

Effecting Repair: A Canyon Cinema Report on the “Rediscovery” of Toney W. Merritt

The Bay Area–based independent filmmaker Toney W. Merritt has been creating work for over fifty years. His unique corpus of personal films and videos draws upon and subverts numerous experimental, narrative, and documentary strategies and techniques. Like the work of acclaimed African American visual artist David Hammons, who rose to prominence in Los Angeles and New York in the 1970s and 1980s, Merritt’s work shares some of the same allegorical and self-referential aspects and obscure humor and is distinguished by an unusual combination of playfulness, opacity, and formal concision. As a graduate student at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) in the late 1970s, Merritt was part of a thriving subculture of personal cinema and radical individualism. Like many of his teachers and peers of the time, such as James Broughton, Mike Henderson, George Kuchar, Robert Nelson, Dean Snider, Babeth M. VanLoo, Marian Wallace, and Al Wong, Merritt made art firmly rooted in a San Franciscan bohemian tradition and style.¹ Iconoclastic, performative, and disarmingly funny, Merritt’s films belong to a broader repudiation of the aesthetic seriousness that dominated experimental cinema culture in the 1970s.

1 See Steve Anker, “Radicalizing Vision: Film and Video in the Schools,” in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*, ed. Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 152–163.

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This repudiation of aesthetic seriousness and cultural gatekeeping is further borne out in Merritt's involvement with the No Nothing Cinema group, which posed a challenge to the institutional hierarchies and professionalization of the Bay Area's avant-garde film establishment by advocating for more inclusive, transparent, and democratic programming. However, despite being an active, long-term presence in the San Francisco Bay Area film community, Merritt remains an underappreciated contributor to the postwar American avant-garde film movement and alternative media culture. He has been left out of most of the significant histories of regional, national, and international experimental media. Scott MacDonald's *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* and *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000* barely mention him.² How to account for Merritt's absence from the American avant-garde canon?

I assert that Merritt's recent reemergence after decades of neglect is emblematic of the current curatorial infatuation with "overlooked" and "forgotten" artists—artists who, for reasons of race, sexuality, gender identity, class position, or geography, were marginalized or ignored for the majority (if not the entirety) of their careers. In a recent discussion about the French West Indian filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, *Another Gaze* founding editor Daniella Shreir points out that "[t]he idea of 'rediscovery' in [Maldoror's] case basically signifies her long overdue discovery by white curators and programmers . . . the vocabulary around this sort of curation evokes the idea of an archaeological dig. It's a kind of fetishism of the unfindable, of the 'forgotten.' But forgotten by whom?"³ Set against 2020's sweeping protests of racist state violence, Shreir's analysis of "rediscovery" discourse provides an urgent call-to-action for institutions that have historically operated in the interests of white artists and audiences.

The organization I work for, and of which Merritt has been a decades-long member, is one such example. Founded by the filmmaker Bruce Baillie in Canyon, California, in 1961, Canyon Cinema began as an alternative exhibition venture created by and for friends. Baillie's backyard microcinema emerged in response to the top-down, centralized American media monoculture of the 1950s. Established amid a hot-bed of countercultural activity and revolutionary politics, and in a spirit of do-it-yourself, community-based organizing, Canyon Cinema began as a forum to share locally made films (and other small-gauge fare) in a neighborhood environment. Intimacy, flexibility, and a rejection of formality and normality were its defining principles. The series quickly became semi-nomadic, hopping across a heterodox assortment of Bay Area locations, from an anarchist restaurant in Berkeley, to the Oakland Art Institute, to Chick Strand's backyard, drawing additional artists into its orbit as it went. In late 1966, this flourishing network of Bay Area independent filmmakers founded Canyon Cinema Co-op as a member-

2 Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*.

3 Quoted in Daniella Shreir, "Transforming Limitation," interview by Caitlin Quinlan, *MAP Magazine* 61 (April 2021), <https://mapmagazine.co.uk/transforming-limitation>.

owned and -operated distribution company and film service organization.⁴ A year later, its exhibition practices were rebranded as Canyon Cinematheque, which in time split off to become the San Francisco Cinematheque. In 2012, Canyon's members voted to become a nonprofit, the Canyon Cinema Foundation.

