

## 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 nearly 70 Black women filmmakers, artists, writers, and scholars participating.

### PROGRAM 9: INTERIOR LIVES

#### *Back Inside Herself* (Dir. S. Pearl Sharp, 1984, 4 min, digital video)

Courtesy of Cinenovo.

S. Pearl Sharp's debut film, *Back Inside Herself*, was made after studying film at Los Angeles City College and was awarded first prize at the San Francisco Poetry Film Festival and the Black American Cinema Society's Independent Film Awards. The film was inspired by Sharp's poem of the same name and follows Barbara O. Jones's eponymous "herself" as a voice-over and choral mantra guide viewers through her reclamation of the self and rejection of a culturally ascribed identity. This theme appears throughout Sharp's career and even extends beyond her creative efforts to her role as a co-founder of the Black Anti-Defamation Coalition.



#### *Cycles* (Dir. Zeinabu irene Davis, 1989, 16 min, 16mm)

Collection print courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Zeinabu irene Davis's *Cycles* focuses on the interior life of a young woman, both her spiritual state and her home life, as she performs various activities while waiting... for what we discover at the end of the film. Davis combines live action, animation techniques, and still photography in her loving portrait of a woman taking stock of her life and performing acts of self care. A key member of the younger generation of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, Davis has chronicled their work in her feature documentary *Sprints of Rebellion: Black Cinema from UCLA* (2016).



#### *Rain (Nyeshia)* (Dir. Melvonna Ballenger, 1978, 15 min, digital video)

Digital presentation courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

*Rain (Nyeshia)* was Ballenger's Project One in film school at UCLA where she was part of the L.A. Rebellion. The film, set to Coltrane's "After the Rain," follows a female typist who wakes up apathetic due to the threat of oncoming rain. However, an encounter with a man on the street (played by fellow L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Bernard Nicolas) encourages her to reverse her understanding of the rain's symbolism. It does not signify defeat. The rain can be an opportunity for gathering and renewal.



***Killing Time* (Dir. Fronza Woods, 1979, 9 min, 16mm)**

Courtesy of the the Academy Film Archive and Women Make Movies.

*Killing Time* is Fronza Woods’s debut film and also features a performance by Woods under the name Sage Brush. Inspired by a friend who joked that Woods wouldn’t be able to commit suicide because she wouldn’t know what to wear, the darkly humorous film follows its character’s inability to create the perfect circumstances for a would-be suicide. The film offers a layered examination of ego, vanity, and the habits that help us get through the day.



***Dreams of Passion* (Dir. Aarin Burch, 1989, 4 min, 16mm)**

*Dreams of Passion* is a dance film that depicts Black lesbian desire, featuring contemporary dancers Matima Hadi and Debra Floyd as well as original music by multi-instrumentalist Vicki Randle. Beginning in the dance studio at the ballet bar, Hadi practices a solo routine before interpolating a dreamlike, intimate duo with Floyd under a parachute on the beach. In addition to being an experiment in dance film, there is also a romantic narrative that legitimizes Black women’s artistic expression and desires.



***Spin Cycle* (Dir. Aarin Burch, 1991, 6 min, 16mm)**

*Spin Cycle* begins with the narration “There’s always been a woman that’s an object of my desire.” An autobiographical rumination on filmmaking and romantic relationships, Burch’s stream of consciousness voiceover drives the film. In it, Burch explores the choices behind her art, particularly representations of race, the concern of objectifying women behind the camera, and the fear of being pigeonholed as a Black lesbian filmmaker. Meanwhile, reflections on her own “love addiction” and romances past and current are ever-present. With *Spin Cycle*, Burch interrogates her own relationship with intimacy, selfhood and even time’s irreversibility— behind and in front of the camera.



***Monique* (Dir. Yvonne Welbon, 1991, 2 min, digital video)**

Yvonne Welbon’s *Monique* is an autobiographical film which uses story-telling and experimental techniques to explore the shadows of her childhood memories. The bruised footage and sharp editing help to create the mood for her first painful encounter with racism. Yvonne 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.



***Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (By Kelly Gabron) (Dir. Cauleen Smith, 1992, 6 min, 16 mm)**

Courtesy of Canyon Cinema.

Cauleen Smith invented the protagonist of *Chronicles of Lying Spirit* (By Kelly Gabron) during an exercise in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s performance art class at San Francisco State University. During this period, she took classes with Trinh T. Minh-ha and Angela Davis before earning her BA in filmmaking in 1991. A fabulist short that traces a circuitous, polyvocal history from the Middle Passage to late-1980s, *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (By Kelly Gabron) concludes with an unflinching monologue about class privilege and artistic responsibility wherein the filmmaker states, “The only way I’m gonna get on TV is to make my own goddamn tapes and play them for myself, my sisters, my brothers. We will be seen, and we will be heard.”



Program notes by Sam Bowden, Parker Stenseth, and Zachary Vanes.

*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.