

HIGH STAKES

Yasmina Price on *Till They Listen: Bill Gunn Directs America*

"I WAS A VERY STRANGE CHILD. Everything had to be very beautiful." In a 1974 interview with *Impressions Magazine*, the multihyphenate maverick Bill Gunn traced his aesthetic sensibilities to his precocious early years. A quiet only child who grew up in Philadelphia mostly around adults and with parents who both had artistic backgrounds, Gunn was fascinated by storytelling and uninterested in still photography and sought a physiognomic proximity that the theater could not deliver. The cinema, a space of collective solitude and close-ups, was an ideal fit. He called it his babysitter.

Gunn, who died in 1989 at age fifty-four, is currently the subject of a solo exhibition at New York's Artists Space open until August 15. The show was a collaborative effort by the venue and Hilton Als and Jake Perlin, with the participation of Sam Waymon, Nicholas Forster, Awoye Timpo, Chiz Schultz, and Ishmael Reed. Interest in Gunn has risen steadily in recent years thanks to the ongoing caretaking of archivists and programmers such as Pearl Bowser and Michelle Materre along with the organizers. Yet the cultish mystique of his long underscreened films and unrealized projects endures, lending a shrinelike aura to the exhibition, a rich self-referential tapestry of Gunn's art and life. The assembly of objects—scraps of notes, video clips, set photographs, leaflets, ephemera of various media—are relics of his cumulative process of world-building, revealing the architecture of Gunn's vibrant personal sphere.



Bill Gunn on the set of *Ganja & Hess*, 1972. Photo: Chuck Stewart.

Gunn's truncated filmography, comprising just three works made over the course of a decade, belongs to an imagination both keenly focused and irreverently elastic. *Stop* (1970), *Ganja & Hess* (1973), and *Personal Problems* (1980) concern, respectively, swingers in Puerto Rico, vampires in upstate New York, and an experimental soap opera in Harlem. Contending with questions of race and class, these films were also explorations of the limitations of assimilationist politics and integrationist aspirations for Black people. *Ganja & Hess*, his best-known film, exemplifies the range of Gunn's subversive aesthetic. In his hands, bloodlust becomes a metaphor for many forms of addiction; the movie is, among other things, a manifesto on the roles of Black artists and a spiritual sociological study. The limpid erotics and careful poetry of the images he created with cinematographer James E. Hinton established Gunn's credentials as an avant-garde filmmaker driven toward Black cultural autonomy. Glimpses of a dreamed mythical past flit past alongside scenes in an ecstatic Black church, conjuring

Gunn—against prevailing norms and brash stereotypes—created an intimate, multidimensional visual register for Black sexuality. (This formal triumph also came before being able to light Black actors became a recurring, if uninspired, standard for photographic praise.) In one scene, the couple unhurriedly caress each other on a mattress Hess keeps in his attic, half-clothed in jeans on the white sheet (the Calvin Klein-ad look before there was such a thing). The camera circles them patiently, focusing on their intertwined arms and Clark's elegant, beringed fingers. Later, having been transformed into a vampire, Ganja has a tryst with a dinner guest, and the lens, very lightly blurred, pans slowly over skin dusted with gold. When the young man becomes her meal, his blood-covered body appears encrusted in red gems.

Rather than marshal film toward pedagogic or moralizing ends, Gunn was drawn to its potential to execute exacting aesthetic visions: "I could create my own world." Although he was a contemporary of the Black Arts Movement, he refused to be folded into any collective cohesions of political art. He cautioned against turning "artists into politicians" and opposed artistic overtures that aspired to racial redress. Gunn's work wasn't apolitical, but he was motivated above all by a determination to pursue his path as a Black artist without compromise, to make what he described as "a true poem about me." His was a steadfast and unsentimental personal commitment to authenticity—which meant being able to realize his images without bending to (white) industry demands.

The independence Gunn claimed was from Hollywood and conventional metrics of success, as well as from the critical establishment that served to legitimize them. In the exhibition, this is expressed in a blowup of a blistering article he published in 1973 in the *New York Times*, a dressing down of white critics who failed to engage with Black art beyond the parameters set by structural racism. In response to one reviewer who wondered where the "race problem" was in *Ganja & Hess*, he parried: "If he looks closely, he will find it in his own review."



Bill Gunn, *Ganja & Hess*, 1973, Super 16 mm transferred to 35 mm, color, sound, 112 minutes. Hess (Duane Jones).

Gunn evaded the white gaze by disregarding it, devaluing what devalued him and other Black artists. While he remained uninterested in the consolation prize of representation within the mainstream film industry, he did find ways to use that industry's financial resources. *Ganja & Hess* started out as a commission by Kelly-Jordan Enterprises for Gunn to make a formulaic Blaxploitation horror film. He spent its \$350,000 to create his arthouse masterpiece, which was then cut by forty minutes by the distributor and repackaged in more conventional form under the titles *Blood Couple* and, later, *Double Possession*. Before the early-aughts reemergence of the single surviving print at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and its subsequent restoration by the museum thanks to Bower, the director's cut had rarely been seen in its entirety. Series such as "Tell It Like It Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968-1986," programmed by Materre and Perlin at Lincoln Center in 2015, and regular runs in arthouse venues have carried out a corrective to the erasure that followed Gunn's refusal to sell out. His reputation also benefitted from the somewhat dubious response by cultural institutions to last summer's uprising for Black liberation, after

which they began to exhibit and circulate more Black art. The vampirism in Gunn's film gains new resonance when considering such institutional opportunism. As much as he disavowed pedagogic filmmaking, one lesson to be drawn from Gunn is that there is a partial workaround to the devil's bargain of commercial funding: He took the money and ran with his ideas—no matter the consequences.

