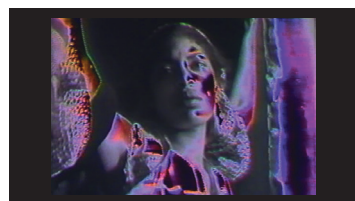


Film
By Harry Burke

RITUAL



AND



REVOLT



Stills from Barbara McCullough,
Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space, 1981
Video, 60 minutes

Barbara McCullough's *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1981) is a study of ritual and its influential role within the improvisational and assemblage practices developed by black artists in Los Angeles in the late 70s and early 80s. The film features artists like Betye Saar and David Hammons, reflecting on their own artistic rituals; in Saar's words, it's not just a rite, but what feels "right".

A rebellion is a ritual because it cannot be confined to a single time and place in history. The Watts Rebellion erupted in a black neighbourhood in Los Angeles in August 1965, and cut deeply into the American consciousness. Incited by the arrest of 21-year-old Marquette Frye, the six days of upheaval demonstrated its community's longstanding grief over – among other systemic issues – high unemployment, substandard housing, and underfunded schools. Martin Luther King Jr. described the event as "the beginning of a stirring of those people in our society who have been by passed by the progress of the past decade". This stirring informs anti-police and anti-racism activism to this day.

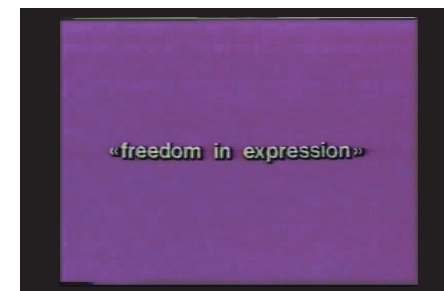
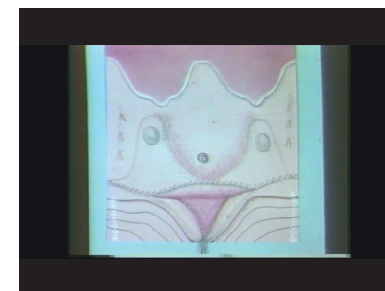
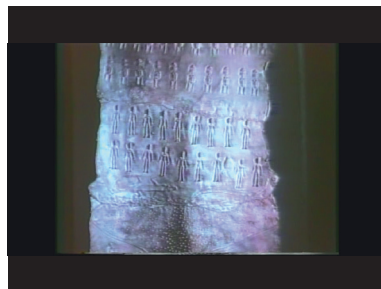
A few months before the riots, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), now the West Coast's largest art museum, relocated to a \$11.5 million complex on arterial Wilshire Boulevard. The move away from its former location in what was then called South-Central Los Angeles was symptomatic of the period's white flight.

The early 70s saw an upswing in LACMA's black art programming, compelled by the advocacy of the Black Arts Council, founded at the museum by art preparators Claude Booker and Cecil Ferguson in 1968. Still, in the underexposed black art scene of the city of angels, collaboration was fundamental and experimentation thrived. Materially, assemblage and film offered pliant, not-yet-codified languages for innovation, as curator Naima J. Keith noted in the Hammer's 2011 catalogue, *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980*.

This spirit is exemplified in Barbara McCullough's *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1981), which merges the techniques of assemblage and film. Born in New Orleans, McCullough was associated with the artists' collective Studio Z and was part of the LA Rebellion, a generation of black filmmakers that scholar Clyde Taylor has called a "cinematic

liberation". McCullough's hour-long documentary begins with footage from the artist's 16-mm short *Water Ritual #1*, completed two years prior, which features actress Yolanda Vidato enacting a rite of purification in an urban wasteland. "Ritual", McCullough says, candidly addressing her viewers following Vidato's performance, "is a symbolic action that I've dealt with in terms of my own internal state to help me release myself, and help me move from one space and time to another." For the rest of the documentary, McCullough interviews other black artists about their understanding of ritual, discussing mythologies of production and process that locate their work within complex cosmologies of African diasporic movement.

McCullough's first interview is with David Hammons, who is chiselling the dirt accumulated on a stone wall. He says, "Betye Saar calls her pieces 'Spirit Catchers' ... I guess this could be called a spirit catcher." Hammons balances, deftly, two pyramids of stones, wood and metal in an abandoned lot. Cars whizz by. With deadpan precision, the reclusive artist describes himself as "doodling" or "trying to keep it as uncontrived as possible." Most artists in the film deploy some kind of improvisation, which poet and critical theorist Fred Moten has recently remarked, is born not of freedom, but of "necessity, the necessity to act in favour of freedom." A gulping jazz rhapsody by Don Cherry struts in the film's audio track. McCullough's camerawork, which zooms and pans across the two earthworks, the landscape, and Hammons himself, grounds the artist in his environment. In sharp contrast to the preoccupied drivers in the cars passing by, he is meticulously attuned to the undeveloped streetside plot. His questioning and equivocal relation to this environment is explicated in his precarious, almost ruinous arrangements. In these the material logic of the riot and its aftermath is clear.



Cars were also in the background of Senga Nengudi's public installation and performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978), which McCullough had filmed. Yet her reel failed, and the only footage of Nengudi's piece in *Shopping Bag Spirits* shows a crane and draped columns. The performance is evoked by stills and Nengudi's recollections, emphasising its ephemerality. A light jazz track, garnished with vocals and chimes, provides the section's score. Unscripted, Nengudi's performance was made with Hammons (who played a male spirit), Maren Hassinger (a female spirit), and other Studio Z collaborators. It took place on unused land under a freeway on Pico Boulevard, which was scattered with shrubbery and small palm trees, creating a "very African feeling,"

according to Nengudi. Nengudi crowned the roadway's circular concrete colonnades with abstract pantyhose sculptures in the manner of classical capitals. Performers donned headdresses fashioned from the same fabric. Wearing a canvas tarp, the artist played the enjoining spirit between the two genders. Coupés rumbled overhead. Dancers' footprints fled from the dust.

McCullough's documentary unearths the spiritual density of the contested cityscape. Her work, she has said, is an effort to "extract the magical from the seemingly mundane". Moten, in his dialogue with literary critic Saidiya Hartman's notion of hypervisibility, has written of how this fervent concept "opens us to the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively)

quotidian". Amid beauty and volatility, and disrepair and alienation, ritual entices rebellion, infusing history with the possibility of other times.

In the film's alluring closing sequence, McCullough asks Saar about her sculpture *Spirit Catcher* (1977), referenced by Hammons at the start. Saar reveals that she collected materials from Haiti, Nigeria, and Mexico for this mixed-media assemblage, which she likens to the Watts Towers. "You can never tell where art comes from," she muses.

In the 70s, black cultural production in the US was connected to Third World liberation struggles. McCullough and other LA Rebellion filmmakers were introduced to Third Cinema, the anti-colonial cinematic movement that emerged in Latin America and spread worldwide, by Teshome

Gabriel, a scholar and UCLA professor. While rooted in the prismatic urban experiences of LA, *Shopping Bag Spirits* draws upon numerous ancestral mythologies of the African diaspora. These alternative epistemological and temporal schemas provoke an emphatic interruption of the American everyday, and evince, theorist Alessandra Raengo has argued, an "Afrofuturistic sensibility in their exploration of forms of *being in*, but not *belonging to*, American culture." In this incisive and interminable manner, McCullough's definition of ritual as a way of moving "from one space and time to another" remains potent.

HARRY BURKE is a regular contributor to Spike, and lives in London.