Julie Wyman stands in the lobby of the film entrance to the Museum of Modern Art, laughing and joking with friends and onlookers while a photographer scuttles around her, shooting rapidly and ordering her to pose this way and that. Outside, an arctic blast screams through the canyons of New York City, and the blizzard of 2005 is about to hit the East Coast.

Wyman, a documentary filmmaker and assistant professor of cinema in the College of Arts and Sciences, has braved the alarming forecast to introduce her quirky film, *Buoyant*, to a packed audience. The 27-minute documentary interweaves footage of a group of fat synchronized swimmers called the Padded Lilies with scenes of a begoggled Wyman demonstrating the “Drystroke Swimulator”—a device that allows her to simulate swimming in midair. Also included are explanations of the Greek mathematician Archimedes’ Principle, which calculates the weight of a floating body based on the volume of water it displaces. Fat people, it turns out, are more buoyant than thin ones.

To Wyman, the Padded Lilies challenge ideas of female beauty by making a spectacle of themselves and using fat as a strength. (They are adamant that they be called “fat,” not “overweight.”) She has said that this film, which was her M.F.A. project at the University of California, San Diego, in 2002, suggests “the exuberant possibility of a fat body that liter-

Wyman admits she is drawn to subjects whose body image or gender identity doesn’t fit easily into the stereotypes that exist in our culture. “I’m always interested in people who fall between the categories, who force us to rethink those categories. I notice people who don’t meet our expectations of what is beautiful or what is appro-

Wyman’s interest in human culture and its taboos is a long-standing one. She graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology and English from Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1993. While at Amherst, she became involved with a performance art group and began thinking about how to get her message across to a wider audience. Film seemed the logical answer.

“By my senior year, I was trying to decide whether I wanted to be an anthropologist or a filmmaker. In a way, I guess I’ve decided to do both.”
It’s Not What You Think

It was a collaborator from her performance troupe who got her involved with a project in 1993 that has brought her considerable recognition as a documentary filmmaker. The friend’s partner had decided to undergo a sex change, and the couple approached Wyman about documenting the process. “At the time,” says Wyman, “there was really nothing like it out there. And I was looking for stories about people who explode our assumptions about gender and the body.” Wyman picked up her camera and began filming a project that she would return to frequently over the next six years.

The resulting full-length documentary is *A Boy Named Sue*. Named after a song Johnny Cash made famous, the film chronicles the transformation of a young woman named Sue into a young man named Theo. Wyman was in graduate school by the time it premiered in 2000 at the San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which partially funded the project along with the Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco. Winner of the Sappho Award for Best Documentary in 2000, *A Boy Named Sue* has been shown at dozens of film festivals in the United States and abroad and appeared on the Showtime cable network in 2003–04.

Her current work-in-progress, a film about Olympic weightlifter Cheryl Haworth, continues Wyman’s focus on themes of female beauty and strength. According to the official Olympics Web site, Haworth’s normal 2.5-hour workout involves lifting up to 25 tons—the equivalent of an F-15 fighter jet. Wyman says when she first saw Haworth on television during the 2000 Olympics, she was immediately struck with the then 17-year-old athlete, who won a bronze medal in Sydney.

“I love to watch the Olympics, and I remember thinking how out of the box this was—a big, incredibly strong young woman competing as an Olympic athlete. We usually think of athletes as having svelte, even lean, bodies.” Wyman filed Haworth’s name away for future use.

In the spring of 2004, Wyman, now on the faculty at Hartford, began to wonder if Haworth would be competing in Athens. An Internet search handed her the name of Haworth’s coach, who put her in contact with the athlete. Using a stipend from the university, she flew to Savannah, Ga., that summer to start filming. In August she followed Haworth to the Summer Olympics to document the women’s weightlifting competition.

“Like most documentary films, this is being made on a shoestring budget,” Wyman says with a laugh. “I used my mother’s frequent-flyer miles to pay for my flight and stayed with a friend of a friend in Athens.”

Do It and Teach It

Wyman stepped from behind the camera at the start of the 2003 fall semester to become an assistant professor at the University of Hartford. She joined a relatively young cinema department that was founded in 1996 and previously led by two film scholars, Associate Professors Robert Lang and Michael Walsh, who is the chair. Her office on the third floor of Hillyer Hall, a small,
cell-like space with a single window at one end, reflects her junior status. The dimly lit interior contains bookshelves crammed with videos and books on filmmaking; a desk; a small sofa; and a couple of leggy, light-starved plants.

Joseph Voelker, dean of A&S, says he is very pleased to welcome an innovative filmmaker of Wyman’s standing to Hartford.

“I’m delighted that we can boast of a talent like Julie Wyman on our faculty. Her work has appeared on the Showtime network and at the Museum of Modern Art, and yet here she is in the classroom at the University of Hartford, helping our students become filmmakers in their own right. We are lucky that she shares with her students her ability to see human life from so surprising an angle."

The cinema department has enjoyed an extraordinary leap in popularity in the past five years, growing from 32 majors in 1999 to around 70 for this academic year. Wyman, who teaches video and film production and screenwriting, says she sees some great strengths in the program already.

“The students here are true film buffs. They’re interested in being able to look at films intelligently. Secondly, I think the fact that we’re a small community works very well. I get to know my students, and it’s very rewarding for me as a professor to see their productions improve.”

As for the future, Wyman hopes to develop a student film festival on campus. She is already holding campus screenings of student work completed in her classes, bringing filmmakers to campus as speakers, and encouraging students to send their work to film festivals across the country. But she sees her role as more than just instructing fledgling filmmakers.

“Whether or not my students become filmmakers later on, it’s important for them to be able to observe the world around them skillfully and thoughtfully. Maybe it’s the anthropologist in me that feels that getting outside the realm of our everyday lives is a good way to expand our notions of what is possible and true.”

Scenes (above and below left) from Buoyant, which premiered in January at the Museum of Modern Art.

Assistant Professor of Cinema Julie Wyman is making a name for herself on and off the campus.