



Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present  
the Los Angeles premiere of

# TONSLER PARK

By Kevin Jerome Everson

September 18 — 7:30pm  
Downtown Independent

## TONSLER PARK

80 min // USA // 2017

This portrait of the black staff members in the polling station at Tonsler Park in Charlottesville, Virginia was filmed during the US Presidential Election Day on November 8, 2016, the day when the battle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was decided. Kevin Jerome Everson records the staff taking an oath, seeing rows of voters pass as they hand out voting slips, while no one seems aware of the camera that is standing there motionless. Conversations change to hubbub, backs block the camera's view —this is democracy in practice and every vote counts.

Everson is a very productive filmmaker who has made countless short and long films about the work culture of black Americans. His choice for this location is not without significance: Tonsler Park is



named after Benjamin Tonsler, a local Afro-American school director who continued to teach older Afro-American pupils against the law in the era of segregation. (IFFR)

## Kevin Jerome Everson by Jordan Cronk

“I don't make films for the audience, I make them for the subjects, and I try to position those subjects and the camera so that there's a element of generosity between the two.”

*The following is an excerpt from an interview originally published in BOMB Magazine (2017)*

Ohio-born, Virginia-based Kevin Jerome Everson is one of America's most prolific and unpredictable filmmakers. Over a span of fifteen years and upward of 100 films, Everson has worked at a near tireless pace, framing largely anonymous images of working-class African Americans through an impressionistic aesthetic palette that is equally informed by street portraiture and observational nonfiction. From his early work with found footage to the vividly rendered suburban and inner-city social vignettes, Everson—who's currently a professor at the University of Virginia—has continued to move nimbly between academia and the avant-garde.

**Jordan Cronk** I get the impression when watching your work, particularly as an entire program, that you're something like a filmmaker in the truest sense of the term. And by that I mean that the actual process of making films is where you derive your greatest satisfaction—which might explain why you've made so many. Can you speak about your films as acts of creation versus works to be exhibited to an audience?

**Kevin Jerome Everson** I come to film from the arts—from photography, sculpture, painting, and printmaking. Especially with photography, you have to make a body of work, you know? And I feel that in film, too. I can't just make one. I have to make these other components to see if my formal qualities are working or being exercised to the fullest. And if not, then I can adjust next time. I was recently reading Darby English's book, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, about these black abstract painters in the late '60s and early '70s, and I realized I approach film like abstract art in some weird way—like maybe they don't need an audience? Like, I'm just making things. (laughter) They're just so self-referential.

One strategy is that I've been trying to have the people on screen be smarter than the audience—in the sense that the subjects don't need them. A lot of my professors in undergraduate school came out of the University of Iowa's art program in the early '70s. And because of that, I feel my work has to present itself as material, process, and procedure. So the act of making—the camera, film stock, even time or whatever else goes into it—is all part of the film's content.

**JC** Do you see some of the labor depicted in your films as a metaphor for the filmmaking process itself?

**KJE** I'm trying to present it as an art object. To go back to the audience thing again, since I've been thinking about it so much lately: I don't make films for the audience, I make them for the subjects, and I try to position those subjects and the camera so that there's an element of generosity between the two.

**JC** You've mentioned that in general your relationship with your subjects is pretty professional. You're not living with and becoming friends with them. You respect their work, and they respect yours—you go in, present the idea, shoot, and get out. Can you expand on this approach?

**KJE** I come to film from street photography, where I shoot strangers and I'm there for just a hundred-and-twenty-fifth of a second. But with film I'm there for a longer duration, so I have to say something. (laughter) I tell them I'm in the art-making business: "I like what you do, and I'm gonna frame you up," that kind of thing. Sometimes I give them my information, sometimes I don't. Depends on the film—sometimes these people are criminals, you know? Or I get their information and send them a DVD or a link later.

