

HYPERALLERGIC

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Deborah-Joyce Holman: *Close-Up*
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Art Review

Deborah-Joyce Holman's Quietly Radical Black Femininity

Through abstraction and nonlinearity, Holman invests in cinematic practices that unseat “spectacle” as the prominent mode of Black representation.



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Deborah-Joyce Holman, “Close-Up” (2024), film still
(all photos courtesy Swiss Institute/the artist)

Deborah-Joyce Holman's "Close-Up" (2024), currently on view at the Swiss Institute, aestheticizes a Black woman's mundane domestic activities in a moving image work that taps into the power of the quotidian. Aside from the wall-sized projection of the film and the seating, the lower-level gallery is empty, creating a contemplative space (which is collectively titled [Close-Up](#)). For "Close-Up," Holman restaged a single scene from their 2023 multichannel video installation "[Close-Up/Quiet as It's Kept](#)." Artist Tia Bannon is the only person in the most recent iteration; the camera focuses on the minor details and visual elements of her and her surroundings. The plot is driven by the anonymous woman's gestures: she lays down for a rest, scratches her head, rubs her eyes, smells her tulips, brews and pours tea, and washes her hands.

Given the opportunity to pay such close attention to the minutiae of the everyday, a subtle, easily overlooked beauty in each visual element begins to emerge: The kettle is a pretty ultramarine, her brown skin is radiant in the film's cool-toned color palette, and her balanced countenance makes her actions appear nearly meditative. She wears her curly hair in two braids. Metal hair clips, small gold hoop earrings, and a silver chain necklace, each minimal, decorative touches, add to the stunning vision of quietude.



Deborah-Joyce Holman, "Close-Up" (2024), film still

Holman uses [16mm film](#), which results in a grainy cinematic look. Although 16mm is generally considered a low-budget and low-resolution gauge of film, its textured aesthetic is admired among experimental and artistic filmmakers. The wide angle creates a sense of immersion and intimacy with the filmed environment, as if we are in the space with the protagonist. Given the histories of [dominant \(White, male\) gazes](#) within cinema, Holman’s cinematic gaze is an effective formal strategy to position spectators in such a way that we are not looking *down* on the film. It seems to recall the “looking with, through, and alongside” that Black feminist scholar Tina Campt theorizes in [A Black Gaze](#).

The dominant gaze of onlookers is disrupted further by moments in which the film is intentionally blurred. This, paired with the nonlinear plot, lacking audible dialogue, speaks to Holman’s broader practice of cultivating abstraction in the film. They are invested in cinematic practices that unseat “[spectacle](#)” as the [prominent mode of Black representation](#). A refusal of the forced hypervisibility and surveillance culture of anti-Black representations in mainstream culture, we have the opacity and mystery of Bannon’s character, whose interiority is private from spectators. Amid a mainstream cultural backdrop of Black women’s hypervisibility as a series of tropes rooted in [misogynoir](#) — angry, superwoman, excessive, unruly — it is an insurgent visual tactic when an artist represents Black femininity in an alternative grammar.



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Deborah-Joyce Holman: Close Up continues at the Swiss Institute (38 St. Marks Place, East Village, Manhattan) through April 20. The exhibition was organized by Alison Coplan and KJ Abudu.