

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 7: FAMILY STORIES

Suzanne, Suzanne (Dir. Camille Billops & James Hatch, 1982, 27 min, DCP)

Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Camille Billops and James Hatch's intellectual and artistic partnership dates back to Los Angeles in the early 1960s, when Billops was a student at Los Angeles City College at the same time that Hatch taught theater arts at UCLA. After Hatch's Fulbright Fellowship took the couple to Egypt in 1962—and later India, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand—Billops reoriented her practice away from her early projects in sculpture, ceramics, and painting to focus more on collaborative filmmaking with Hatch through their shared production company, Mom and Pop Productions. Upon re-establishing their home base in New York City, they took on the work of formalizing their monumental personal archive, the Hatch-Billops Collection, dedicated to preserving the material memory of Black history, culture, and visual and performing arts in America (now archived at Emory University).



Made in 1982, *Suzanne, Suzanne* is the first of three films in Billops and Hatch's acclaimed Family Trilogy—which also includes *Finding Crista* (1991) and *String of Pearls* (2002). Described by bell hooks as “one of the most powerful documentaries of domestic life,” the film focuses on Billops's niece Suzanne and her mother Billie whose relationship had been strained and accordingly mediated by their shared, but largely unspoken experience of abuse at the hands of the late family patriarch, Brownie. Suzanne, a recovering heroin addict, details the emotional and physical trauma of her childhood as part of the keys to understanding her own self-destruction. Undergirded by the devastating insights of Suzanne's own self-reflection, what remains particularly striking about Billops's directorial gaze is that it seeks not to pathologize her family's story, but instead expose *how* their struggle emerged from and was sustained by a broader network of inherited trauma and lack of care—as experienced both within the contained family system *and* through interactions with broader social institutions. In Billops's own words, their “films say it like it is; rather than how people want it to be,” and in doing so, help to pattern an alternative, prismatic portrait of Black kinship and family life.



***African Woman, U.S.A.* (Dir. Omah Diegu, 1980, 20 min, digital video)**

Digital preservation courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Omah Diegu is the artist name of Ijeoma Iloputaife, a Nigerian-born storyteller, fine-artist, and filmmaker. After graduating from the University of Nigeria Nsukka and working as a television reporter at Nigerian Television Authority Lagos, Diegu enrolled at UCLA in the 1980s and became part of the important filmmaking movement known as the L.A. Rebellion. At the time, Diegu was one of the few African international students at school in California. *African Woman, U.S.A.* reflects Diegu's insights into the relationship between Black people born inside and outside of America. The film depicts an African woman who came to the U.S. to study dance while trying to support her daughters. She faces many challenges, from the bureaucracy of acquiring work permits as a foreigner, to sexism and racism in the job market.



***Shipley Street* (Dir. Jacqueline Frazier, 1981, 30 min, digibeta)**

Digital preservation courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Written and directed by Jacqueline Frazier, *Shipley Street* follows Lana Wilson a young Black girl who is sent to an all-white Catholic school. Her father's desire for a better life pushes him to move Lana to a school where he believes that his daughter will get a better education and have a better chance of social and financial mobility. However, while at this Catholic school Lana experiences racism in all of its forms. The film shows the cost of "getting ahead" and the adverse impact predominantly white academic institutions can have on Black children.



***A Dream is What You Wake Up From* (Dirs. Carolyn Johnson & Larry Bullard, 1978, 62 min, digital video)**

Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Carolyn Johnson and Larry Bullard are both best known for diversifying Third World Newsreel (a pre-eminent film distributor) with stories about social inequalities. *A Dream is What You Wake Up From* focuses on the lives of three Black families as they navigate the realities of systemic racism, domestic abuse, and economic inequity while simultaneously looking at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Through a combination of staged narrative and documentary footage, Johnson and Bullard purposefully create a film where it is unclear to the audience who is an actor (and who isn't) to emphasize the pervasive ways that racism affects Black people inside and outside of their homes. Though these families face many hardships, the film highlights the ways they survive these hardships together.



Program notes by Nicole Liu, Sofia Torriente, and Byshera Williams.

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.