

Document Citation

Title	The cool works of Shirley Clarke
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	7
Subjects	Clarke, Shirley (1919-1997), New York, New York, United States
Film Subjects	The Cool world, Clarke, Shirley, 1964

Tuesday, October 13
The Cool Works of Shirley Clarke

"Dance of Life": A Program of Short Films 7:00

A film and videomaker since 1953, a former Professor of Film at UCLA, a founding member of Film-Makers' Distribution Center and the Film-Makers' Cooperative, Shirley Clarke is one of a handful of women who have been central to the American independent and avant-garde film movement. Clarke's initial desire to be a dancer is evident in tonight's selection of works which span twenty-five years. She studied modern dance with Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, until she realized she wouldn't be, as she put it, The Greatest Dancer in the World. Using a camera received as a wedding gift, her first film, Dance in the Sun (1953), was of a dancer friend. Soon after she met Maya Deren, and determined to make films exploring Deren's "interest[.] in using people as well as dancers to create films where you get, not merely dance movement that has been created for the camera, but the actual Dance of Life." All her work, from her overtly experimental films, to her hybrid narrative/documentary feature films and collaborative videos, is characterized by rhythmic editing and subjective point of view, and can be seen to validate her claim that ". . . even a film in the style of *cinema verité* becomes choreographic because dance, as I conceive it, is the very nature of a human being."

Dance in the Sun: Danced by Daniel Nagrin. (6 mins, B&W). In Paris Parks. (1954, 12 mins). Bullfight Danced and Choreographed by Anna Sokolow. (1955, 9 mins). A Moment in Love. Danced by Carmela Gutierrez, Paul Sansardo. Choreographed by Anna Sokolow. (1957, 8 mins). A Scary Time. Co-directed by Robert Hughes. Produced by the United Nations Children's Fund. (1960, 20 mins, B&W). Four Journeys into Mystic Time (excerpt)(1978-79, c.30 mins). (Total running time: c.85 mins. All prints Color, Sound, 16mm, from Museum of Modern Art, unless otherwise noted)

The Connection 8:45
(Shirley Clarke, U.S., 1961)

Shirley Clarke's first feature film also marks the first of her many depictions of American subcultures. "I never felt that anything about my own life was going to interest anyone else, so I chose surrogates--underdogs, outsiders--whom I identified with." Based on Jack Gelber's controversial play, The Connection is both a depiction of a group of junkies waiting for a fix in a claustrophobic Greenwich Village loft, and an interrogation of the documentary form. Using a jazz score, an

inventive, dancing camera, and a film-within-a-film structure, Clarke "disconnects" all previous documentary expectations. Writing at the time of its release, Penelope Gilliatt was alone in observing "the audience . . . feels accused. This is . . . due . . . mostly to Shirley Clarke's brilliant insistence that the camera is the instrument of our own curiosity. In most films, the camera has no identity; it is simply a conveniently agile window through which one can stare without being seen. . . In The Connection on the other hand, the camera is always a palpable object."

Written by Jack Gelber from his own Play. Photographed by Arthur Ornitz. Music by Freddie Redd. With Warren Finnerty, Gary Goodrow, James Anderson, Carl Lee, Jerome Raphael.(103 mins, B&W, 16mm, Print from New Yorker)

Tuesday, October 20
The Cool Works of Shirley Clarke

The Cool World 7:00
(Shirley Clarke, U.S. 1963)

The Cool World, the first feature film shot in Harlem, is the story of a young black adolescent, Duke who longs to head his gang, the Royal Pythons. He sees his entree as linked to possessing a gun, a pursuit which takes him on a downward trajectory from stealing, selling drugs, gang fighting to arrest. Described on its release as "a loud, long and powerful cry of outrage at the world society has created for Harlem youngsters and at the human condition in a slum ghetto," The Cool World has lost none of its relevance, and remains a powerful, poetic, study of black youth. In it, Clarke continues her interrogation of the documentary form. She and Carl Lee, who collaborated on the film, selected the cast from Harlem junior high schools. Although based on Warren Miller's novel, and the play by Miller and Robert Rosen, much of the film was improvised, with the result, as Lauren Rabinovitz has observed, that "out of traditional modes and antagonistic relationships between documentary and fictional narrative, Clarke inscribes new positions for social subjectivity."*

*Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71.

