars in and narrates her own story, which picks up after she's already been diagnosed with breast cancer. It's in the next steps that Nourry starts finding her connections — weird ones, like a video project she made almost a decade ago that chronicles the in-vitro fertilization process through an amusing dinner party. Its creation occupies her mind as she harvests her own eggs to preserve their fertility before undergoing chemotherapy, a situation she surely never expected when she first made "Le Dîner Procréatif."

And yet, there it is, a piece of her past work impacting her present day. It's not the only one, and as Nourry works through the steps to wellness, she also works through her many past creations. It's an essential survey of her creative endeavors, but it's also an intimate look inside her own world (which, incidentally, includes a lot of bonding time with no less than living legend Agnes Varda). Few films feel this immediate and vivid, and Nourry's abilities as a creator translate wonderfully to the medium.

For an artist and a woman who has never had a problem sharing her own body, the serendipitous connections now help her feel, in her own words, "in charge of her own body," in a period when so much is out of her control. Of course, in the midst of physical and emotional disarray, Nourry was still making art. Perhaps it was the only thing she could do, the most natural expression of an artist seeing the lines between the personal and the professional, between the confrontational and the intimate, blur in real time and in front of her very eyes.

Grade: B+

"Serendipity" premiered at the 2019 Berlin International Film Festival in the Panorama section. MOMA will screen it twice in the coming weeks.