

JACQUELINE ILIA ZERVOU 23A ATHENS

Burnett, Faulkner, Evans

Curated by Andrew Christopher Green

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Burnett, Faulkner, Evans is centered around Charles Burnett's 1973 short film *The Horse*. Burnett is most well known for his 1978 feature *Killer of Sheep*, a film inspired by Italian neorealism, composed of vignettes depicting daily life in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Though it was released five years after *The Horse*, both films were shot around the same time in 1972. Burnett had already finished the script and begun production on *Killer of Sheep* when his lead actor was suddenly incarcerated. Burnett later recalled, "I kept hearing he was going to be paroled, but it didn't happen. I stayed at the university waiting for him to get out, because he was a very good actor. So in the meantime, I shot *The Horse*."¹

The Horse was a film born of waiting, and it is a film largely about waiting. Three white men show up at a farm talking disgruntledly about a job while a black boy gently tends to a horse. They all wait around for the duration of the film for the boy's father to arrive and ultimately put down the horse. But because we don't know what they are waiting for, the white men's presence, speech, and gestures have a cryptic and threatening quality.

Burnett has cited two influences on *The Horse*: William Faulkner's short story *The Bear* and Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. As discussed in the exhibition's publication, Faulkner and Evans and Agee's collaboration provided models for Burnett to sustain the opacity of marginalized life. Unbeknownst to Burnett, Faulkner and Evans had a brief interaction of their own in the magazines *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

In 1948, *Vogue* commissioned Evans to take photographs for a spread about Faulkner that would coincide with the release of *Intruder In the Dust*, his first novel in eight years. Evans went on a trip with editor Allene Talmey through Mississippi and Louisiana, photographing the local architecture and landscapes. Evans's photographs were published in the October issue that year under the title *Faulkner's Mississippi*, together with excerpts from Faulkner's prose selected by Talmey, including a passage from *The Bear*, the story that influenced *The Horse*.

While Evans had long admired Faulkner's writing, Faulkner became familiar with Evans's work through a murky chain of events. A footnote in the 1979 *The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* by editor Joseph Blotner reads: "Faulkner's friend Anthony West had sent him a photograph Walker Evans had made of a shaded cemetery. [...] Hoping for a piece for the Bazaar, West asked Faulkner if he wanted to write anything about it."² Evans had taken publicity photos of West in the summer of 1954, and must have gifted West a print from a shoot seven years prior in Mayfield, Kentucky, which West then passed on to Faulkner. He allegedly told West that the picture—a rear view of a group of stone effigies—was "a fine photograph," and ended up writing *Sepulture South: Gaslight*, a story about a boy attending

1. Michel Cieutat and Michel Ciment, "Interview with Charles Burnett," *Positif*, no. 357 (November 1990): 40–47, reprinted in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 49.

2. Joseph Blotner, editorial note in *The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, by William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1979), 703.

his grandfather's funeral and then returning to visit his gravestone throughout the years. The story was published in Harper's Bazaar in December of 1954, printed alongside Evans's photograph.

A French translation of Blotner's collection was published under the title *Idylle au désert: Et autres nouvelles* in 1985. I do not know what prompted Jean-Luc Godard to read *Sépulture sud* in particular out of the forty-five stories in the 450-page collection, or if he knew about Evans's photographs that inspired it. It is also not clear if Godard was aware the story originally appeared in Harper's Bazaar, though he, more than anyone, would be poised to appreciate the irony that the author of the undead past had appeared alongside images promising the perpetual rebirth of the ever-the-same.

But we can be sure Godard read it almost as soon as the translation was released, as he used it in one of his most obscure television films—*Grandeur et décadence d'un petit commerce de cinéma*—which aired just a year later in 1986. In a film about a director putting together his next project, a series of actors walk in file past a camera to audition, each reciting one or two words from a cut-up collage of the concluding sentence to *Sepulture South: Gaslight*:

...all of them looming among the lush green of summer and the regal blaze of fall and the rain and ruin of winter before spring would bloom again, stained now, a little darkened by time and weather and endurance but still serene, impervious, remote, gazing at nothing, not like sentinels, not defending the living from the dead by means of their vast ton-measured weight and mass, but rather the dead from the living; shielding instead the vacant and dissolving bones, the harmless and defenseless dust, from the anguish and grief and inhumanity of mankind.

Harper's Bazaar, December 1954. Featuring *Sepulture South: Gaslight*, William Faulkner, pp. 84-85, 140-141

Walker Evans, Untitled (Table, Fireplace, and Pictures on Wall of Floyd Burroughs's Bedroom, Hale County, Alabama), 1936. Offset print, 16 x 12 cm (Matted 60 x 40 cm)

Walker Evans, Untitled (Bud Fields' Garden, Hale County, Alabama), 1936. Offset print, 10 x 15.5 cm (Matted 60 x 40 cm)

Walker Evans, Untitled (Bud Fields and his family in Bedroom, Hale County, Alabama), 1936. Offset print, 12 x 16 cm (Matted 60 x 40 cm)

The Horse, 1973. Digitized 16mm color negative with sound. 14 minutes. Directed, written, and edited by Charles Burnett.

Grandeur et décadence d'un petit commerce de cinéma, 1986. SD Video, color, sound. 11 min 45 sec loop (full film 90 minutes). Directed, written and edited by Jean Luc Godard.