

**Los Angeles Filmforum presents
Christopher Harris
Sunday, February 25, 2024, 7:30 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives**

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2024 is our 49th year. www.lafilmforum.org

In person: Christopher Harris; moderator Matazi Weathers, Assistant Curator of Film at LACMA

Filmforum commissioned five artists to make new work, generously funded by the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. We've hosted four thus far, and Christopher Harris is our fifth.

With support from the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, Filmforum has been honored to commission a new work from Christopher Harris, and this film – *Speaking in Tongues: Take One* - will have its premiere in our screening, along with most of his other short films, with the filmmaker in person to discuss his work.

Christopher Harris makes experimental films and video installations informed by Motown, P-Funk, bebop, free jazz and beyond. Often drawing on archival sounds and images, his work features staged re-enactments, hand-cranked cameras, rear-projection, close-focus cinematography, re-photography, photochemical manipulations, and screen captured video among other strategies. Like his production techniques, his influences among them Black literature, avant-garde structuralist film, and most significantly, all forms of Black music—are eclectic. Working through incongruity and slippages, between sound and image, between past, present and future, and between absence and presence, his films, like the music from which it takes inspiration, embodies the existential complexities and paradoxes of the Black experience in the U.S.

His films have exhibited internationally, including solo screenings at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the Museum of Modern Art, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, the Walker Art Center, and the Locarno International Film Festival. Additional screenings include the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Flaherty Seminar, and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Harris is the recipient of the 2023 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts in Film/Video, a 2015 Creative Capital Award and fellowships from the Mellon Foundation, Radcliffe, and Chrysalis. Harris is based in Iowa where he is the F. Wendell Miller Associate Professor of Film and Video Production in the Department of Cinematic Arts at the University of Iowa.

Special thanks to Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts; Stephanie Spray, Joie Horwitz, and the USC Center for Ethnographic Media Arts.

Screening:

***Reckless Eyeballing*, 2004, 16mm, black and white, sound, 14min**

Taking its name from the Jim Crow-era [prohibition against black men looking at white women], this hand-processed, optically-printed amalgam reframes desire by way of everything from D.W. Griffith to Foxy Brown and Angela Davis: "Your lover belongs to this band of murderous outlaws."--Cinematexas International Short Film Festival

"Harris' *Reckless Eyeballing*, [is] a fairly direct provocation that also functions as a loving treatment of all-too-rarely engaged found-footage material. *Eyeballing's* dominant motif is the image of Pam Grier from her *Blaxploitation* apex, with an unusual exchange of gazes-hers out at us, and the men in surrounding footage back at her. Harris is quite explicitly exploring the racial dimensions that Laura Mulvey left implicit (to put it kindly) within the Male Gaze question, sending Foxy Brown into the cinematic apparatus as a kind of test case. Can she look back, or will she too be pinned and mounted by the gaze? Or, is there a place for an African-American female spectatorship, an active subject position inside visual culture?

"Within the film, Harris juxtaposes images of Angela Davis (including wanted posters) with the Grier footage, generating a fantasy/reality dialectic, and articulating precisely how cinema's cultural image bank conflates African-American women's desirability with danger. The film's title, 'reckless eyeballing,' is of course pre-Civil Rights Era cracker-talk for when black men allegedly looked lustfully at white women. (It's a well-known expression: Ishmael Reed published a 1986 novel by the same name.) So the stakes are clear: looks and gazes, when to scope out and when to stare deferentially at the ground, are matters of grave historical importance for African-Americans, and all truly rigorous formal considerations should return us to historical thinking sooner or later." -- Michael Sicinski, *Cinema Scope Magazine*

***28.IV.81 (Bedouin Spark)*, 2009, 16mm, color, silent, 3 min**

Approximates a small child's fantasy world in the dark. In a series of close-ups, the nightlight is transformed into a meditative star-spangled sky. An improvisation, edited inside the camera and shot on a single reel. The stars swirl in silence.

--International Film Festival Rotterdam

An expensive medium when compared to paint or charcoal, film has not typically been a vehicle for purely improvised experimentation. But the avant-garde provides a strong tradition of in-camera filmmaking, an instantaneous, improvisational, in-the-moment interaction between moving image artists and their environments. Christopher Harris's *28.IV.81 (Bedouin Spark)* is just such a film, one that draws directly from the musical vocabulary of jazz itself in its handheld glissandi and staccato in-camera edits. Harris has said that he wanted to approximate the gestural articulations of Cecil Taylor's piano playing in this film. He does so by using a child's delicately flickering night light as an unlikely surrogate for Taylor's often muscular, propulsive piano playing. The film realizes visual music's originating dream to transfigure the spirit and methods of music into the formal and material registers of graphic art, to create a music for the eyes. In this regard, Harris's efforts directly mirror Smith's earlier synesthetic method while also pointing towards the future of cinema in more oblique ways. Arthur Jafa has argued that African American filmmaking has long lagged behind Black music, in part, because it lacks a

cinematographic gesture as distinctive as the sonic signature of James Brown's grunt. Here Harris has taken up that quandary and proposed a gestural cinema—a musical filmmaking without music—that forges a mimetic relationship not with Brown's funk exclamations but with Taylor's free jazz articulations. --Juan Carlos Kase