Produced by Frederick Wiseman. Written by Clarke, Carl Lee, based on the novel by Warren Miller and the play by Miller and Robert Rossen. Photographed by Baird Bryant. Music by Mal Waldron. With Hampton Clanton, Yolanda Rodriguez, Carl Lee, John Marriott, Georgia Burke. (105 mins, B&W, 16mm, Print from Zipporah Films)

Portrait of Jason 9:00
(Shirley Clarke, U.S., 1967)

Described by Clarke as a response to fellow filmmakers Leacock and Pennebaker's *cinema verité* works, Portrait of Jason is a fascinating depiction of Jason Holliday, a African-American gay prostitute and aspiring nightclub performer. Filmed from 9pm to 9am one night in Clarke's apartment, Holliday's non-stop talking was interrupted only by camera reloading. Clarke described the 12 hours as "the first time I was able to give up my intense control and allow Jason and the camera to react to each other." As the sole person on-screen, with some off-screen questions from Shirley Clarke and Carl Lee, Jason "performs" for the

camera, improvising and impersonating, relating stories about his employers, confessing his sexual encounters, and ultimately revealing himself--a self which may or may not relate to the stories he has told, but which comes to "life" before the camera. In Clarke's *verité* expose, there is no truth; there is a production. "One thing I never expected was the highly charged emotional evening that took place. . . . How the people behind the camera reacted that night is a very important part of what the film is about. Little did I expect how much of ourselves we would reveal as the night progressed."

Photographed by Jeri Sapanen. With Jason Holliday (Aaron Paine). (105 mins, B&W, 16mm, Print from PFA Collection)

Tuesday, October 27
The Cool Works of Shirley Clarke

Video Shorts: "Portraits of Collaboration" 7:00

Clarke began using video in 1969, back when it was referred to as VT for videotape. She founded the Videospace Troupe which toured between 1973 and '75 putting on "interactive video shows with our hosts" as well as creating a Video Ferris Wheel and the Videoracle, with Clarke telling fortunes, which were presented as part of New York's Avant-Garde Festival. In the early eighties, she collaborated with actor and director Joseph Chaikin and playwright Sam Shepard to make Savage/Love and Tongues, re-thinking theater pieces as video works. The incredible Chaikin presents the one-act monologues of shifting personalities, with the jazz-like rhythms of Shepard's language finding visual expression in Clarke's manipulation of the image.

Soon after meeting New York experimental filmmaker Donna Cameron in 1987, Shirley Clarke presented her with a reel of her own home movies, of herself as a child photographed by her mother. She offered them for inclusion in Cameron's found footage project, at the time entitled Civilization. Cameron's Shirley Clarke is a celebration of Clarke, and the inspiration she provided. Its attempt to create a subjective portrait of both a person and a time, bears an interesting relationship to Ornette: Made in America, although here an intriguing element is that the portrait is of the artist as a child.

Savage/Love: (1981, 26 mins). Tongues (1982, 20 mins). Both tapes by Clarke, Joseph Chaikin, Sam Shepard. Music by Shepard, Skip LaPlante. Tapes from Electronic Arts Intermix. Shirley Clarke: Donna Cameron, in cooperation with Shirley Clarke. (1975-92, c.40 mins, Color/B&W, Tape from artist). (Total running time: c.90 mins. All tapes Color, 3/4" Cassettes)

Ornette. . . Made in America 8:45
(*Shirley Clarke, U.S., 1985*)

Shirley Clarke's first feature length film since Portrait of Jason is subtitled "A Musical Journey." It is a portrait of jazz innovator Ornette Coleman. While it includes footage dating from 1968 up to 1983, of Ornette performing in Morocco and Nigeria, at Berkeley's Hearst Stadium ("Sun Suite of San Francisco") and in his hometown, Fort Worth, Texas, on

Coleman Day ("Skies of America"), it is not a traditional biography of a musician. Rather Coleman's ideas on music, artistic creation and life are kaleidoscoped with a fanciful evocation of the times in which he lived, from the depression era to the space age. Leaping, as one reviewer put it, "randomly through time and space," from Coleman in conversation with his son, to comments from Buckminster Fuller, Viva, and William Burroughs to a recreation of his childhood with Gene Tatum playing young Coleman, and using 35mm, 16mm and video, Clarke fashions her culminating cross-disciplinary collaboration. Ultimately, the film is a portrait of the creative process of two legends. As this film is rarely revived, we will repeat it Thursday, October 29. .

Preceded by Skyscraper. By Clarke in collaboration with Willard Van Dyke, D.A. Pennebaker, Wheaton Galentine, Kevin Smith. Music by Teo Macero. Lyrics by John White. (1959, 20 mins, B&W/Color, 16mm, Print from MOMA): "Skyscraper [is] a musical comedy about the building of a skyscraper."--S.C.

Photographed by Ed Lachman. (90 mins, Color, 16mm, Print from Caravan of Dreams Productions)

Thursday Oct. 29
late show]

The Cool Works of Shirley Clarke
Ornette: Made in America

Please see note Tuesday, October 27. Preceded by Bridges-Go-Round.
Version #1: Sound by Louis and Bebe Barron. Version #2: Sound by Ted
Macero (1958, 8 mins, Color, 16mm, Print from PFA Collection): "[The
film] looks at bridges as they effect you when you cross them, which gives
them movement and design like flying in space. The film is both beautiful
and scary. . ."--S.C.