

CHARLES: I chose fiction because it was easier for me to tell the story that I wanted to tell than if I had done a documentary. I think I was not courageous enough to do interviews face-to-face and film family members. Everybody in my family is a bit like me—everybody is shy. I didn't want to put the camera in front of them to tell this story, which is a difficult story. But even with the more, I would say, joyful souvenirs or memories—I knew that it would have been a difficult moment for them and even for me. Choosing fiction really helped me to create some kind of distance, to actually find the courage to tell the story that I wanted to tell.

NOTEBOOK: How did you get to [the] idea of expressing family and memory in [a] concrete bio-geographical context through literally framing landscape and family together?

CHARLES: I would say that I realize that now. Maybe I didn't while I was doing the film because I thought that I was making a film about my cousin and her mother. But I was also telling a story about myself, because I see a lot of myself in the film and the way that I film landscape. Originally, I was supposed to go to Haiti to film all of the landscape scenes. It was my main goal. It was probably the reason why I wanted to do the film, because as my cousin died when she was fourteen, she never had the chance to go to Haiti herself. So, it was very important to me to symbolically go back together with her, in a way. But then the pandemic happened and the film insurance company wouldn't cover the crew entering Haiti. Also, the film is government-funded, and the branch of the government funding body told us not to go because it was too dangerous. Therefore, I decided with a heavy heart to go to Dominica and St. Lucia. So, all of the exteriors are actually not shot in Haiti.

I showed the film to a few Haitian friends, and from the first frame, they knew that it's not Haiti. But it's kind of Haiti for me. I made my peace with it, because personally, it adds to the nostalgia of the film and also a little bit to its sadness. The two characters always talk about going back. When they actually go back, they don't recognize anything. They look at a map and they are lost. For me, it was a way to tell that they're not really there. It was important to not try to transport them into a fake Haiti [where] they would say, "Oh yes, I know everything." It was important for them to be lost because they're not really there. ♦

Coming soon to Acropolis:

Locarno in Los Angeles 2023—March 16-19 at 2220 Arts + Archives

Acropolis Cinema presents:



February 16, 2023 – 2220 Arts + Archives

 @AcropolisCinema  /AcropolisCinema  @acropoliscinema

www.acropoliscinema.com

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Of Haitian descent, Miryam Charles is a director, producer, and cinematographer living in Montreal whose work explores themes related to exile and the legacies of colonization. Her award-winning first feature, *Cette maison (This House)*, premiered at the 2022 Berlinale Forum following a run of acclaimed short films that have played at festivals worldwide. Tonight's program pairs *Cette maison* with a selection of three shorts, which together exemplify Charles' uncanny approach to genre and vivid sense of historical memory.

Fly, Fly Sadness: 6 min. | Canada/Haïti | 2015

Towards the Colonies: 5 min. | Canada/Haïti | 2016

Three Atlas: 3 min. | Haïti/Québec | 2018

Cette maison: 75 min. | Canada | 2022

This (Is Our) House by Marius Hrdy

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by MUBI Notebook, July 15, 2022

NOTEBOOK: In *This House*, we follow a personal tragedy that happened in your family. Can you talk about how your work on this film was informed by your autobiographical experience?

MIRYAM CHARLES: I would say that everything in the film was informed by my experience, even the little details in the art direction, the costumes. I actually took everything—from tragedy, but also from more joyous moments from my family history—and I put it in the film. A lot of things will only resonate with my family members through the décor or the set. I use a lot of objects from and inspired by my mom's house, my sister's house, and my aunt's house. The paintings that you see in the film, actually, everything—even some of the flowers in the garden scene are from my mother's garden. I surrounded myself with a lot of familiar objects to actually help me go through the process of making this film.

NOTEBOOK: We often recur to place and family in the film—expressed so evocatively with the ambiguity of the film's title, *This House*, which could address a place or a social “house” as in a family organization. Could you talk a little bit about the different modes of place on display here and the tension between security of place and the violence that can come with it by being emotionally or quite physically displaced from another?

CHARLES: I was first supposed to film the house where my cousin died, because it's still owned by my family. And very early in the process, I realized that I... I just couldn't do it. I went to Connecticut with one of my producers, and the moment I went inside the

house to film inside, I couldn't, as it was too much for me. So, in the film, when you see the car driving around the streets, it's actually me trying to find the courage to go inside the house. I couldn't find it, so it didn't happen. But the title of the film came from the first idea that I had about the film, which was going inside a house to film its different rooms and then to finish with the room where my cousin died. And then the more I talked about this idea of the house, I came back to my own.

It was a sense of identity in a way, since I'm a child of immigrants from Haiti. When I was younger—and I think even now, but it is less intense, I would say—I was obsessed to find my place, to find my home, because in Canada, I felt Canadian, but I wasn't Canadian enough for the majority. When I would go to Haiti to visit my family, I wouldn't feel exactly Haitian either. I speak Haitian with a French accent, which always bothered me. So I tried to find my place, and I think it shows in the film and that idea of traveling to a different country, to different houses. I'm trying to convey that this house or the security that we need to feel comfortable with is mainly people and not really a specific place.

NOTEBOOK: In many of your earlier shorter works, you use poetry and song and juxtapose them with observational landscape shots of places you are connected with: Haiti, Scotland, to name but two. How do music and poetry inform your work process?

CHARLES: For all of my films I usually start from sound and music—even if it's maybe strange to say—because I originally started out as a cinematographer. You would think that images are very important to me, but not so much in my work. I always start with sound, and usually what I do is I record a lot of soundscapes and music. And when I start a project, I record voiceover narration, if there's narration, because for me, narration has a musical sense to it. Then I edit everything, and afterwards, place the image on top of the sound. That's how I create all of my films, because for me, if I can understand a story only through sound, it's actually easier. With images I feel like the possibilities are endless; editing images is a bit of a nightmare for me. But if I have a solid sound base, then I can allow it [to be] a guide to work myself through the images.

Another important element is music and singing, like the singing voice that appears in my film. This is a cultural ritual for me. Haitians will sing when they're happy, as well as when they're sad. You can tell by the way that people sing how they feel. So sometimes I will maybe look happy and I will hum a song and my mom would say—“Oh, I think something's not right.” And she always knows—and me too, I can hear it. My sister, my little cousin, even with my niece. So I think that I integrated all of this into my filmmaking. There's always a song. There's always somebody humming a song. It's very important to me. And in *Cette Maison*, I do a few of them. When the actress playing Tessa is singing a song in the film, it's the song that my mom used to sing to us to wake us up in the morning. Every morning when the four of us needed to go to school, she would go from room to room and wake us up, singing that same song.

NOTEBOOK: How did you choose to expand on your earlier short films by adding fictional elements like indoor sets, props, on-screen dialogue, and actors for *This House*?