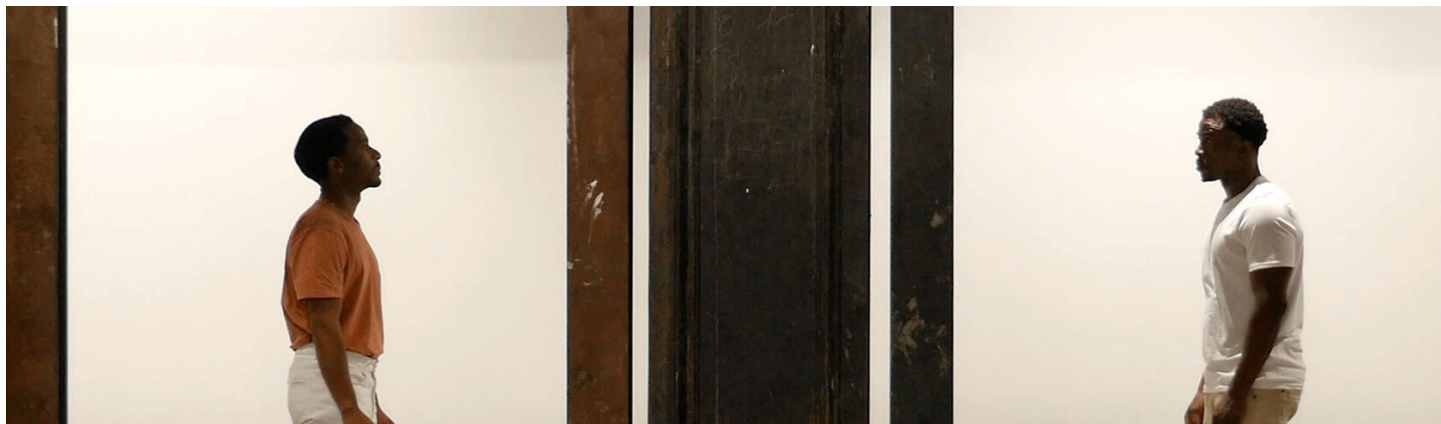


FRIEZE

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Bill Gunn's *'Black Picture Show'* Explores Sacrifices of Success



Bill Gunn's third play, *Black Picture Show*, was first performed in early 1975 – a time when Hollywood's backlots churned out Blaxploitation flicks while the American New Wave's hip, younger, white male directors had it all: attention, respect and *control*. Gunn got his start as an actor, though his roles were circumscribed by the poverty of white imagination. When he ventured into playwrighting and filmmaking, his work was lambasted or altogether ignored by the critical establishment. Upon its premiere, *Black Picture Show* was called 'self-pity[ing]' by *Newsweek* and an 'abhorrent' display of 'reverse racism' by *Time* magazine.



Awoye Timpo, *Black Picture Show*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: Artists Space

Gunn was the second Black filmmaker after Gordon Parks to be courted by the studio system, writing the screenplays for films like Hal Ashby's *The Landlord* and Ján Kadár's *The Angel Levine* (both 1970). Despite the allure of studio support and popular recognition, Gunn remained committed to writing and making art on his own terms – which is to say, terms that were unpalatable to white audiences who could not fathom complex Black characters, much less the idea of a Black art-house film. His directorial debut, *Stop* (1970), was shelved by

Warner Brothers – its frank depiction of gay, interracial sexuality deemed too much, no matter the accolades heaped on X-rated titles like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). In 1973, Gunn’s erotic vampire feature, *Ganja & Hess*, was the only American film included in the Critic’s Week section at that year’s Cannes Film Festival, yet US critics never took it seriously. ‘I want to say that it is a terrible thing to be a Black artist in this country – for reasons too private to expose to the arrogance of white criticism,’ wrote Gunn in a 1973 letter to *The New York Times*.

