
THE BOX

February 1–28, 2017

Christopher Harris

Reckless Eyeballing (2004)



Christopher Harris, *Reckless Eyeballing*, courtesy of the artist.

Reckless Eyeballing

One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at...The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality."

—bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators"

Taking its title from the Jim Crow-era practice of making it a criminal offense for black men to look at white women, *Reckless Eyeballing* examines the structure of looking—in particular through the dynamic that exists between the spectator and the object of his or her attention and the ways in which both racism and misogyny feed into that structure. Rooted in the evolving theories of "the gaze" in cinematic history (from Laura Mulvey to bell hooks), experimental filmmaker Christopher Harris delves back into both film and black history to deconstruct representations of race and gender in the media. Using found footage including images of Blaxploitation film icon Pam Grier (*Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, *Friday Foster*), civil rights activist Angela Davis, and excerpts from D. W. Griffith's notoriously racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, Harris's piece reimagines the power dynamics that exist among genders and races in visual culture.

Harris treats his images using optical printing techniques to foreground the images' texture and tactility. He then deconstructs and reassembles the found footage through precise cropping and editing. Images of the female powerhouse Pam Grier are intercut with the famous sequence from *The Birth of a Nation* in which a black soldier Gus (played by a white actor in blackface) pursues a young white woman who fearfully jumps off a cliff to avoid his lusty intentions. In Harris's remix, Gus's advances are met with Grier's strong female gaze. The woman is no longer the subject of the male gaze to be objectified, fetishized, and hypersexualized. She is given agency through Harris's editing and, with each exchange of looks, the tables are turned and the power dynamic shifts. Grier is no longer the object of desire—she perhaps is a desirous being herself, capable of wielding social, political, and sexual power.

The original material is rendered in a starkly contrasting palette of black and white that Harris inverts repeatedly throughout the piece, playing with ideas of positive and negative space and suggesting absence and presence in the images themselves. Our perception of color-based identity is blurred—black turns white turns black again. Using this combination of media critique and formal contrasts, Harris's film upends the gaze across both gender and racial lines—making a powerful statement that may be more relevant than ever.

Christopher Harris has screened his films at festivals, museums, and theaters internationally, including the 2014 Artists' Film Biennial at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2005, 2008, 2010), the Viennale–Vienna International Film Festival, the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Leeds International Film Festival (2007, 2009), the San Francisco Cinematheque, and the Rencontres Internationales Paris, among many others. He was awarded a 2015 Creative Capital award in support of his upcoming film *Speaking in Tongues*. The essay "Cosmologies of Black Cultural Production: A Conversation with Afro-Surrealist Filmmaker Christopher Harris" was published in the Summer 2016 issue of *Film Quarterly*. Harris is currently associate professor in the School of Visual Arts and Design at the University of Central Florida, Orlando.

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Reckless Eyeballing, 2004

14 mins., 16mm film transferred to video

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