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Art in America

New Talent: Artists to Watch + Opacity Now + Recasting the Past

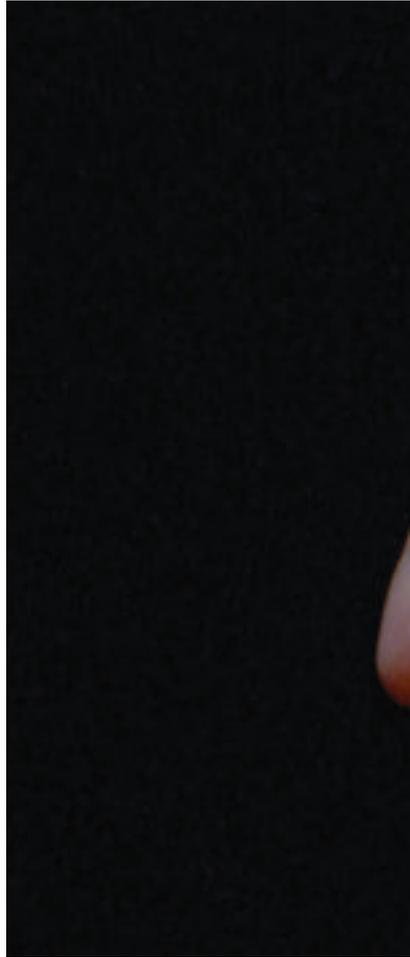


May 2022

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Diana Sofia Lozano:
Pyrokinesis (detail), 2021

REVERSE



Artists discuss making experimental films after colonialism.

Sky Hopinka, Tiffany Sia, and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa

Moderated by Emily Watlington

NO LONGER CONTENT SIMPLY TO CRITICIZE the camera's colonialist gaze or offer warnings concerning their medium's proclivity for propaganda, a new generation of artist-filmmakers is imagining anticolonial futures for the moving image. Meanwhile, many leaders in the field of postcolonial studies have moved to consider global neoliberalism, rather than colonialism, to be today's primary source of international inequality, citing as evidence manipulative maneuvers by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as well as the unequal global distribution of certain types of labor. Three artists leading this next wave of anticolonial

cinema are Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, Tiffany Sia, and Sky Hopinka. The cohort – bringing perspectives from Uganda, Hong Kong, and Ho-Chunk Nation, respectively – assembled on Zoom for a conversation about their goals, perspectives, and techniques. By centering different communities as their audience, uncovering surprising histories, and giving new form to oral traditions, these artists are helping untether their medium from its entanglements with empire. They were prompted to talk about why they chose the moving image as their medium, discuss postcolonialism today, and share their current projects and influences.



SHOT

Sky Hopinka:
Kicking the Clouds,
2021, 16mm film
transferred to video,
15 minutes, 35 seconds.

Courtesy Sky Hopinka

EMMA WOLUKAU-WANAMBWA I don't actually describe myself as a filmmaker – I'm someone who does things with video from time to time. I'm always relearning editing software from scratch because it's changed so much since the last time I used it. Still, I do often find that a lot of the conceptual questions I'm asking bring me back to film and video – issues of framing, representation, and manipulation of the image. I have recurring fantasies of making a proper narrative feature film, but somehow, the ideas always decompose en route. Time and again, I find myself coming to the conclusion that the medium is wrong for the story, so then I start to fiddle with the fragments.

TIFFANY SIA Recently, I've been interested in how film relates to law. I'm also interested in cinema outside of Europe and the United States, and in how the postcolonial subject sees. More than postcolonial or regional cinema, though, I'm interested in power structures surrounding the production of images.

Since the Hong Kong protests, I've been thinking about the idea of film as a witness. Film is potentially incriminating, if someone is documented doing something that may be considered a criminal act. I've also become interested in the circulation of moving images through social media. My most recent short, *Do Not Circulate*, deals heavily with this, and also with issues

of fair use, public domain, and the rights to a story, plus the legacy of filming cops, whether cop-agenda films or crime thrillers from '80s and '90s Hong Kong.

SKY HOPINKA One of the reasons I got into filmmaking was to tell stories that were specifically intended for my community and for my family. I didn't want to rely on those broad cultural references that film often uses to reach a wide audience. I'm interested in focusing on very specific things within my own beliefs, family, tribe, or region – not in catering to a white audience or white gaze. Once you start to eschew certain standards or expectations that are placed upon you, especially as an Indigenous person or any sort of filmmaker of color who is filming their own community, there's a lot to think about: exploitation, representation, who is holding the camera, who is in front of the camera. I think about my own position as a cis man and where I fit within my community. I also think about where my oppression lies, being brown and a person that is marginalized in a lot of different ways in this country.

