

This house

A film by Miryam Charles



THIS HOUSE

A film by **Miryam Charles**
Production **Embuscade Films**
Canada 2022

Running time **75 minutes**
Shooting format **16mm/Super 16mm/4:3**
Screening format **DCP/Digital/5.1**

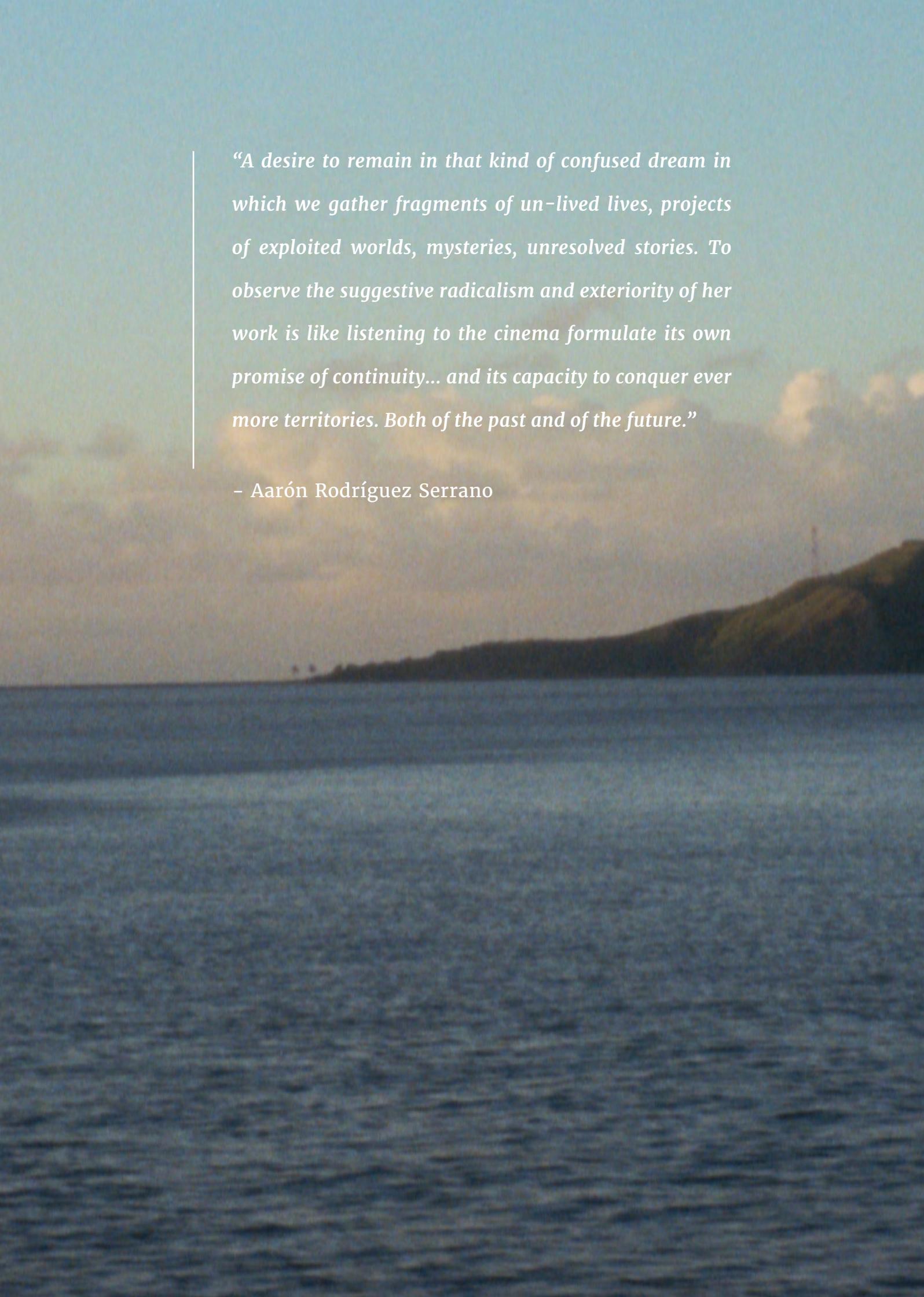
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“A desire to remain in that kind of confused dream in which we gather fragments of un-lived lives, projects of exploited worlds, mysteries, unresolved stories. To observe the suggestive radicalism and exteriority of her work is like listening to the cinema formulate its own promise of continuity... and its capacity to conquer ever more territories. Both of the past and of the future.”

