

# RISD MUSEUM

***Black Flyyy***, November 21, 2020 - May 2, 2021

*“I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice. I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged, **and just now, if it were possible, would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them.**”*

—Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931)

These six short films and videos explore self-revelation, craft, legacy, and ancestral knowledge(s) in ways that center Black narratives and challenge white cultural hegemony. Their dreamlike meditations consider cultural traditions of and from the African Diaspora related to the meaning of the word *fly*, making reference to stories of human flight, the return to homelands, and travel to longed-for realms. From narratives that undermine stereotypes of Black abjection to Afrofuturist provocations that reimagine memory, these works engage themes of movement, transcendence, spirituality, style, originality, and the supernatural.

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## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

“Haiti,” from the film *Zouzou*, 1934

Performed by Josephine Baker (French; b. US, 1906–1975)

Black and white video with sound

Running time: 5:53

Courtesy of Kino Lorber, Inc TL71.2020

Josephine Baker sings of diasporic longing in this melancholic ode to Haiti. The lyrics express homesickness, with Baker vocalizing that “the most beautiful cage is just a prison” compared to the lushness of her character’s native land. The film’s famous image of Baker swinging as a caged bird adds layers to her forlorn reflection on freedom and (restricted) flight. At the end of the scene Baker frees herself, launching into the arms of the performers below.

*Zouzou* marked the first time a Black woman starred in a major motion picture.



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“This Bitter Earth” from the film, *Killer of Sheep*, 1977  
Written and directed by Charles Burnett (American, b. 1944)  
Black and white video with sound  
Running time: 3:53  
Courtesy of Milestone Film & Video TL72.2020



In *Killer of Sheep*, Charles Burnett depicts quotidian aspects of Black life in 1970s California. This scene shows an intimate moment between the film’s main character, Stan (Henry G. Sanders), and his wife (Kaycee Moore). Nostalgia becomes the focus of this clip as she grapples with Stan’s rejection and their declining relationship.

The couple dances to “This Bitter Earth,” in which Dinah Washington croons, “Today you’re young/ Too soon you’re old,” putting in dialogue the previous video’s concern with time—specifically Wendy’s demand that the Lost Boys grow up. (An iconic image from the film is the roof-jumping sequence, not shown in this exhibition, where children seemingly defy gravity as the adults look up from the ground.) At the end of this clip, Stan’s wife delivers a soliloquy recalling memories of her grandmother, who “drag[ged] her shadow across the porch.”

"Nuncaland" from the HBO series, *Random Acts of Flyness*, 2018  
Series created by Terence Nance (American, b. 1982)  
Color video with sound  
Running time: 5:26  
Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. Used with permission. Stream RANDOM ACTS OF FLYNESS, Season 1 on HBO Max TL83.2020



This musical sequence presents an updated interpretation of the Peter Pan story. Nuncaland, or Neverland, is in some ways the “beautiful blue country, far, far away in other skies” that Josephine Baker longed for, complicated by the refusal of Wendy (Le’Asha Julius) to join the Lost Boys as their queen. Wendy resists being confined by sexual harassment and rape culture, demanding that the boys grow up and “fix their father’s sins.” The segment interrogates gender and sexuality, with Wendy insisting that the boys come of age and be different than the environment that produced them (and systems of oppression, including patriarchy).

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## *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY*, 2017

Written and directed by Jenn Nkiru (British, b. 1987)

Color video with sound

Running time: 10:30

Courtesy Jenn Nkiru TL82.2020

In this nonlinear work, clips of Afrofuturist performer Sun Ra, jazz music, and magical-realist elements are paired with archival footage. *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* flows as an audio/visual/textual stream of consciousness, in which Nkiru presents the many facets of Blackness on the continent and in the African diaspora.



## *Wake*, 2012

Written and directed by Bree Newsome Bass\* (American, b. 1985)

Color video with sound

Running time: 21:27

On loan from Bree Newsome Bass TL97.2020

An empty chair rocks on a porch in the beginning of Bree Newsome Bass's *Wake*. Ezra Giles, the father of Charmaine (Sahr Ali), has died "unexpectedly." A fly buzzes loudly and lands on the dead man's hand. The audience witnesses the digging of a grave and hears Charmaine talk about God's making the first man from dirt. What follows is a story about conjure, root work, and return that takes a malevolent twist. Graveyard dirt is used to spawn the Man, a mysterious entity, whose spirit eventually goes back to the bitter earth that birthed him.



\* Bass is also an activist known for suspending herself in the air and scaling a flagpole of considerable height to remove a Confederate flag from its position in front of the South Carolina State House in 2015.

## *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*, 2019

Created by Sophia Nahli Allison (American, b. 1987)

Color video with sound

5:53 minutes

Courtesy of the artist TL90.2020

*Dreaming Gave Us Wings* is an Afrodiasporic meditation on the folklore of flying Africans—myths in which enslaved people escaped



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exploitative plantation economies in the Americas by taking to the sky and returning to Africa. These myths about superhuman ability of flight endorsed Black people's autonomy over their own bodies and their refusal to submit to racially derived logics of inferiority. Allison addresses the work to Black women, whose mobility and capacity to levitate in the video have spiritual dimensions. The mythological nature of early accounts of flight straddles the line between reality and imagination.