I'm aware I make work that some might call "experimental." Others who are heavy in the experimental film world would say it is not, but it's certainly experimental to my grandma, who is familiar with the conventions of Hollywood films. I'm trying to explore our cultural vernacular and push the possibilities of the moving image moving forward.

I also think a lot about what it means to have a proprietorship over a story. This is a new idea: as



stories were told over generations, they shifted and changed based on who was telling them and who the audience was. Film can be part of that evolution, building on older forms of storytelling.

SIA Cinema is heavily shaped by the last century, when it existed largely in theaters where it was inaccessible to a lot of people. When I think about what a new cinema might look like, I wonder, does it have to be shot on film? Can it be shot on a phone? What are the signposts that let you know you are watching a film, and how much do we need those signposts? I think about this especially when it comes to pointing out the limitations of proprietary knowledge, or having the rights to a story.

Left, Hopinka:
Kicking the Clouds,
2021, 16mm film
transferred to video,
15 minutes, 35 seconds.

Below, Hopinka:
*Here you are before
the trees*, 2020,
three-channel video
installation, 13 minutes.



HOPINKA At the same time, cinema is only about 130 years old, and I'm energized by the fact that this gives us room to define what we're doing without relying on or reacting to the established conventions that define so much of how we understand what we are watching on the screen.

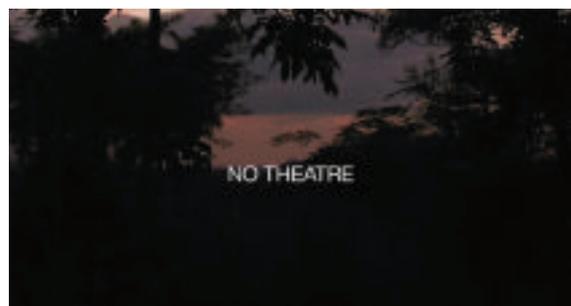
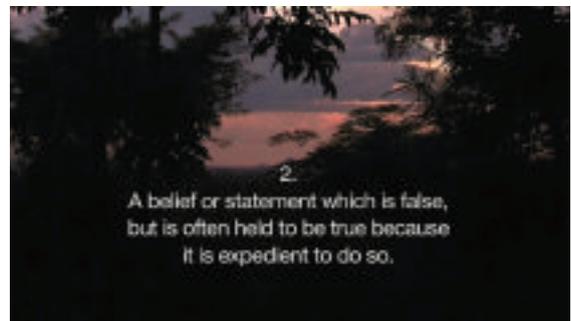
WOLUKAU-WANAMBWA With my work, I often find myself thinking about something Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, who is at the University of Toronto, always warns – he says any knowledge that we produce can be used against us. I think this is wise, and for this reason, film cannot, in and of itself, be de-colonial, because any aesthetic innovations or strategies we develop can so easily be repackaged, defanged, declawed. That process is only happening faster in the Information Age.

Still, I think storytelling is essential in all sorts of contexts. We live by stories, and the ways we narrativize our experience of the world matter. One thing that brings me back to technologies of the image is the central roles images have played in providing justifications for projects of colonial expansion. Producing images and stories was often a way to evoke or exoticize a place for people who hadn't been there.

SIA I've been really interested in those sorts of images and stories in my new short, *What Rules the Invisible*. I'm borrowing footage from travelogues, because I'm similarly curious about the idea of a place that film produces. I've become sort of perversely fascinated with travelogues written by missionaries in East Asia, China in particular, from the nineteenth century. The preserved travelogues in many ways help me see a time and place that I couldn't see otherwise. Sometimes these reels help fill in the stories that my parents tell me, stories I don't have any image or footage for. But they're still a traveler's perspective and are ridden with clichés. Certain shots show subjects who glare at the filmmaker, visibly annoyed at the intrusive camera that's pointed at them.

Sky, you also frame these problems in your work – we've talked before about how narratives were passed on through our families, but also through the study of our people. I'm interested in that void, and in the failure of images. For this reason, I often want

Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa: *Promised Lands*, 2015–18, video, 20 minutes.