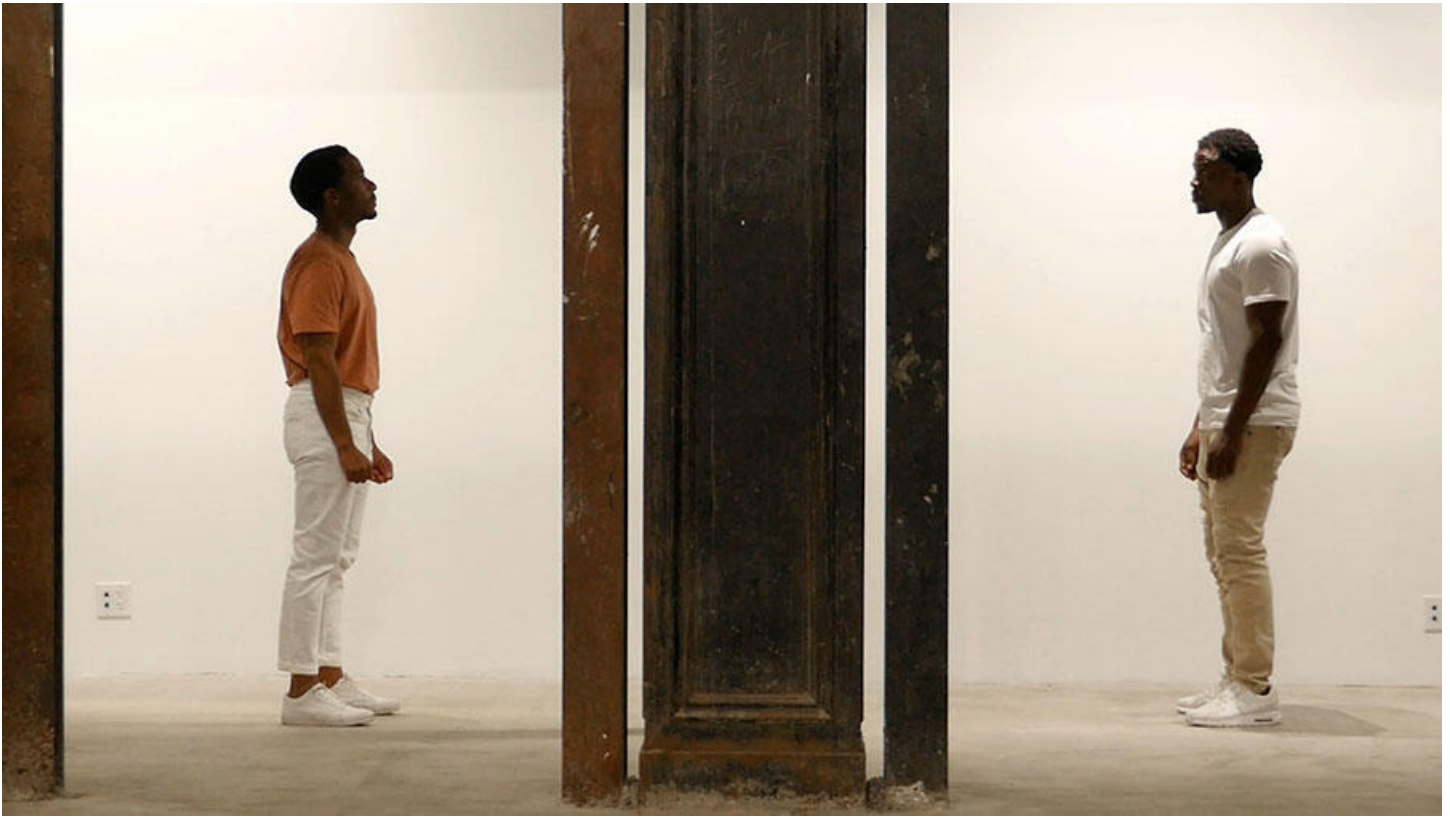


Awoye Timpo, *Black Picture Show*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: Artists Space

Then came *Black Picture Show*, a play about a Black man who literally goes insane from working in an industry that sees him strictly as a commodity. The story – told in unsettling, elliptical fragments – unfolds thus: Alexander, a once-respected poet and playwright ultimately relegated to a Bronx mental ward, is remembered by his son, J.D., a sell-out Hollywood filmmaker. J.D.’s ‘counter-revolutionary’ disregard for artistic integrity – he has no qualms about kowtowing to the establishment as long as he gets paid – reads like a prelude to the symbolically castrated, world-weary Black artist that his father embodies. Alexander once peddled his words for cash, but it brought him only trauma, regret and derangement. Scattered throughout the play are scenes from Alexander’s life – his destructive relationship with his alcoholic wife, his many humiliations at the hands of white employers – while his unfixed and spectral presence, accentuated by frequent temporal ruptures, suggests he may already be dead. The play’s conundrum is echoed in a line from *Ganja & Hess*: ‘To be adored on this planet is to be a symbol of success. And you must not succeed on any terms because life is endless.’ Indeed, success for Gunn requires a disavowal of the self.

To coincide with the exhibition ‘Till They Listen: Bill Gunn Directs America’ at Artists Space in New York, Metrograph cinema is screening a filmed version of Gunn’s theatrical work directed by Awoye Timpo, the creator of CLASSIX, a group dedicated to re-engaging with the history of Black theatre. Under Timpo’s direction, *Black Picture Show* comes alive as a staged reading, with actors André Holland and Jason Bowen in the roles of J.D. and Alexander.

With its minimalist decor and white-walled stage, Timpo’s interpretation is bare bones, while the camera’s unsettling fluidity and constant cutting exacerbate the play’s sense of temporal and physical displacement, toggling not just between the coalescing memories throughout the play, but between the different perspectives and physical arrangements of the cast. Holland and Bowen continuously and unpredictably reverse their roles, blurring the lines between the characters and artistic attitudes to demonstrate the double consciousness of the Black artist, forced to perpetually reconcile with an internalized vision of success that denies autonomy and identity.



Awoye Timpo, *Black Picture Show*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: Artists Space

While it's true that Gunn's career was often sidelined and stifled, his body of work – resistant as it is to interpretive closure and critical pigeonholing – contains in its frenzied forms and textures a simmering protest against the finality of art and death itself. He was not interested in neat messaging and stillborn images. Timpo's *Black Picture Show* embraces this ethos, presenting to us not a manicured final product, but a work abundant in rough edges and experimentation. Despite its unembellished framework, *Black Picture Show* is not stunted prior to its full realization; it's been harnessed in all its raw potential, gesturing at the possibilities, promiscuous in the staking out of space it needs to grow.