

“The rhetoric of cinema has consistently denigrated surface decoration, finding the attractive skin of the screen to be false, shallow, feminine, or apolitical.” Césaire articulated her own version of this suspicion, writing that the paradisaical splendor of the Antilles, so often extolled by its poets, is a gorgeous mask that conceals a reality of colonial plunder and debasement: “And to hell with hibiscus, frangipani, and bougainvillea. Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be.” When this line is uttered in *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire*, a visually seductive film in which botanical imagery proliferates, it sounds a note of ironic tension. But like Galt, Hunt-Ehrlich wagers that the sensuous image has a resistant potentiality. “If my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded,” wrote Césaire. If Hunt-Ehrlich’s film is so beautiful, it is because she recognizes that there is another game of hide-and-seek to play: one that would claim beauty as celebration and as armor. This beauty is perhaps not “convulsive,” as Césaire’s friend André Breton demanded in the final sentence of *Nadja* (1928), but it is a shroud that both deflects a scrutinizing gaze and serves as a conduit to the marvelous. ♦

Coming soon to Acropolis

- *The Friends* (Dir. Shinji Sōmai, 1994)—Los Angeles premiere of new restoration, August 26 at 2220 Arts + Archives

Acropolis Cinema presents:



July 23, 2025 – 2220 Arts + Archives

ABOUT THE FILM

An actress and new mother (played by Zita Hanrot) is haunted by voices as she embarks on inhabiting the role of surrealist writer Suzanne Roussi-Césaire. In the sleepy palm groves of the tropics, a small group of filmmakers and actors confront the history of writer Suzanne Césaire in her youth and then stage scenes from her life, troubling the “paradise” of historical memory. Moving between narrative filmmaking and abstraction—a night at a 1940s cafe, and the garden where a film’s cast and crew discuss and bring to life the missing pieces of the writer’s legacy—this is a film that leaves room for the unknown.

This is Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich’s first feature. The film stars César-award-winning actor Zita Hanrot and Motell Foster, and features a soundtrack by singer Sabine McCalla. Official Selection: Rotterdam, TIFF, NYFF, Viennale.

TRT: 75 min

Lushness for Life by Erika Balsom

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The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire is a poetic evocation of the life and work of the eponymous author, editor, and Surrealist, born in Martinique in 1915. It is also a film of deliberate beauty. In her debut feature, Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich captures her small cast at rest and in rhythmic movement, enveloping them in a mantle of tropical verdancy and diffuse eroticism. She suffuses her images with a sense of lushness and languor so powerful that it is easy to lose track of just how much of the film consists of acts of reading and recitation, drawing in significant part from essays Césaire published between 1941 and 1945 in *Tropiques*, the journal she cofounded after returning home from years spent in Paris.

As is the fate of so many wives of lauded modernists, Suzanne Césaire’s own work is typically overshadowed by that of her husband, Aimé, towering figure of Négritude, politician, and author of *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal* (1939). She bore him six children, carving out time for her literary and political activities alongside the toil of motherhood. At the close of World War II, she ceased to publish for reasons unknown, never to resume, entering one of those great unnatural silences that, as Tillie Olsen underlined in 1978, so often mark the biographies of women writers, and which reveal the constraints of their existence.

The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire is thus a rescue mission. Yet Hunt-Ehrlich does not string together the events of a life like pearls on a necklace, hanging in perfect sequence. As her title suggests, affect and musicality prevail over explanation. Glimpses of scenes

that might look at home in a conventional biopic appear here only as fragments, with all the narrative apparatus that typically characterizes that Oscar-thirstiest of genres stripped away. Where the biopic imitates, Hunt-Ehrlich evokes; where it sutures cause to effect, she wreaks gentle havoc on chronology. Within a loose metafictional frame of a film shoot taking place in a park, she creates a calm yet kaleidoscopic swirl of palm fronds, words voiced from creased paper, a baby’s cries, amorous camaraderie, and the vocation of anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggle.

Near the film’s end, a fire rages, consuming sheets of a manuscript. Césaire participated in her own forgetting, burning her papers. Earlier, Zita Hanrot, the actress who plays her, had faced the camera to declare, “We are making a film about an artist who didn’t want to be remembered.” Hunt-Ehrlich has chosen to remember her nevertheless, and in a way that rhymes with Césaire’s own convictions. This means that the filmmaker’s reparative gesture not only proceeds very differently than would Hollywood’s but also departs from the many who, stricken with archive fever, place their bets on the evidentiary value of historical documents. *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire* sits squarely at the crossroads of two vital paths of contemporary inquiry: efforts to recover women’s underappreciated contributions to cultural life and attempts to rethink Surrealism beyond the Eurocentric narratives that have prevailed for too long, which fail to capture its existence as a transnational phenomenon with signal contributions coming from the Caribbean, Latin America, and beyond. It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that this film contains no depictions of vintage publications, expired passports, or handwritten letters belonging to Césaire, and no photographic or filmic images of the historical person, either. In one telling moment, Hanrot stands holding a snapshot, next to Motell Gyn Foster, who plays her husband. “I wonder why she doesn’t look at the camera,” she says. They can see this image; we cannot.

Hunt-Ehrlich married such acts of withholding with sumptuous imagery in previous works such as *Spit on the Broom* (2019), a short about the United Order of Tents, an African American women’s organization operating since 1867 in partial secrecy. That film, which never reveals the precise nature of the group’s activities, rests on a conviction that is carried forward in *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire*: one should not presume that stark visibility is the best remedy for the historical occlusion of Black women. Why? The grids of representation through which a subject must pass to attain widespread legibility can deform and betray in ways that reproduce structures of domination. Some secrets are meant to be kept close. And if any depiction of the past will be just that—a depiction—then why not embrace the possibilities of fabulation in reflexive ways? Against demands for sociology and authenticity, Hunt-Ehrlich cultivates an epistemological blur—a state in which knowledge is present and shared to some degree, but only as it is artfully wrapped in a gauzy, veiling softness. A reference to another Martinican thinker is unavoidable: she protects what Édouard Glissant would call her subjects’ “right to opacity,” shielding them from the violence of the colonizer’s demand for clear understanding.

Césaire called Surrealism the “tightrope of our hope.” Hunt-Ehrlich walks a tightrope, too, in her love for the beautiful image. As the film scholar Rosalind Galt has observed,