

OTHER USES

FILM SERIES

EMPAC

**MONDAY
MAR 26
7:00 PM**

**ULYSSES
JENKINS**

OTHER USES

The moving-image works presented in the screening series *Other Uses* utilize a variety of in-camera and post-production techniques to reframe objects, places, histories, and people that might otherwise remain off-screen.

The series' title is borrowed from the English translation of *Otros usos*, a 16mm film shot in a former US Naval Station in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz. Filmed through mirrored sculptures, or “malascopios” as the artist describes them, *Otros usos* projects shifting, unstable viewpoints as multiple prismatic images that are arrayed in a single frame. Together, these refracted shards of ghostly architecture, land, sea, and the fishermen who work on it produce a composite time-scale that gestures not only to the region's colonial past but also to the militarized present.

This destabilization of perspective, geometry, and structure within the film frame is a common characteristic of the artworks in this series. Although vivid in surface and rigorous in technique, the films and videos deliberately resist the spectacle of the singularly imaged “event” in order to transform everyday surfaces into the cinematic.

SERIES CURATOR: VICTORIA BROOKS

ARTISTS

05: MON / MAR 26 / 7PM

Ulysses Jenkins in conversation with Lucas Matheson

06: THU / APR 26 / 7PM

Jorge Jácome

Naeem Mohaiemen

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz

PREVIOUSLY SCREENED IN THIS SERIES:

Martine Syms

Marwa Arsanios

Morgan Fisher

Mohammad Fauzi

Deimantas Narkevicius

Hito Steyerl

Doa Aly

Yto Barrada

Joan Jonas

Shelly Silver

Ana Vaz

Joyce Wieland

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz



OTHER USES 05

MON / MAR 26 / 7:00 PM

The fifth screening in the *Other Uses* film series features the work of Ulysses Jenkins, whose videos examine television's power to shape current events and historical episodes.

Ulysses Jenkins is an artist who has given particular consideration to the portrayal of Black men in America. This installment features documentary and performance videos Jenkins made from the 1970s to the present, beginning with the artist's filming of the Watts Festival. Alternating between clarity and obscurity, the forms and content of television are redeployed to challenge the perceived neutrality of the televisual record.

Jenkins is a video/performance artist whose work has been shown in a number of national and international venues, including the Maryland Institute College of Art, the Hammer Museum, and the Getty Museum. He was the recipient of the California Arts Council's Multicultural Entry Grant as artistic director of Othervisions Studio, an interdisciplinary media arts production group. He is a three-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts' individual artist fellowship and was awarded the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame first place award in the experimental video category in 1990 and 1992. He is currently Professor of Art at University of California, Irvine.

GUEST CURATOR: LUCAS MATHESON

PROGRAM

Secrecy: Help Me to Understand (1994)

Video, color, sound. 5:20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Part II of Remnants of the Watts Festival (1972-73, compiled 1980)

Video, b&w, sound. 25:50 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and EAI, New York.

Mass of Images (1979)

Video, b&w, sound. 4:16 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Inconsequential Doggerel (1981)

Video, color, sound. 15:19 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Vulnerable (2000)

Video, color, sound. 5:04 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Planet X (2006)

Video, color, sound. 6:27 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Approximate runtime: 63 minutes

ULYSSES JENKINS THROUGH THE TELEVISION

In *Mass of Images*, Ulysses Jenkins plays a character with a sledgehammer. Standing before three televisions, he lifts the hammer up, primed to strike, but soon puts it back down. He struggles, caught in a dilemma. Why doesn't he destroy them if he has a way to do so? The boxes rest in a stable stack, yet, the protagonist could swing his hammer at any time and smash their screens into a million tiny shards. But it's not so simple. These machines only receive signals. They do not generate them. For this character, his weapon's target is not the television but the source of its broadcast.