- Aarón Rodríguez Serrano



SYNOPSIS

Bridgeport, 2008. A teenage girl is found dead in her room. While everything points to suicide, the autopsy report reveals something else. Ten years later, the director and cousin of the teenager examines the past causes and future consequences of this unsolved crime. Like an imagined biography, the film explores the relationship between the security of the living space and the violence that can jeopardize it.

A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

I am a child of Haiti. In a way, I refuse reality and try to understand it through art. Knowing that I won't be able to do it completely. I tell stories, constant wanderings without precise paths or destinations. I dream of coming home. So I travel endlessly in my head, in my heart, on the page, then onto the screen. Just like the beings who inhabit my works, I ask myself what I am doing here. How to exist through a history that has long sought to erase me. In this history of cinema, I am a black woman of Haitian origin who creates atypical works. I dream of returning home. While knowing that my home no longer exists. This desire for the impossible and the melancholy that accompanies it inhabit my films. I am a daughter of Haiti. It is the beginning of everything. The beginning of every creative endeavour. Then begins the voyage.



INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

This House opens with the words of a heavy, exhausted, nostalgic heart, which dreams of being caught up by the sea, brought back to Haiti, “because it is necessary to return”. And yet you immediately resume, then warn us with this determined proposal, that of “an announcement of things to come” by a “fluid journey in time and space”. One feels from the introduction two opposite forces, one turned towards the past, the history, their pain, and the other towards the perspective of a field of possibilities which would be to come, with its promises. And yet these two forces are complementary, at least because they have in common that they cannot stand the present. Which part did you write first? Or rather, is it a film that you wrote in the past, present or future tense?

As soon as I understood what death, loss and mourning could imply, I sought to deflect them. In my childish mind, where everything was possible, I saw myself confronted with finality. Terrified of dying before those I loved. At night, I would make rounds to make sure my parents, sisters and brother were still breathing. This may explain why I like filming the process of sleeping so much. This idea of eluding death and even time has remained with me. It lives in each of my films. I fiddle with time where the present, the past and the future, question each other, converse, oppose each other in order to unite. Always with the objective of unity. To unify the multiple threads of time.

Originally I wanted to pay tribute to my cousin who died more than ten years ago and to the resilience of her mother who continues to live on with such grace. With this film, I wanted to express a wound over time. Past, present and future. I understand that it will never fade but I also understand that I cannot stay in front of the wall. I have to move forward. It may be a bit naive to think like that, but it is with love that I move forward. Despite the pain of such a tragic death, love exists. It existed before and will exist long after us. If one refers to opposing forces, I would say that I oppose everything against love and then I let it exist in time. I don't have a definitive answer as to the outcome. A better, brighter future? I think we need to find brightness at all times.

And finally to answer the second part of the question : I make errant films. I wander in my head, in my heart, through a family history, the history of several countries, without knowing which way to go. When I started writing this film, I wanted it to end in Haiti and it didn't. I got a little lost in the process. I got a little lost along the way. But I am at peace with it.

Was Shelby Jean-Baptiste's portrayal of the murdered teenager, at an age she never knew, a way of stepping aside from the mimetic violence of representation? To try to transform her tragic memory through the poetry of an impossible story?