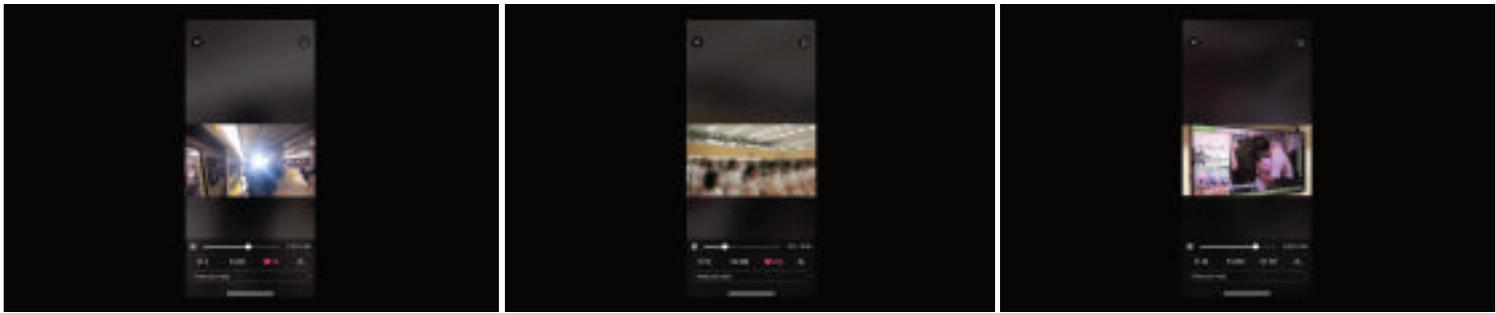
“Film cannot, in and of itself, be de-colonial, because any aesthetic innovations or strategies we develop can so easily be repackaged, defanged, declawed.”

my works to have an informal feel, as a way of trying to push against the slickness of media that is often used in compelling and coercive ways. But I maintain a textual component of my practice, because some things cannot be told solely with an image.

WOLUKAU-WANAMBWA I spent five years working in Uganda starting in 2011, with the idea that I would make something in the tradition of documentary. The short video *Promised Lands* was the final work I made in the resulting series, “Uganda in Black and White” [2011–16]. My parents were born there back when it was the Uganda Protectorate.

One of the reasons I don't work with film or video often is because I hate editing, and I really struggle with making decisions. But *Promised Lands* is a single take of a sunset, and that is pretty much all that happens. I hit record at the beginning, and leave it going until there is no longer enough light for the camera to record anything. You hear a conversation offscreen, and I didn't really change much, besides overlaying it with some textual meditations.

Paradise is another work in that series. I was intrigued by technologies of memory in contemporary Uganda, particularly those that were introduced during the period of colonial rule [1894–1962], which included the museum and also the public cemetery.



There are very few public cemeteries in Uganda, and the sites are interesting, because they are not indigenous. I found one cemetery that turned out to be all that remained of a refugee camp that had existed on the shores of Lake Victoria from 1942 to 1950. It housed mostly Polish and Ukrainian refugees who were fleeing the Second World War, primarily Christians who'd been in the gulags in Siberia when Germany invaded Poland. There was a brief attempt to park them in India, but that didn't work, so on they went to Britain's colonies in Eastern and Southeast Africa. Seven thousand of them came to Uganda, at a time when the white population was just two thousand people. They managed this by keeping them in remote camps, where their freedom of movement was heavily restricted.

I was working on this story at the beginning of what Europe chose to describe as a "refugee crisis." It was so interesting to learn that there had been refugee camps for Europeans in Africa. In 2012 there was a reunion of people who had been in these camps; they flew to Uganda, now 70 or 80 years old, and some brought their children and grandchildren. I happened to be around, so I filmed as much as I could, without any real plan. It was one of the strangest events I've ever attended, for two reasons, principally. One is that the refugees who were returning to remember their history are tens or hundreds of thousands of times more affluent than the people who live in that area now, where there is still no electricity or proper sewage system. Seeing these affluent refugees was an interesting inversion of expectations. The other is that the British government didn't allow anyone to stay in Uganda – many wanted to, but they were removed against their will, and the whole town was demolished. I filmed these very old people wandering through barely tended land that's now littered with ant hills as they tried to reconstruct the place they grew up, where they had all these formative experiences.

I have every expectation that I will eventually do something with this reunion footage, but it's not unusual for me to think on it for several years before I get editing. In the interim, I made this series of light boxes pairing images of Kojja, the town, with a story I was told by an old man who lives locally. He worked at the camp when he was young.

SIA I'm also currently working on a new short that prepares the runway for a longer project. I'm moving toward more personal histories, such as family

Tiffany Sia: *Do Not Circulate*, 2021, video, 17 minutes.

histories that I've been trying to make sense of all my life. For instance, my great-grandfather was part of the Malaysian Chinese Communist Party, which the British established in 1930, conscripting Malaysian people to fight off Japanese occupation by arming them with guns. They successfully fought off the Japanese, and then there were all these Malaysians who now had weapons. The British grew afraid that they were going to overthrow them, so they set out to disarm the group. But a faction of them disappeared into the jungle with their weapons and became guerrilla-fighter Communists. My father is ashamed of this story, and I guess that's why I've become so obsessed with history as an adult. I want to uncover partial stories I've been told, and this is one of so many within my family.