Jenkins has been concerned with such sources for over 40 years, a career that has observed the proliferation of cinema and television, not their destruction. *Mass of Images* marks the beginning of the artist's exploration of the critical potential of moving images, as a way to create amidst the indelible legacies of racism in America, both onscreen and at large. A certain revelation is required, namely of what remains obscured behind the clear, clean glass of the television screen. But what could the television's glass hide from view? The question seems paradoxical, perhaps even silly. The transparent, ubiquitous material carries a neutral visual status, a slippery clarity that allows for unconsidered viewing. With *Mass of Images*, this question of clarity plays out in the very assumption that Jenkins himself is playing the film's lead role. Yet, for a few brief moments, he directs his gaze away from the camera revealing that the sunglasses resting on his face are actually part of a large, clear mask. Jenkins' face is seen through not just the glass of the television screen, but through yet another transparent material. This subtle doubling questions the certainties of vision and television, and what invisible but meaningful layers one gazes through when looking at someone onscreen

Barring any technical malfunction, everything present on screen is fully manifest. That is, everything occurs right before the viewer's eyes. But despite that apparent clarity, the possibility nevertheless remains that this clarity conditions viewers for a uncritical sort of viewing. That is, the kind of viewing where one assumes they see the true face of the man on screen without mediation. The brilliance of Jenkins' videos derives from the coexistence of certainty and uncertainty, and the two categories never remain static onscreen for long. A face mask appears and disappears, speech and sound move sequentially then double back, the remnants of one scene blur into another. Clarity trembles. Rinse and repeat.

If obscurity and clarity are the concerns here, then before asking how one comes to see, a material question must come first: *through* what does one come to see? Sight passes through many channels, some material, some immaterial. We may see through the apparatus of the eye, through light and space itself, or figuratively through history, memory, and language. Consider the materiality of looking through glass, its ubiquity and ease. Smartphones, eyeglasses, cameras, windows on homes, buses, ovens, and countless other objects that support daily life depend on glass for their functionality. Because of this ubiquity, one can look through glass without full awareness, without a fully considered sort of thinking. This depends on a great deal of unspoken trust. That is, when one looks through an ordinary, untreated window, one has a belief that what is on the other side is really there and presenting itself as it truly is. Indeed, the common expression referring to an illuminating piece of writing as a "window onto the world" demonstrates a shared belief in the function of glass as a direct pathway to truth. Glass does not appear to impede encounters with the truth but facilitate them. So the story goes.

A larger theme of Jenkins' project, in its push away from neutral seeing and the neutrality of the video camera, is to break down simplistic, assumed truths. Glass enables seeing. That's obvious. Glass enables seeing. But barring any treatment to the glass, that seeing travels in two directions: from the viewer inside to the world outside, and from the viewer outside to the world inside. In that seeing, both inside and outside are marked and made. Both are mutually defined. After the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, a result of longstanding racist housing practices and police brutality, "Watts" became a shorthand for 'dangerous' on television news broadcasts, an utter denigration of the people making their lives there and a state of affairs that Jenkins and his subjects recognize in *Remnants of the Watts Festival*. By recording the Watts Festival, Jenkins challenged the dominant vision of people of color living there. A prior certainty

is shaken. Throughout the piece, Jenkins captures the positivity of the festival and community members happily living their lives. Near the end of the video, a woman takes the microphone firmly in hand and repeatedly declares her pride in the event and the possibility it presents: "This is beautiful! This is the start of what can be really America!"

Looking back on his early video career, Jenkins saw a great possibility: "I was interested in a broader audience, so the connection with the tube was a natural... [and] because of public access on cable, you could go out and shoot something about the community and they'd play it... For the first time, people in the community had access to television and I was fascinated by it."¹ But as the artist notes in the same interview, public-access television came to be increasingly bound to a high-budget aesthetic defined by major production studios: "as it progressed...they started knocking the community people out by saying their production values weren't as good as the standard television offering."² Through Jenkins' vision, those offerings formed the basis for a practice of reclamation, of storytelling and myth-making in the face of an ever-growing stack of televisions. The glass would not be shattered, but its shape revealed, invisibility made visible.

— LUCAS MATHESON

-
- 1 Don Snowden, "A Griot's Vision: Fleeing the Hollywood Plantation," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1986.
 - 2 Snowden, "A Griot's Vision."