For *Ten Five in the Grass* (2012), I was shooting these black cowboys, spending time with this family in Lafayette. I was calling them up, going to the rodeos. I liked them—they were beautiful and talented. When I was back home and editing, I heard on the news that there was a flood in Lafayette. Even though I knew they were on higher ground, I still wanted to check on them. So I called, and they didn't know who I was! I was like, "Yeah, it's me, Kevin, the filmmaker." (laughter) So, that proved I'm not the most important thing that happened to them that day! I realized then that I have little effect on my subjects' lives. I sent that same family a DVD of the film, and I think the wife watched it and the husband didn't. They looked handsome in it, and that's all they cared about. I know some filmmakers like to befriend their subjects. But you have to realize you're not that important to them. You are taking their likeness and representation somewhere else, but if you're true to the subject matter and respectful, there's not much harm in it. For me at least—I'm way past that.

**JC** How do you reconcile your early, found-footage work with more recent projects on similar subjects, such as your first boxing film, *Ring*? Your films tend to look and operate in similar ways whether

they're comprised of new or found footage.

**KJE** For *Ring*, the footage was like an audition tape—like, this boxer looks cooler than this boxer, this gesture looks cooler than this one, so I'll slow it down. I was looking for images that look more like art objects. That was really the only process with those films, and I knew I wouldn't do that forever, because I'm a shooter. So for a while I was making films that looked like found footage. There's a nostalgia thing there, for what they're wearing or their hairstyles, or for the film stock itself. There was a film I did years ago that was both found and shot footage called *The Golden Age of Fish* (2008), and I just can't look at it now. But it provided me with a template, as an example of something that didn't work. I thought the aggressive cut from found footage to something I shot myself would be like an abstract brushstroke. But I realized time, or duration, was a better way.

**JC** People have said your films feel very "casual," or give off that air. But at the same time, if you watch a film like *Ears, Nose and Throat* (2016), it's obvious that there's a concrete structure. It's casual but carefully constructed.

**KJE** I'm all about compression. For that film, there's seemingly no rhyme or reason to being in that doctor's office, and the details come out later. The camera doesn't move much, but the camera is evidence of presence. You know I'm there. It was kind of scripted, but then the doctor started examining her and fiction started to become documentary, as they say.

**JC** You've mentioned that you like to use reality as a formal device, and also how in *Fe26* you utilized props and things to heighten that reality. Can you talk about the fictional elements in your work?

**KJE** For fiction, it's easier to control—I have a direction I know the film should go in. But I've got films like *Stone* (2013), where I just showed up and cats were doing what they're doing. But if I'm going to drive from Virginia to Ohio, then I'm thinking over those eight hours about what the film needs and how I can implement a kind of palette—that's how films are made. In fact, in *Fe26* you can barely see those props. It doesn't make a difference. It's like improvising with a blank canvas. I'm trying to fill it up.

**JC** To return to the subject of the audience one more time: You're of course largely making films about the African American experience, but then

inevitably presenting your films in festival and gallery contexts to mostly white audiences.

**KJE** Yeah, filmgoing audiences, especially in America, are mostly white. Even that Jordan Peele film [Get Out]—not every black American in the country is going to see it. Mostly white people will. (laughter)

**JC** By and large, then, what do you want a typical viewer, of any race, to get out of your work? A glimpse into these lives or lifestyles?

**KJE** Not really, because they're not really lives. They're re-representations. The goal is to have certain formal qualities come out. But there's a social, political, and economic condition that's present. And that's part of the materiality, so people will get that. But I'm always outnumbered. It's always just me, if the audience is six or six hundred. I don't ever know what they're going to think. But if I'm comfortable with my own relationship with the material and upfront with the subject matter—and even if I'm not—the goal is to be consistent. At least I hope so. And if not, fuck it, I'll shoot something else next week!

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## MUBI

Starting September 20, MUBI will present an exclusive career-spanning retrospective of the work of Kevin Jerome Everson, including TONSLER PARK and six additional titles from this prolific and essential American artist, spotlighting Everson's deeply personal, socially acute, culturally embedded and formally adventurous body of work. With a filmography of more than 100 works, this multi-disciplinary artist has created a sprawling body of cinema, bountiful in its observation of the black experience in America.

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