

## CREATING A DIFFERENT IMAGE: BLACK WOMEN'S FILMMAKING OF THE 1970S-90S

### THE SOJOURNER TRUTH FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS

In 1976, an extraordinary group of Black feminist artists and activists—Faith Ringgold, Margo Jefferson, Patricia Jones, Michele Wallace, and Monica Freeman—co-organized the first ever Black women's film festival: the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts. The festival, held at the Women's Interart Center in New York City, situated films by Black women within a broader Black feminist arts ecosystem. The festival was simultaneously a celebration of the emergence of a Black women's film culture as well as a radical call for the kinds of socio-political and institutional changes necessary for it to thrive.

Four decades later, **The Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts, 2023** commemorates the 1976 festival with a nine-week screening series—*Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s*—and a closing symposium March 3-4 celebrating the original festival and the tradition of Black feminist filmmaking with over 40 Black women filmmakers, artists, writers, and scholars participating.

### PROGRAM 2: TRIBUTE PAID TO WOMANIST MENTORS AND OTHER ARTISTS

Toni Cade Bambara wrote in the early 1990s, "As Zeinabu Davis often points out, a characteristic of African-American women filmmakers is tribute paid to womanish mentors and other women artists." Two weeks of programs take inspiration from Bambara's and Davis's shared assessment of womanist cinema as built around networks of care and in robust dialogue with the multiple forms of artmaking.

### *Remembering Thelma* (Dir. Kathe Sandler, 1981, 15 min, DVD)

Courtesy of Women Make Movies.

Kathe Sandler's films are deeply attentive to the nuances of Black life, often examined through the lenses of race and gender. In *Remembering Thelma*, Sandler presents a beautiful profile of her former teacher, Thelma Harris, who was affectionately called "Mother" by her students. The documentary contains rare footage of Ms. Harris's performances with the New York Negro Ballet and the original Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, and gives us the opportunity to consider her brilliance both as a teacher and as a dancer. Through her varied embrace of these identities, we learn how Ms. Harris used dance to create new communities and possibilities for her audiences, her students, and herself.



***Creating a Different Image: Portrait of Alile Sharon Larkin*  
(Dir. O.Funmilayo Makarah, 1989, 5 min, digital video)**

Digital presentation courtesy of UCLA Film & Television Archive.

With *Creating a Different Image*, O.Funmilayo Makarah creates a layered portrait of Larkin's work and her identity. Makarah and Larkin were both students at UCLA at the same time, and Makarah once wrote that Larkin's work "makes it clear that it is possible to place Black women on screen without conjuring the stereotypical [...] images of Black women perpetuated by mainstream media." In this way, the film's creation is in and of itself a loving gaze, a physical symbol of the deep and reciprocal bonds that Black women filmmakers share with their sisters in film.



***Four Women* (Dir. Julie Dash, 1975, 7 min, 16mm)**

16mm restored print courtesy of UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Dash initially planned *Four Women* while at the American Film Institute, then filmed it while a graduate student at UCLA where she was part of the L.A. Rebellion of Black filmmakers, along with Larkin, Makarah, and Davis. One of the first experimental films made by a Black woman, *Four Women* sees dancer Linda Martina Young enact four different Black women—Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches—each a different archetype of Black womanhood. Set to Nina Simone's haunting 1966 ballad, this film captures the experiences of Black women in modern America as they navigate the stereotypes placed upon them.



***The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash* (Dir. Yvonne Welbon, 1992, 26 min, digital video)**

Interwoven with footage from *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and other films by Dash, *The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash* is an in-depth interview of the filmmaker conducted by Yvonne Welbon. In the interview, Dash explores her work regarding the making of *Daughters of the Dust* as well as the work of her Black women contemporaries in Hollywood. All in all, this interview makes for a compelling portrait of Dash as an artist and the impact her work has had on filmmaking. Welbon is a co-organizer of the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts 2023 and her organization, Sisters in Cinema, is a co-presenter of this film series.

***Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant* (Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989, 57 min, Blu-ray)**

An acclaimed figure for voicing the Black female perspective, Zeinabu irene Davis captures Black woman icons with her unapologetic and undistorted lens. One such figure is Clora Bryant, the star and protagonist of *Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant*, who experiences setbacks from stereotyping and unfair treatment in the jazz world, despite her widely-recognized talent and unwavering passion. The film dives into the life and struggles of Bryant—an indisputable jazz icon—through the lens of Davis, whose documentaries consistently pierce through unjust narratives to unveil and record the unspoken reality.



Program notes by Cameron Drake, Runtong Liu, and Fern Ramoutar.

*Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s* was programmed by Monica Freeman, Yvonne Welbon, Michael Phillips, Hayley O'Malley, and Allyson Nadia Field.