



Stills from
Crystal Campbell, *Go-Rilla Means War*, 2017 [courtesy of the artist]
via <https://www.artpapers.org/crystal-z-campbell/>

D I F F U S I O N

S U M M E R F E S T I V A L S E R I E S

DIFFUSION is a new summer festival series that will take place across 10 events (on site and online) including screenings, talks, workshops and critical writing intersecting with recent non-fiction moving image works.

re:assemblage collective since 2016 this collective has been committed to championing underrepresented voices and perspectives through public film/video screenings. We are itinerant and intentional. We are "reassembling" assumptions about artist film/video practices: who is shown and the forms of works championed. The re:assemblage collective was co-instigated by Christina Battle and Scott Miller Berry and is currently comprised of Faraz Anoushpour with Miller Berry and calls Tkaronto/Toronto home.

Generous support for DIFFUSION 2022 provided by
Canada Council for the Arts (Public Outreach programme);
Toronto Arts Council with funds provided by the City of Toronto.

A Flaneur of Collected Memory: The Works of Crystal Z Campbell



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E S S A Y

by Yaniya Lee

It's not only the stories we tell that make history but it's also the stories we don't tell, ones that are just ours, kept secret. Collective memory is made up of such unique experiences. Untold long enough, in a big enough way, those experiences become what artist Crystal Z Campbell calls "public secrets".

Campbell grew up in Oklahoma, a state still reckoning with the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. While the mass killing was locally remembered in black, and white, communities, it was erased from public history almost immediately. "What is collective memory really?" Campbell asks. "We're sort of being fed the idea that we all know this thing, that we should all feel a certain way about this thing, but we're experiencing vastly different narratives." That dissonance is what Campbell takes up, remakes, and undoes, using various visual and sonic strategies throughout the six film and video works selected for re:assemblage collective's program.

In these works, ranging in length from one to nineteen minutes and made over more than a decade, Campbell mixes historical documents with images and stories they themselves produced. Brought together in the artist's evocative aural landscapes, these artifacts and memories are augmented, transformed into something entirely new. "We're constantly engaged in listening to the battle over narrative," Campbell says. In their attempts to challenge and reshape collective memory, Campbell's works allow for the possibility of a different reckoning.

In the short video *Future for Failures* (2011), the artist mixes personal recollection with aerial footage of the infamous demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri—but reversed. "I'm playing with that space between what we know and what we imagined, between history and subjective experience," they explain. The sound of a piano plays and a big white mushroom cloud looms on screen until the end of the video, when it shrinks back into the shape of the building. Throughout, a young voice tells Campbell's story of an accidental trip to a stranger's funeral.

Found footage, voiceover, editing, manipulation of pace—these are the artist's way of playing with that space between what we know and what we remember, between history and subjective experience. This careful assemblage allows their videos, though full of figuration, historical documents, and truthful accounts, to teeter on abstraction, as Campbell frees the elements of their narratives from a literal representation. Instead, they immerse viewers in a flow of visual and sonic detail that stays open in meaning and significance. The events of history become blurry; vivid realities become abstract. "We remember things uniquely from our own perspectives," Campbell says, "but somehow you can put different impressions and images together and tell a new story."

Currency (2019) distills what Campbell does best: it has the atmosphere, sound, and slowness of pace of all their varied film and video works. Here they use a simple gesture (head-shaking) to play with sound and rhythm in a manner that arrests viewers in a soothing, haptic embrace. "I try to edit a lot of that language out—to filter it through gesture, filter it through the sonic layers or the visual formation of what that may look like," they say.

In A Dark Story for Clowns (2009), Campbell revises a William Faulkner short story by incorporating a personal remembrance and an African ritual; in *A Meditation on Nature in the Absence of an Eclipse* (2017–20), they focus on environmental racism. The longest film in the program is *Go-Rilla Means War* (2017). In it, clips from a sepia-toned silent film, originally filmed in the now-demolished Slave Theater in Brooklyn, are interspersed with a new soundtrack and voiceover; two boys find misadventure with other characters, while a narrator tells an intricate tale about a woman named Nydia. It was several years after Campbell found the undeveloped 35mm film footage, and only after many attempts, that they were able to realize a full print of the original film, around which they later built a story. "I'm very much drawn to the possibilities of a research-centered abstraction," they say. In other words, the process of undertaking the research is a major component of how they produce their work. "Most of the time I'm trying to let the material, or the people and the work, encourage the shaping and sculpting of that narrative as well. And I don't try to do that explicitly. It's something that comes with spending time with the people or engaging with a particular site," Campbell says.

For *Viewfinder* (2020), which was filmed in Sweden, they spent extensive amounts of time talking with local people, hearing oral histories from community elders, and reading newly translated, centuries-old local folk tales. They combined this research with very symbolic elements and made a film where the actors enact a choreography of gestures. "I'm interested in the psychologically induced relationship that film can have," they say. This overarching interest guides their process, determining the harmoniously layered new and found footage, the resonant sonic landscapes, the narrative voiceovers. "I honestly think of my films as sound films because I place so much emphasis on the sonic level. I want that to be the space that most resembles the experience I'd like viewers to have with the work, which is this feeling of being a flaneur of the everyday, of collected memory."

Yaniya Lee's writing, research, and collaborations focus on the ethics of aesthetics. She was a member of the editorial team at Canadian Art magazine from 2017 to 2021, and now edits at Archive Books.

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