

# frieze

## ***From Magic Lanterns to Afrofuturism: the 48th International Film Festival Rotterdam***

**Ela Bittencourt**

**February 26, 2019**

The 48th edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) abounded in intricate, ephemeral works across an expansive programme, which included several sections – ‘The Skin Is the Film’, ‘Bright Future’ and the Ammodo Tiger Short Competition – that explored experimental short-form films. The section ‘Deep Focus’ was dedicated to British-born, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Charlotte Pryce and the African-American artist Cauleen Smith.

Steeped in Victorian and Edwardian literature on botany as well as the writings of Sigmund Freud, Pryce’s handcrafted films usually open with observations of her surroundings – her garden, a forest floor, a stroll through rainy London – before evolving into haunted abstractions that might have been conjured up in a psychoanalyst’s chair or during a daytime reverie. In her 16mm silent short, *Discoveries on the Forest Floor 1-3* (2007), which references a minor genre of 17th century Dutch painting, Pryce portrays moss, spider webs and rotting leaves to examine their plasticity and spiral forms. Images flash by quickly; some are repeated. At times, a detail is shown in such extreme close-up that it appears as though viewed through a microscope: an insect performs an acrobatic dance; a lavish plant with vibrant red thorns has smothered another. It’s in the nature of a vision to be both concrete yet inexplicable: in Victorian fashion, Pryce – echoing the intimation of a divine spirit in Emily Dickinson’s poems – imbues her reveries with a sense of otherworldliness.

This eerie disorientation is felt yet more keenly in the two magic-lantern performances at IFFR that Pryce staged with the assistance of her husband and son. In W. H. Hudson’s *Remarkable Argentine Ornithology* (2013–ongoing), she narrates her (imaginary) stumble into an ornithology lecture: a projector catches fire; the handmade slides – depicting dark interiors, stills of birds and the natural world – jerkily move across the screen. The application of oils and bleach to the film enhances the sensation of images dissolving before our eyes. As Pryce noted during a talk at IFFR, she seeks to explore the essence of daydreams.

Cauleen Smith’s work has distinctly socio-political roots. In her feature *Drylongso* (1998), a young African-American artist in California’s Bay Area engages with her community by taking polaroid portraits of passers-by. In a neighbourhood plagued by a night strangler, and in which young black men are routinely killed by gunfire, the artist’s gesture proves restorative – particularly once she incorporates her polaroids of the men, many of whom have subsequently been killed, into an installation. Smith’s 35mm slide projection and performance, *Black Utopia LP* (2012) – which was shown as part of the concurrent ‘Blackout’ exhibition at the Kunsthal Rotterdam – includes portraits similar to those featured in *Drylongso* as well as slides reflecting the complex legacy of influential musician Sun Ra. Ranging from portraits to images of archival materials and memorabilia, *Black Utopia LP* offers a glimpse into Smith’s attempt to deal with historical trauma – via explorations of race, activism and cosmology – as a means of envisioning the future.

Nowhere was this gesture more striking than in Smith’s spirited, glamorous *Sojourner* (2018), which had its world premiere as part of the IFFR’s Ammodo Tiger Short Competition. The film, whose title references the 19th-century African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth, was shot in Chicago, Philadelphia and parts of California featuring a cast of racially diverse women displaying banners emblazoned with the slogan ‘Be at the Hand of Might’. At one point, the young women gather to hear the historical recording of the Combahee River

Collective Statement, a key text of black feminism, composed during the late 1970s and early '80s. With a soundtrack featuring *Eternity* (1975) by Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda, the film moves quickly from observational footage of black women organizers to an exuberant Afro-futurist scenario, staged at Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum. Cassette players, piles of old computers, antennas and satellite-lookalikes evoke a sci-fi feel and reflect Smith's interest in both sculpture and site-based performance. The women wear fanciful headwear and promenade in leisurely groups: it's a vibrant vision of a community in which women of colour are heard.

Kevin Jerome Everson's *Black Bus Stop* (2019) co-directed by Kevin Jerome Everson and Claudrena N. Harold, also premiered in the Ammodo Tiger Short Competition. Like Smith, Everson re-enacts an aspect of African-American culture: a bus stop on the University of Virginia campus, which served as a gathering point for black youth in the pre-internet 1980s and '90s. Everson jumps from young people casually conversing in daylight to their dances and fraternity chants at night. The nocturnal setting heightens the scene's theatricality, while some of the chants reference the civil-rights struggle. Like Smith, Everson and Harold capture bodies in performance and explores cinema's capacity to expand its context via site-specific settings.

In Sara Cwynar's *Red Film* (2018), another competition entry, young women in flowing red clothes dance against a backdrop depicting classical sculptures, while the filmmaker's image appears from time to time as she hangs upside down, her face turning red. Cwynar also weaves repeating images of young women's faces, most of whom wear bright red lipstick, with visuals of luxury cosmetics named after famous painters, such as Paul Cézanne, neon billboards and consumer goods, such as a red convertible car. In a voice-over, male and female voices raise questions around how female beauty has been shaped over the centuries by both the arts and consumer products. 'Who is at the centre of vision here?' the male voice asks. The female voice later proclaims: 'Woman creates life, man creates art, but not anymore, suckers! I can buy anything I want.' While initially empowering, the statement ends with a solipsistic assertion of purchasing power. Cwynar's film seemingly voices her splintered dialogue with herself and with others, as a woman and an artist. *Red Film* is a playful, impressionistic take on how commerce has harnessed our subjective perceptions of colour and beauty, hijacking our senses and our identities.

'The Skin is the Film' programme comprised seven shorts, shot on 16mm and 35mm, which investigated film as a tactile medium. In Luis Macías's modified double-projector performance, the eyes empty and the pupils burning with rage and desire (2018), a ray of light created slowly morphing globular forms that resembled pearly stardust clouds. As the contours shifted, the effect produced was of a sculptural form: ethereal, yet solid. An odour of burning film emulsion, triggered by the rising heat of the light, wafted through the screening room; this was a performance that toyed literally with self-destruction.

*Eroded Pyramid* (2019), by Colectivo Los Ingrávidos from Mexico, was screened as part of the 'Bright Future' section dedicated to emerging talent. In the film, images of plants, rocks and occasional mountaintops flicker by so quickly they almost evade perception. Extreme colour-tinted close-ups and the use of a rhythmic, drum-forward jazz soundtrack create an effect of a syncopated collage of geometric forms. The collective seems to call into question the audience's ability to ascertain the significance - whether historical or geographical - of the vaguely identified, eroded sites presented. Only the film's brief synopsis, 'The pyramid used to be a mountain', was an indication that the artists were referring to a historical site.

With such a wide variety of shorts on offer no single aesthetic approach emerged, other than the prevailing desire of the filmmakers to find a point at which traditional storytelling and experimentation meet. While 'The Skin Is the Film' programme proved a single outlier, with some of the works pushing into the realm of pure abstraction, many experimental shorts at the festival deployed narration. In so doing, hybrid experiences were created that reflect a deep affinity with cinema history.

*The 48th International Film Festival Rotterdam ran from 23 January to 3 February 2019.*