PROGRAM NOTES:

Secrecy: Help Me to Understand

(1994)-5:20 minutes

Speaking desperately into a telephone, Sidney Poitier begs his interlocutor: “Help me to understand. What went wrong? And I don’t mean this morning!” Taken from the 1965 film *The Slender Thread*, which stars Poitier as a man tasked with saving a despondent woman who calls a suicide hotline, this snippet of dialogue generates the video’s organizing question: How is it that mass media has come to damage the lives of African-Americans, and where did this damage begin? Across five minutes, Jenkins appropriates clips from the whole gamut of ‘90s pop culture: music, cinema, televangelism, sports, and late-night TV. A number of celebrities make appearances, including Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, Marlon Brando, and Arsenio Hall, but the star-power of these appearances is contrasted with allusions to the exploitation of Black people’s suffering. In addition to snippets from 1933’s *King Kong*, the OJ Simpson trial, and Mike Tyson’s incarceration, Jenkins includes part of an interview between Barbara Walters and Desiree Washington, the woman whom Tyson was convicted of raping in 1992. Jenkins blurs these clips together so that their sound and images overlap, destabilizing the certainty of what is seen. Clichés pulled from interstitial segments of cable news appear throughout, phrases like “Television...So Many Choices,” “You Decide,” and “It’s Sports, It’s Fun, It’s News, It’s Special Moments, It’s Everything!” The film closes with Rodney King’s epochal question: “Can we all get along?” The inquiry is left open.

Part Two of Remnants of the Watts Festival

(1972-73, compiled 1980)-25:50 minutes

This historically significant footage documents the excitement and hope of the Watts Festival, first organized in 1966 to celebrate the community of Watts, an historically working-class African-American neighborhood in Los Angeles. It begins with the following epigraph from the artist: “Back in the days when the myth of public access was being preached, I put down my paint brushes and grabbed a Porta-Pak and went to visit one of the greatest Afro-American events in the history of the United States. This event lasted ten years, yet it has become a myth. The following information and images are what I have left to share from the Remnants of the Watts Festival.”

Part One considers the origins of the festival, its community-organized structure, and the increasing corporatization of the event over time. Near the end of this section, Claude Booker, then-president of the Black Art Council and a pivotal advocate of Black artists in Los Angeles, gives a short tour of the festival’s art exhibition and interviews exhibiting artists. Booker goes on to speak of the exclusion of Black artists from museums, predicting a return to functional art making in which “art won’t be so precious.” As he starts to elaborate on this idea, mentioning an encounter he had with a truck “that was selling watermelons and paintings,” Part One ends abruptly. Part Two shifts the focus from the organization to the experience of the festival itself, combining concert footage and impromptu interviews with festival-goers to share what it was like to celebrate with the people of Watts.

Mass of Images

(1979)-4:16 minutes

Jenkins' first performative video casts the artist as a mysterious sage, speaking directly to the camera with a rhyming, poetic cadence. He has come bearing the following reminder: "You're just a mass of images you've gotten to know from years and years of TV shows." Stills from early American movies appear on screen throughout the video, emphasizing the integral role that anti-Black racism plays within the historical formation of American cinema. These epochal films, like *Birth of a Nation*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Jazz Singer*, are interspersed with images of white actors in blackface and African-American actors playing stereotypical, caricatured roles. Standing before a stack of televisions, Jenkins' character struggles with a sledgehammer, lifting it above his shoulders as if preparing to strike, but ultimately declines to do so. He goes on to declare that "I don't and I won't relate. And I think for some it's too late." A clear statement of resistance to legacies of portrayal in cinema and television, in deciding not to destroy the monitors Jenkins character demonstrates the aspiration of video art to struggle with and change existing modes of moving-image representation.