28.IV.81 (*Descending Figures*), 2011, 16mm-to-HD, color, silent, 3.5min

28.IV.81 (*Descending Figures*) is comprised of footage Harris shot at a performance of Christ's Passion, staged as an attraction at a Florida amusement park. We see a well-coiffed, Christian-metal Jesus getting scourged by costume-shop Romans with headset mics, while zaftig women in tennis shoes weep and wail. Meanwhile, the audience penetrates the diegesis quite often—an arm with a camera pops in, or we see the crowd standing around in the heat looking bored. But more significantly, Harris' use of dual-screen and end flares result in mutual image competition. Jesus gets whipped while yellows and reds ping-pong back and forth across the display. The Romans move through fogs of zipping white projector light. The images themselves operate contrapuntally (close-ups and medium shots, mismatched reaction shots, etc.), but Harris' use of the pure filmic light continually disrupts these faux-holy scenarios from coming into being. This flimsy display of devotion is shown up by something genuinely overpowering, or at least recognizably real. In a way, this seems to sum up Harris' practice. Filmic images are things with actual impact in the world, and as such they have an unavoidable ethical dimension. If you've got some eyeballing to do, go hard or go home. --Cinema Scope Magazine

***Halimuhfack*, 2016, 16mm-to-HD, color, sound, 4min**

A performer lip-synchs to archival audio featuring the voice of author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston as she describes her method of documenting African American folk songs in Florida. By design, nothing in this film is authentic except the source audio. The flickering images were produced with a hand-cranked Bolex so that the lip-synch is deliberately erratic and the rear-projected, grainy, looped images of Masai tribesmen and women recycled from an educational film become increasingly abstract as the audio transforms into an incantation. Performer: Valada Flewellyn

***Sunshine State (Extended Forecast)*, 2007, 16mm-to-HD, color, sound, 8 min.)**

Florida, 2007. Somewhere in a quiet outer suburb of the Milky Way galaxy, we live our lives in the pleasant warmth of our middle-of-the-road star, the Sun. Slowly but surely we will reach the point when there will be one last perfect sunny day. The sun will swell up, scorch the earth and finally consume it. --International Film Festival Rotterdam

***Distant Shores*, 2016, 16mm-to-HD, color, sound, 3min**

A sunny afternoon on an architecture tour boat in Chicago is haunted by the specter of the European refugee crises as a disembodied narrator recounts a much more dangerous voyage across altogether different waters. The hazardous journey is the unseen other of the carefree trip down the Chicago River and across Lake Michigan.

***Dreams Under Confinement*, 2020, HD, color, sound, 2.5min**

(Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts)

Frenzied voices on the Chicago Police Department's scanner call for squad cars and reprisals during the 2020 uprising in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and

Ahmaud Arbery, as Google Earth tracks the action through simulated aerial views of urban spaces and the vast Cook County Department of Corrections, the country's third-largest jail system. In Christopher Harris's *Dreams Under Confinement*, the prison and the street merge into a shared carceral landscape. --New York Film Festival

Speaking in Tongues: Take One (2024, 16mm-to-HD, b/w, sound, approx. 10-15 min.)
Preview!

Speaking in Tongues: Take One is a film about Black ecstasy and the carceral forces arrayed against it.

Moderator **Matazi Weathers** (they/them) is a temporal and spatial farmer from Los Angeles always in the pursuit of new potentialities. They are the Assistant Curator of Film at LACMA , co-curated Strong-Sissy Black Movie Night - a cinema and political education space. They founded Black Bloom, a Black farmers cooperative in Los Angeles that provides free education and mentorship to Black folks learning to grow. Previously, they've worked at the California African American Museum, The Underground Museum, Critical Resistance LA, REDCAT, Echo Park Film Center, and more. Matazi is active artistically as an image maker and storyteller - mostly through film and photography and is dedicated to an abolitionist and decolonial ethos in life and film, working to bring new visions to life that have the potential to materially change our realities.

This program is supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles, and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming Soon:

March 3 – Footprints of the Forgotten: Video Works on Immaterial Archives

March 8 - *La Région Centrale*, by Michael Snow, at UCLA

March 16 - 1:00 - Luther Price: New Utopia and Light Fracture

March 24 - *Gaza Ghetto*, on 16mm

April 2 - Scott Stark

April 17 - *Race d'Ep*

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