

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 50 Black women filmmakers, artists, writers, and scholars participating.

PROGRAM 6: EXPANDED PRACTICES

Nguzo Saba Films (Dir. Carol Munday Lawrence, 16mm)

Tiger and the Big Wind (1972, 8 min) ~ *Mudope and the Flood* (1975, 5 min) ~ *Finding the Green Stone* (1980, 5 min) ~ *Noel's Lemonade Stand* (1981, 9 min)
Courtesy of Chicago Film Archives.

Carol Munday Lawrence is a filmmaker, producer, animator, director and the first Black woman to independently write and produce a nationally broadcast television series. In a series of short films, Lawrence investigates the Nguzo Saba of Kwanzaa, also known as the seven principles of unity. These animated children's films explore ideas of folklore, love and learning. *Tiger and the Big Wind* represents Umoja (Unity), *Mudope and the Flood* represents Ujima (Responsibility) and was shown at the original 1976 Sojourner Truth Festival, *Finding the Green Stone* represents Nia (Purpose), and *Noel's Lemonade Stand* represents Ujamaa (Economic Cooperation).



Hair Piece: A Film for Nappy Headed People (Dir. Ayoka Chenzira, 1984, 10 min, DCP)

Courtesy of Milestone Films and Kino Lorber

Ayoka Chenzira is known for being the first African American woman animator. Also an experimental filmmaker and transmedia storyteller, Chenzira challenges the narrative on how Black women are portrayed and stereotyped in popular media. In this animated film, she investigates the politicization of Black women's hair and questions why the beauty standard has always demanded a white ideal.



Define (Dir. O.Funmilayo Makarah, 1988, 5 min, digibeta)

L.A. in My Mind (Dir. O.Funmilayo Makarah, 2006, 8 min, digital video)

Digital presentation courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

O.Funmilayo Makarah is a writer, director, educator, and film festival programmer raised on the South Side of Chicago. A film and video artist associated with the L.A. Rebellion, Makarah's work is wide ranging in style and form. Her experimental short film *Define*, featuring Kelly A. Hashimoto and Yreina D. Cervantez, examines ethnic female identity with a cynical narration expounding on how to “win and invitation to the dominant culture.” *L.A. in My Mind* offers a montage of Los Angeles landmarks with projections of places and people.



***A Period Piece* (Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1991, 4 min, digital video)**

Zeinabu irene Davis, a filmmaker and professor who came out of the L.A. Rebellion, works across film and video art. This short video work, *A Period Piece*, was made in collaboration with performer and activist Quinta Seward (who served as cinematographer on O.Funmilayo Makarah's *Define*). In this feminist video, four women perform a comic old-school rap ridiculing advertisements for feminine hygiene products. While not her first film to touch on the subject, this one takes a comic approach to menstruation and reminds us that true confidence comes from within.



***Dreadlocks and the Three Bears* (Dir. Alile Sharon Larkin, 1991, 12 min, digital video)**

Another key figure of the L.A. Rebellion, Alile Sharon Larkin is a trailblazing filmmaker, educator, and the author of several books, articles, and essays. *Dreadlocks and the Tree Bears* is a reimagining of the fairytale with a collage of construction paper cut-ups. Larkin has since adapted her short film into into a beautiful children's picture book.



***Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (Dir. Barbara McCullough, 1979, 4 min, 35mm)**

Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Barbara McCullough is one of the more experimental filmmakers associated with the L.A. rebellion. In *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification*, she connects an ancestral past to the present in this homage to the grace and resilience of Black women in the African Diaspora. McCullough films performer Yolanda Vidato enacting rituals and symbolic acts in a desolate setting. Filmed in an area of Watts in South Los Angeles that was cleared for an ultimately abandoned highway project, the film engages the viewer's conceptions of time and space, migration and displacement.



Zora Lathan shorts (digital video)

Aerial (1975, 3 min) ~ *American Pie* (1976, 3 min) ~ *Performer's Dressing Room* (1976, 1 min) ~ *The Bump* (1976, 4 min) ~ *Trip or I'm Late I'm Late* (1976, 4 min)
Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Zora Lathan is an experimental filmmaker, organizer and environmental activist. Much of her work is set in a home environment with an emphasis on her own family from a time when she was living in Chicago. These films focus on finding beauty in the mundane and telling stories that center around the everyday Black experience. She views these seemingly ordinary scenarios with a sense of wonder and whimsy by playing with the practical elements of the camera such as shutter speed in her film *The Bump* (1976) or exposure in *Trip or I'm Late I'm Late* (1976) as well as visual distortion like in *Aerial* (1975). Lathan also has a love of photography which she highlights in her film *American Pie* (1975) through the use of tinted still images to create a virtual collage. In 2022, the National Museum of African American history and Culture received a National Film Preservation Foundation grant to preserve Lathan's short films.



Program notes by Abby Delio, Glenys McGuire, Chioma Nwoye, and Matthew Temple.

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.