In my film *Do Not Circulate*, I talk about how Prince Edward Station was rumored to be haunted by the ghosts of the protesters who were thought to have died there. My mother told me that actually, that place had been haunted since at least World War II, because the Japanese housed prisoners of war in jail cells in police stations in the neighborhood. There, they would also execute people against the wall. There are many rumors concerning the restless dead in these spaces. My mom also mentioned all the literal shit in the area – around Kowloon and Prince Edward – in the 1950s and '60s, since there was no plumbing at the time. Those stories are juxtaposed against travelogue footage that depicts Hong Kong at a great distance and doesn't show you how people really lived. I think one of the most powerful things cinema can do is hold tension between what is shown and what is suggested. For me, the part about shit management refers back to one of my favorite scenes in cinema, from Visconti's *The Leopard* [1963]. Right before the prince leaves the party, he stops in a room full of chamber pots. It is four or five in the morning, and the sun is rising, and he just pauses in front of this roomful of shit from the party guests. The Italian aristocracy and Old World order that he is part of is embodied in this stinking metaphor.

HOPINKA I recently finished my sixteen-minute film *Kicking the Clouds*, and in a way, I'm still processing it. Right now, I'm trying to think about what I can do to further bridge those connections between various aspects of my work – my film, photographs, and writing. Meanwhile, I've been reading this book *Our War Paint Is Writers' Ink* [2018] by Adam Spry, this Anishinaabe scholar. It looks at Indigenous

transnationalism through writing over the centuries, especially with the Anishinaabe writers and their counterparts in the colonies in the United States. It's really a fascinating look at the agency that the Anishinaabeg or Indigenous people have engaged in through writing and poetry.

SIA I think often about Julio García Espinosa's essay "Towards an Imperfect Cinema" [1969], which brings up questions about the time, ability, money, and means required to make a film. It also talks about

View of Sia's installation *A Wet Finger in the Air*, 2021, in her exhibition "Slippery When Wet" at Artists Space, New York, 2021.

how in moments of, say, political action, the role of the filmmaker isn't always necessarily making art, but sometimes direct involvement in political action. In another passage, he talks about how films get guarded by distributors through the cinema circuits that show them. All of this questions the alleged democratization of this medium, both in terms of who can access a camera and who can see the works. Today, through new media, we do have a lot more access, but this is made fraught by the fact that anything we share becomes owned by tech companies that are very much profiting from our relentless content creation, not to mention the privacy issues that come with that.

I have a hyper-citational practice. It's helpful to have company in my thoughts, and this is especially important when challenging structures of power or creating opposition. Another text I cite often is Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of Four Continents* [2015], a brilliant work about how colonial mercantile histories are so intimately intertwined. Hong Kong cultural studies scholar Ackbar Abbas has also been a big influence on my work – Rey Chow as well. Both have produced cultural theory that feels so singular to Hong Kong yet also somehow so resonant to many places in terms of thinking about the postcolonial subject. Both of them have worked outside Hong Kong for a long time, and their work really challenged my idea of what it means to think in place, or to think about having the authority to speak for a place.

WOLUKAU-WANAMBWA A text I think of often is *The Deaths of Hintsa* [2009] by Premesh Lalu, a professor at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, which was the historically colored university prior to the formal end of apartheid in 1994. He argued the discipline of history was complicit in the project of apartheid. Therefore, history after apartheid requires a completely different methodology. The book explores different accounts, primarily written by colonizers, of the murder of a Xhosa chief called Hintsa. At the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the government tried a process of reconciliation without juridical accountability. There was amnesty if you came and confessed what you'd done and told families what happened to their loved ones – in theory, you could go back to "normal life." It was a deeply unsatisfactory process, and the ramifications continue to haunt South Africa. Around that time, there was this healer, Nicholas Gcaleka, who claimed he'd found the skull of Hintsa. Hintsa was believed to have been decapitated, his skull taken off to the UK. Gcaleka claimed he had Hintsa's skull and was bringing it back to South Africa. He was widely ridiculed, and many were involved in this whole process of discrediting him. Lalu explores the reasons for this ridicule and shows how colonizers have devised certain definitions of "evidence" for their own benefit. It's a really fascinating story and it's very beautifully told – Lalu draws a productive kind of attention to the narrative and aesthetic strategies of the archive. The book did not win him any friends, but the questions he poses have really stuck with me. ●



Photo Filip Wolak/Courtesy Artists Space, New York