As it had been with *Ganja & Hess*, his Trojan-horse tactic was again foiled when the release of his 1970 film, *Stop*, was suspended by Warner Bros. (which had green-lighted it) for the unmasked eroticism of its gay and interracial sex scenes. Toni Cade Bambara read *Stop* as "revers[ing] the colonial-oriented relationship of empire dramas," noting Gunn's decision to abandon the commissioned "modernized Tarzan plot" in favor of one in which "Puerto Rican independistas are foregrounded as the heroes of the texts they undermine." A copy of the script of *Stop* is included in one of Artists Space's vitrines, opened to a page with the final line "Activist Demonstrations in Streets," an apt curatorial choice that, with a light touch, evokes last summer's Black rebellion. Sentimental materialists may feel a frisson of haptic delight over the many appearances of Gunn's scrawl in pink and red marker in several of the displays. Typewritten director's notes from *Ganja & Hess* reiterate Gunn's consistent statements on whom his art was for, in this instance asserting plainly that the white audience could either "listen quietly or be gone."



View of *Till They Listen: Bill Gunn Directs America*, 2021, Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

There are four monitors in the show, unassuming squat TV boxes that have been installed without headphones so that the whole space hums softly with the murmur of their combined sound. One monitor shows a 1984 interview with film scholar Phyllis R. Klotman in which Gunn speaks with the mild exasperation of anyone hearkening back to their more naïve former selves: "I spent much of my young—younger—life, trying to convince people that I was real." He goes on to detail the "intellectual exhaustion" that comes from what he refers to—with characteristic biting humor—as the labor of convincing white people you won't eat or mug them.

The third screen plays clips from Gunn's moving final image work, *Personal Problems* (1980), a virtuosic rendering of Black sociality written by Ishmael Reed and promoted as a "meta soap opera." Set in 1970s Harlem and shot on grainy U-matic videotape with a stylized realism that slips between documentary naturalism and more experimental aesthetics, *Personal Problems* rejects the exhausted caricatures and frantically paced action narratives that had become the conventional vehicles for representing Black life onscreen. Instead, the film pieces

together a mosaic of small moments, dramatizing the fragility and endurance of social bonds at the patient tempo of ordinary existence. Probing intimacy, betrayal, mourning, and gossip with an ease that still feels fresh, *Personal Problems* did not receive a theatrical release until 2018.

While this is not the language he used, Gunn's preoccupation was with Black art in the frame of racial capitalism: contending with the demands of profit, marketability, and tokenization in a classed sphere governed by the interests of white supremacy. He indicted the white establishment but also pointed out that oppositional Black-run cultural production could not depend on support from the Black elite. His frustrations with trying to create within an irredeemable economic system were a recurring motif of his writing. In addition to his scripts and screenplays, the exhibition features copies of Gunn's two novels—*All the Rest Have Died* (1964), an autofiction about a young Black man in the theater industry, and *Rhinestone Sharecropping* (1981), a biting semiautobiographical satire about the horrors suffered by a Black director in Hollywood—as well as a bound copy of the play *Black Picture Show* (1975), whose protagonists are a playwright-filmmaker father and son facing the psychic cost of trying to maintain their dignity under grueling financial pressures. *Black Picture Show*, which was published by Reed, Cannon & Johnson, has a fascinating cover: a reproduction of Betye Saar's 1969 assemblage *Black Girl's Window*, whose shadowy central figure presses both hands against a window inset with personal and planetary iconography. While Saar was a part of the Black Arts Movement Gunn skirted, and I don't know that their paths ever crossed, the two certainly shared an attraction to the mystical and fantastical and the ways these registers could be channeled toward the formation of individual Black selves and collective mythologies.



Bill Gunn, *Personal Problems*, 1980, U-Matic video, color, sound, 164 minutes.

Gunn was provocative because he was interested in complex and irresolvable figurations of Blackness outside both the limits of white cinema and what was expected of Black film. He recognized that courting whiteness was a futile endeavor, and the luxurious kaleidoscope of his moving images does not aspire to prove Black people "equal" to whites. Rather, his method was one of mining uncertain psychic spaces, navigating rage, sensuality, tenderness, and madness with both force and delicacy. He was interested in ambivalent allegories, temporal disjuncture, and sophisticated enmeshments of the cerebral and carnal. What were uncrossable boundaries for other artists dissipate in the hazy, hypnotic textures of Gunn's cinema.

He disliked the rush of figuring out "the beginnings of a creative relationship in front of the camera," preferring the more patient process of building on the foundations he had with previous collaborators. One of Gunn's most enduring artistic partnerships was with the musician Sam Waymon, who played a number of his soundtrack compositions during one of the fantastic public programs that accompanied the

first month of Artists Space's show. Gunn also found an important colleague in Kathleen Collins, another key figure of Black independent filmmaking who was devoted to rendering multivalent Black lifeworlds. Before *Ganja & Hess*, Gunn had worked with Marlene Clark in *Stop*. "There was a lot of collaboration," recalled *Personal Problems* cameraman Robert Polidori during an interview with Reed. "Bill was not the kind of director who was bossy." Photographer Marshall Johnson makes a valuable contribution to the show with contact sheets of photos from Gunn's work as well as stunning production stills from Collins' *Losing Ground* (1982), in which Gunn stars alongside Seret Scott as an affable, adulterous painter. Two of Gunn's own paintings are on view. One is a sweet watercolor self-portrait of the artist as a young man, finely eyebrowed and pensive; the other shows a canvas impaled by two paintbrushes, clutched by a goblin who perches on a piano disintegrating into globules of blood.