I think that at the beginning, it was a way to protect myself from the tragic dimension of a life broken too early. A part of me refused that reality. For me it was impossible to grasp. The character of Tessa repeats it often throughout the film; Everything is possible here. So I imagined an adult body, an improbable reunion between a mother and a daughter through different eras. Just for a moment. A moment of cinema. It's strange to say, but It's still difficult to imagine that this film could exist. For a long time, I denied the reality of this death. I don't know if it's a common thing, but when I learn of the death of someone I love, my first instinct is to refuse it. I refuse. In those few seconds when I both deny and realize the reality of it, I plead. I tell myself that in this short moment, if I refuse this reality and plead at the same time, my wish will be granted. Not to cancel death, but to take the place of the loved one who is no more. I remember pleading to take the place of my cousin.

Years later, I find myself making a film to pay tribute to her and hoping for the time of a film, softer moments in her adult body that never existed. By using this process, I protect myself and I feel I am protecting her at the same time. The fictional device also goes in the same way. Why tell this story using fiction? I staged memories, a hope of reuniting a mother and her child. Everything is possible during the film. Everything is built and deconstructed at the same time. What we can see on the screen is probably something that I have internalized over time. A way of understanding the world, the events of one's life. Stories have to be deconstructed. Even our own.

What is this island which returns punctually, and which ends up superimposed in transparency on the corpse?

It is a small point on the island of Dominica. It is an island in the Caribbean often confused with the Dominican Republic (perhaps because of the name). There is probably a double meaning to the opening narration of the film when I mention that my heart is heavy and that I need to go back to Haiti. This is the characters' quest, this return home, but it was also mine with this film. A quest that failed. I could not go to Haiti for the shooting for various reasons (pandemic, political instabilities). So I left with the executive producer, 16mm film and a Bolex camera to the islands. We wandered around for a few weeks with a few places in mind, but nothing too specific. I was looking for my home country through other places, other images. I'm not sure that a North American audience can automatically tell the difference, but I know that Haitians won't recognize their country. I think this adds to the melancholy of the landscapes and the sense of disorientation of the two characters with their map of the country. They do not recognize anything. The country is no longer the same as they remember it. The impression of being lost in one's own country was already in the original version of the script. The repetition of this island, that of another island, is a reminder to myself. I am calling out to myself with hope. I wanted so much to shoot my first feature film in the land of my ancestors. I will have to go back.

Tessa says that "Time will not exist for us, because I know the end". While we understand that she learns to exist in spite of this counted time, as in a memory inscribed outside of her tragic end, we notice that the interior rooms, the scenes of this intimate and familial house, also seem to exist outside of time. The house was first used to shelter from the bad weather, but does it also serve to cover itself from the passing time?

Indeed, the house has multiple uses throughout the film. The place where the tragedy took place, a refuge where we gather or an enchanted place where everyday scenes are mixed with moments of sadness. I think I can come back to the question of eluding time. And also to the way I conceive my films. I think about the story I'm going to tell and I always start with the end. It can be something very concrete or just an intention. For *This House*, I was thinking of something brighter that would remain. A celebration of life and the love of a mother for her daughter and vice versa. Like Tessa, I know the ending as a screenwriter. I allow myself to play with the temporality of the ending (to stretch it a bit). If we think of the end of our earthly history, it does not necessarily end with our death. Death is not the end of our time. This is what I dare to hope and that I try to translate through this film.

In contrast to these interiors where the era is frozen in the sets, the shots shot outdoors, in the United States as well as in the Caribbean, trade this muffled, controlled plasticity for a different return to the power of nature, its waves, its winds, its crushing sky. In the Haitian images, we see ruined houses, rubble that immediately evokes the earthquakes of 2010, as a way to move from individual drama to collective disaster. There is certainly no possible equivalence between these two catastrophes, but how do you see their interaction, both in the mourning of an individual and in that of a nation?