After more than fifty years, Canyon Cinema remains committed to reimagining what it means to be a reliable distributor of artist-made films. With a special emphasis on American West Coast and Bay Area experimental cinema, the collection now includes nearly 3,500 unique titles, representing approximately three hundred artists. The technological shifts brought about during the digital era, however, have necessitated broadening that scope to better represent today's expanded, multi-platform moving image culture. For most of its existence, Canyon Cinema was almost exclusively a purveyor of works finished on 16mm film. As a consequence of this commitment, Canyon has, however unintentionally, helped to perpetuate the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of the format wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

Debates around medium-specificity shaped the demographics of Canyon's collection. Due to a confluence of economic, social, and cultural factors, video was, from its beginnings, inherently more accessible, economical, and user-friendly than film. The prevalence of white male artists working in 16mm is in part a result of these conditions. Arguments about whether Canyon should distribute works finished on video—an issue that rived the organization for decades—seem as much about maintaining barriers to entry and exclusivity as about the potential complications of managing an inclusive, multi-format collection.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential threat to Canyon Cinema as a distributor of (primarily) niche, (primarily) physical media objects. In her June 2020 article "Artists' Film and Video Online," Erika Balsom summarized the shifting conditions of distribution early in the pandemic: "With cinemas and art spaces around the world suddenly subject to indefinite closure, film festivals have rushed to organize virtual editions, while institutions and commercial galleries have anxiously maintained their visibility by initiating online programs, often presenting changing selections on a time-limited basis." Balsom notes that this new super-abundance of streaming media had both benefits and drawbacks for film enthusiasts constrained to online viewing. The increased accessibility of formerly difficult-to-see work and the comforts of domestic spectatorship are offset by the psychic strain of overabundant choice and the diminished social and affective conditions of at-home screenings. "The positives of this new regime, in theory and practice, are clear. So why does it stress me out?" Balsom asks. "The seemingly endless barrage of links induces a feeling of glut, certainly. But beyond my sense that there are too many great films and too little time, significant issues of presentation exist."⁶

4 The co-op was formally incorporated in 1967. See MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema*.

5 Former Canyon Cinema director Dominic Angerame describes the debates about whether Canyon should distribute video in MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema*, 413–419.

6 Erika Balsom, "Artists' Film and Video Online," *Art-Agenda*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.art-agenda.com/criticism/334094/artists-film-and-video-online>.

For Canyon, the streaming paradigm—in concert with the turn to online instruction due to the pandemic, the educational marketplace’s growing preference for short-term digital site licenses over physical media purchases, and mutating customer demands and expectations—has provided an occasion for introspection and evolution in recent years. Consumer demand drove Canyon’s collection development strategy during the pandemic. Customer inquiries catalyzed Canyon’s sponsorship of a new 2K digitization of Christopher Harris’s *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004), for instance. In addition, collection development has been guided by an organizational commitment to making Canyon’s distribution program more inclusive and more representative of contemporary media practices, including moving image work produced in digital and hybrid formats, and for gallery and other nontheatrical forms of presentation, while allocating more resources (such as support for the digitization of film prints) to filmmakers historically underserved by Canyon and experimental media distribution more broadly.