Inconsequential Doggerel

(1981)-15:19 minutes

A doggerel is a poem with an irregular rhythm that often features a trivial meaning. That rhythmic irregularity appears throughout *Inconsequential Doggerel*, one of Jenkins' densest works. The video stops and starts, looping and repeating short scenes or bits of audio. That repetition reveals the bizarre, even disturbing, quality of television's style that hides just out of view. How might the "slashing" of prices be related to the violence casually depicted in sporting events and nightly news broadcasts? One particular sport, football, appears throughout as a strange and recurring image. Jenkins holds one while wandering naked in a park, another is repeatedly tossed over the shoulder of a woman sitting on the ground, and a man forces a football into his partner's chest as she lies in bed. The combination of the footballs, Jenkins' nudity, and the overblown language of news broadcasters generates a strange and obscure effect. As the ironic title suggests, television's power lies somewhere in a strange triangulation of rhythm, triviality, and the "real."

Vulnerable

(2000)-5:04 minutes

Two men meet in a station of the newly-opened Los Angeles Metro. A moonlit night, the mood is eerie and tense. They eye each other on the platform, on the escalator, and on the metro car they share. This short neo-noir, which Jenkins describes as a "psychodrama," considers who is safe in a public space, and who is suspicious. The use of this new public transit system questions the possibility of new beginnings in new spaces. Yet Jenkins also shoots on location at two of the most-filmed spaces in downtown Los Angeles, the 2nd Street Tunnel and the Angels Flight funicular railway, recalling the way that years of Hollywood cinema have come to define urban space. Can the script be flipped? Can the young black man be considered vulnerable in such a space, or is he destined to play the role of the threat? The Othervisions Art Band, the musical component of Jenkins' multimedia practice, provides the video's soundtrack. Jenkins has noted that in recent years his band has come to play the song as a memorial for Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old high school student killed by George Zimmerman in 2012. *Vulnerable* stands as a reminder that the way people look at each other can never be neutral, that legacies of seeing are omnipresent.

Planet X

(2006)-6:27 minutes

This science-fiction journey considers the destruction of Hurricane Katrina through the lens of astronomical bodies. Jenkins, acting as narrator, describes an imagined asteroid on a possible collision course with Earth, with a likelihood purported by experts to be "close to zero." Looming in the background is the United States government's mismanaged deployment of aid to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. News clips depicting the aftermath of the hurricane and its victims appear alongside astronomical diagrams of the solar system. The water in an animation of the failed levees slowly transforms into a galaxy, and legendary jazz musician Sun Ra is heard speaking about the "very evil things" that will befall Black people through God's power. He goes on to note that space travel is "right around the corner." The video ends on a meditative note, a looped clip of Sun Ra humming juxtaposed with images of swirling galaxies. What will the future hold?

STAFF

Geoff Abbas / Director for Stage Technologies
Aimeé R. Albright / Artist Services Specialist
Eric Ameres / Senior Research Engineer
Argeo Ascani / Curator, Music
Eileen Baumgartner / Graphic Designer
David Bebb / Senior Network Administrator
Peter Bellamy / Senior Systems Administrator
Michael Bello / Video Engineer
Victoria Brooks / Curator, Time-Based Visual Arts
Eric Brucker / Lead Video Engineer
Bruce Bryne / Master Carpenter
Michele Cassaro / Guest Services Coordinator
Gordon Clement / Media Systems Integrator
John Cook / Box Office Manager
Constanza Armes Cruz / Curatorial Assistant
David DeLaRosa / Desktop Support Analyst
Zhenelle Falk / Artist Services Administrator
Ashley Ferro-Murray / Associate Curator, Theater & Dance
Kimberly Gardner / Manager, Administrative Operations
Johannes Goebel / Director
Ian Hamelin / Project Manager
Ryan Jenkins / Senior Event Technician
Shannon Johnson / Design Director
Robin Massey / Senior Business Administrator
Daniel Meltzer / Master Electrician
Stephen McLaughlin / Senior Event Technician
Sharineka Phillips / Business Coordinator
Josh Potter / Marketing and Communications Manager
Avery Stempel / Front of House Manager
Kim Strosahl / Production Coordinator
Jeffrey Svatek / Audio Engineer
Todd Vos / Lead Audio Engineer