The ruined houses in the film, for the most part, were destroyed by Hurricane Maria that hit the island of Dominica in 2017. I knew that when I went to Dominica, I would find homes resembling those destroyed by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. I think one of the only times I purposely pressed the parallel between personal disaster and that of the Haitian nation is during the moment when the young girl sings the wake-up song to her mother who is asleep. She sings: we must get up, we must get up and then we see a map of the country. We see the mother sleeping more than once and when she is awake, she tries to hold on to an impossible dream. The wake-up song is the song my mother used to sing to us every morning. She would come into our room and gently wake us up with a song. I pay homage to her in the film and I also pay homage to the Haitians who stand up for change.

In what way has the choice of 16mm allowed you to better sew together the different territorial and temporal dimensions of your film?

The choice of 16mm was an obvious one. I wrote the film with the idea of shooting it in 16mm and fortunately the producers agreed. I can't really imagine if the transitions between the different dimensions would have been less fluid in digital. I don't think it would have made much difference in terms of cohesion. On the other hand, the visual quality of 16mm is somewhat tied to the archive or to something from the past. I felt it was important for a film that is intimately tied to memory and recollection to be attached to imagery that recalls the past. Still, there is something interesting in the variation of the smoother images shot in 16mm studio and indoors (by cinematographer Isabelle Stachtchenko) and the images I shot in the Caribbean in 16mm with a different type of camera. The result is images that are a little more unpolished. I think that deep down, the priority in stitching together this seemingly disparate material was the sound. Sound is an important part of my filmmaking process and I knew without having shot a single frame that I would be able to build a coherent story with the sound, real or invented environments and with the voices. With that in hand, I knew that the rest would follow. In addition, I was fortunate to work with an excellent editor Xi

Feng. She allowed me to tell the story I was a little afraid to tell. In a way, working with her prevented me from running away from the pain of this tragedy.

I don't remember seeing a Quebec film showing the referendum on Quebec independence from the point of view of the "No" camp. Do you have any apprehensions about the local reception of this scene? How do you perceive your protagonist's relationship to Quebec nationalism?