Take, for example, Toney Merritt, whose films are greatly in need of restoration. Over the course of his career, Merritt deposited twenty-three 16mm films and eleven video works with Canyon for distribution and exhibition. His consistent and consistently adventurous artistic output has been recognized with screenings at esteemed venues, including La Cinémathèque française, London Film-Makers’ Co-operative, Anthology Film Archives, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pacific Film Archive, and the Ann Arbor Film Festival. But in recent decades, few such screenings of Merritt’s have occurred. The fact that many of his films are very short (typically one to four minutes) make them easy to underestimate. Utilizing a reflexive comedic sensibility more common among video artists of the era, films such as *EF* (1979), *Asiam* (1982), and *Lonesome Cowboy* (1979) elaborate a recurring character (played by the artist); Merritt’s tongue-in-cheek, thirty-second *Revolution* (1982) subverts the romanticized iconography of the Black political radical by way of an unexpected pirouette as a pun on “revolution.” As Merritt admits, “These films contain a measure of angst, irony and humor. Without the latter, it would all be bullshit.”⁷ In a field as self-serious as experimental film, Merritt’s jovial, self-deprecating nature may have impeded more critical engagement with his work, even though white male artists such as Bruce Nauman, William Wegman, John Wood and Paul Harrison, and Stuart Sherman and white male-dominated movements such as Fluxus have been widely celebrated for comparable works. Viewed through an art historical lens, Merritt’s work aligns with the well-documented traditions of performance art and minimalism in addition to experimental film.

Adding to the stakes of his relative critical neglect, Merritt’s studio and his entire personal archive of film materials were completely destroyed in 2020 by the Walbridge fire in Sonoma County, California. Merritt fortunately survived the fires and has described and documented the charred remains of his studio and the work that was lost when it burned (see Figure 1). After consulting with Merritt, Canyon staff determined that most of the distribution

7 “Toney W. Merritt,” [canyoncinema.com](https://canyoncinema.com/catalog/filmmaker/?i=217/), accessed April 10, 2022, <https://canyoncinema.com/catalog/filmmaker/?i=217/>.



Figure 1. The charred remains of Toney Merritt's studio and film materials following the 2020 Walbridge fire in Sonoma County, California. Courtesy of Toney Merritt.

prints in our collection are the only extant copies of most of his 16mm films, while the original film materials—including negative and reversal originals, preprint elements, and magnetic sound elements for all his 16mm work—have all been lost. Video transfer copies of twenty of Merritt's 16mm films do survive, but these transfers are markedly inferior to the actual film prints and can only serve as reference copies, unsuitable for exhibition.

Over the past year, the precarious nature of Merritt's body of work provided a focus for Canyon's approach to digitization and digital collection development. In collaboration with Harvard Film Archive, we initiated new high-definition scans of all twenty-three of Merritt's 16mm films in distribution at Canyon. For safety purposes, those now one-of-a-kind prints were subsequently withdrawn from circulation. The new accessibility of Merritt's work occasioned a retrospective program at Philadelphia's Lightbox Film Center in October 2021. Additional screenings of some of Merritt's digitized films have taken place at University of Chicago's Film Studies Center, the Museum of Modern Art, and Media City Film Festival's THOUSANDSUNS CINEMA program online. Meanwhile, a 2021 National Film Preservation Foundation grant is funding new distribution prints of ten of Merritt's films. These new prints will allow Canyon to bring Merritt's work to new audiences, both in the Bay Area and more broadly. As a result of the grant, a touring program of Merritt's films will be offered to festivals and cinemathèques that showcase historic and contemporary artists' films.

The current fetishization of “lostness,” “discovery,” and “firstness” has obscured the inequities that enable such curatorial frameworks in the first place. In the case of Canyon Cinema, I believe many of its lesser-known artist members would be better appreciated today if more internal consideration was given to the power dynamics that determine opportunities. For decades, Canyon Cinema Co-op followed a policy of “neutrality” when it came to promoting members’ films. This policy disadvantaged filmmakers who were not already familiar to programmers while benefiting established artists such as Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage, and Baillie. Toney Merritt’s films provide an instructive example: their precarity exposes what “lostness” means in a material sense. By recognizing and taking steps to address the organization’s implicit biases and allocating resources toward underserved and under-represented artists, Canyon Cinema can begin to effect repair for past and ongoing structural imbalances. However, a more equitable distribution of resources must also be accompanied by framing practices and hermeneutics that resist the rediscovery trope. Further reparative work is necessary to ensure that artists historically overlooked by those in power are not reduced to fetish objects under the guise of diversity.

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