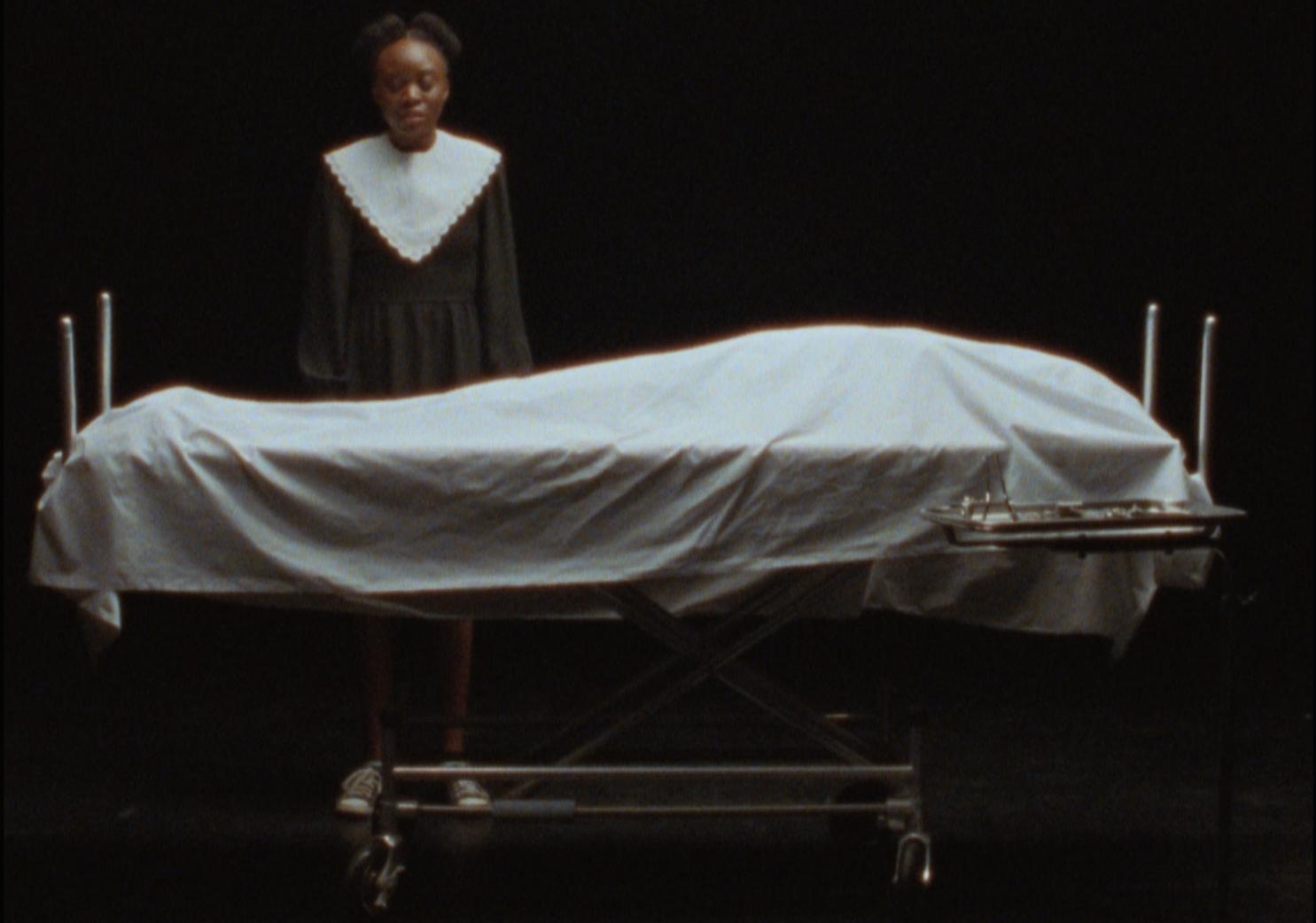
I don't remember a film from the point of view of the No camp either. At the same time, I haven't seen all the Quebec films that deal with the 1995 referendum. I don't really have any apprehension about the reception of the people in Quebec. It's not a question of taking sides. I tell a moment of my family history and the perception that one could have as a person of another origin in the 90s in Quebec. This is only one point of view and it is probably not the one of the whole Haitian community at that time. I am the daughter of immigrants who came to Quebec in the mid-1970s. Like many of my family who came to live here, they came with little knowledge of Canadian and Quebec political history. In their minds, Canada was the land of opportunity. They were grateful. At the time, the discourse towards immigrants was not always in a position of openness and welcome. For many immigrants, independence was a sign that Quebec would become a hostile land for them (rightfully or wrongfully). We must remember that there was a lot of false information circulated on this subject to scare people and perhaps push them to vote for the refusal of independence. Let's say that some speeches on the night of the defeat of the Yes only accentuated the feeling of not being welcome. I wanted to show this sense of victory of a Haitian family who on that famous night of 1995 were relieved to be able to stay home. It was also a very naive perspective at the time I was a child and my cousin was a baby. It was a choice between leaving Quebec or staying. There is a bittersweet feeling in the adult I have become. That night we were celebrating Canada, without really understanding its history and how this country was built. When I refer to this welcoming home that is Canada, I also ask : built on who, on what?

While Tessa confides that she is caught "wandering from place to place" in the manner of diffuse particles, her mother Valeska promises later that they will both settle down, that they will sing, that they will dance the "refusal to be foreign for generations to come. *This House* seems to me to be about the vital need to put down roots on the one hand, and on the other hand about the exclusion, the uprooting, the immense trauma implied by the kind of violence that will have cost the adolescent her life. Yet, at the very end, mother and daughter are reunited and dine around an impressive Haitian table, as if set up in one of the island's abandoned houses. To what extent is this dream of a meal utopian? Do you see it as the image of a secret garden, carved out of memory - like an epilogue - or as a sign of a resurgence, of a promise to come?

I constantly oppose themes, feelings, places and times. I use contradictions to better find myself, or to find a path. Or to find a balance between tragedy, the immense violence of death and the love that surpasses everything. I also think that one should not see the film in a linear way. For me the end is not really the end and could be the beginning. The film ends in this way to pay tribute to Haiti (with the feast), but also to announce a new beginning. In my mind, the film does not end. It is only the beginning. I often say that I am going in circles and I realize that this is quite visible with this film. I don't bring any other answer than that only love can save us. Nothing else is important.



| *“Hope sustains life, even
beyond death.”*



A woman is seated at a dining table in a dimly lit room. She is looking towards the right side of the frame with a thoughtful expression. The table is set with a white tablecloth, plates of food, glasses, and a vase of flowers. A chandelier is visible in the upper right corner, and a candle holder with two lit candles is on the table to the right. The overall atmosphere is quiet and reflective.

“I ask myself what I am doing here. And I remember that it’s so I won’t be forgotten.”

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a white, off-the-shoulder dress, is seated at a dining table. Her hands are clasped together in a prayerful or contemplative gesture. The table is set with a white tablecloth, a lit candle, a glass of amber liquid, and various dishes. The scene is dimly lit, with a chandelier visible in the upper left corner. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

*“My heart is heavy. I can’t
carry it anymore.”*

Director's Biography

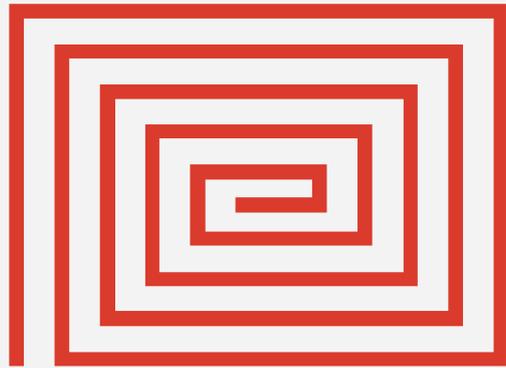


MIRYAM CHARLES

From Haitian descent, Miryam Charles is a director, producer and cinematographer living in Montreal. She has produced several short and feature films. She is also the director of several short films. Her films have been presented in various festivals in Quebec and internationally. She has just completed the direction of her first feature film *This House*. Her work explores themes related to exile and the legacies of colonization.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2023 **THE MARABOUT** - feature film (in development)
 JOU VA JOU VIEN - feature film (in development)
- 2022 **THIS HOUSE** - feature film
 AT DAWN - short film
- 2021 **SONG FOR THE NEW WORLD** - short film
- 2019 **SECOND GENERATION** - short film
 THE RED ALBUM OR A POETIC INSTINCT - short film
- 2018 **A FORTRESS** - short film
 THREE ATLAS (DREI ATLAS) - short film
- 2017 **MOSAIC** - feature film collaboration sci-fic/experimentation
- 2016 **TO THE COLONIES** - short film
- 2015 **FLY, FLY SADNESS** - short film



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EMBUSCADE FILMS

Embuscade films is dedicated to the making of distinctive films : animated films, creative documentaries and atypical fictions. Founded by Nicolas and Félix Dufour-Laperrière in 2013, the company favors singular aesthetics and puts its resourcefulness and independence of spirit at the service of strong auteur visions. We see cinema as art, meaning as a refuge and risk-taking as essential.



C R E W

CAST

Schelby Jean-Baptiste
Florence Blan Mbaye
Eve Duranceau
Matthew Rankin
Yardly Kavanagh
Mireille Métellus
Nadine Jean
Tracy Marcelin

DIRECTOR / SCREENPLAY

Miryam Charles

PRODUCTION

Félix Dufour-Laperrière

LINE PRODUCER

Nellie Carrier

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Isabelle Stachtchenko
Miryam Charles

PRODUCTION DESIGN

Georges Michael Fanfan
Annick Marion

EDITING

Xi Feng

SOUND

Gordon Neil Allen
Olivier Calvert

MUSIC

Romain Camiolo