

**Kevin  
Jerome  
Everson**



*Chevelle* (2012, 7:30),  
frame grab

## 2 Nigs United 4 West Compton: A Conversation with Kevin Jerome Everson

by Michael B. Gillespie

*Growing up people thought we were rich because both of my parents worked. My mom was a bank teller and my dad was an auto mechanic. Also, people thought we were rich because we had two cars. The illusion of art is that it is of the leisure class. But, that's a projection in a weird way. When I was doing street photography and considering how to frame things, the subject matter I was concentrated on was people of African descent performing or posing. In this way, the job site for me became a performance piece of a craft. I don't pretend to be working class anymore but I respect it and appreciate it.<sup>1</sup>*

Kevin Jerome Everson

Kevin Jerome Everson's work represents a distinct processing of materials, craft, and blackness. While he has worked across media (e.g., photography, printmaking, sculpture, painting) for over twenty years, his work has significantly shifted since the late 1990s to primarily film and video. In particular, the last few years has seen a greater circulation of his work at film festivals, museums, galleries, and other exhibition sites throughout Europe and America. His growing catalogue of film and video now includes over a hundred shorts and six feature films. Everson's film and video work defies easy categorical claims by a refined disregard for the way black art can be presumed to embody or dictate cultural policy. Instead, Everson approaches film and video as a fine artist; while his work sometimes gives the impression of a documentary conceit, it is moreover

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mediated by an experimental/avant-garde attention to gestures. His work illustrates a refined insistence on the everyday, black people, history, and repetition. As Ernest Hardy notes about Everson's aesthetic, "Without pedantry or grandstanding, he locates the grace within the grind."<sup>2</sup> Yet, Everson's films and video work always functions as a distinct invitation for contemplation that never proffers anything resembling an essence or ontology. Instead, he pursues a devotion to quotidian occurrences and tasks. As Ed Halter observed,

Everson rejects the role of cultural explainer in his work, opting instead to place the burden of understanding on the audience and its own labor. In this way, he has carved a place for himself outside both the typical expectations of documentary and the conventions of representational fiction, attempting to work from the materials of the worlds he encounters to create something else.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, Everson experienced two significant events as an artist: a solo exhibition (*More Than That: The Films of Kevin Jerome Everson*) devoted to a selection of his short films at the Whitney Museum of American Art (April 28-Sept. 18, 2011) and the release of *Broad Daylight and Other Times: Selected Works of Kevin Jerome Everson*, a DVD box set through the Video Data Bank that includes a feature and twenty three shorts. Everson's work and career as an artist has garnered more attention than ever over the last few years. This short piece addresses Everson's work by way of an

extended conversation we had over the course of several months in 2011 that addressed his then-new work and thoughts about his practice. That work focused on among other things, the black cowboy and the western, noir detection, General Motors and black labor, the Tombigbee River, and above all, Everson's continued address of blackness and form. Kevin generally refuses to look back in terms of his work but after some cajoling and laughter we were able to revisit and reconsider together what that year meant to him and his craft. His work continues to challenge the artistic rendering of blackness, he explains, "I am attracted to the art object/subject and form more than straight storytelling. I like folks who play with blackness and form [e.g. Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Cauleen Smith and Terence Nance]." This piece examines an artist with a desire to push his craft and grow during an intense period of practice. Ultimately, this piece offers an opportunity to consider the stakes of the art of blackness through one artist's practice.

MBG: You used to say that your work was better received across the pond than it was here in the States. How has that changed in the last few years?

KJE: Well, the last two or three years I have been showing more in the States. I think the structuralist quality of *Cinnamon* [2006] and *Erie* [2010] along with the found footage shorts might have had a lot to do with that. I just think there wasn't a context for the work. I'm always in the experimental film programs because my work is not really documentary or narrative in the classical sense. Maybe the formal qualities and the temporality issues of my work took time for people to appreciate. People are getting more comfortable with talking about the work. Regardless, I've always had a lot of support. I was grateful for the Whitney show.

MBG: When did you start thinking of yourself as an artist?

## When I look through the viewfinder, I'm looking at different histories

KJE: I began when I was getting my BFA in Photography at the University of Akron. I continued growing as an artist while getting my MFA in Photography at Ohio University. I was doing a lot of street photography, but really I was always dealing with multiple media. I was doing sculpture, printmaking, painting, and film.

MBG: Your work it defies the expectations of black art, experimental art, and the meeting between the two. Why have you been primarily working with film and video in the last ten years? What does film and video do for you, more than sculpture, painting, or photography?

KJE: Well, I haven't stopped working with multiple media. I had finished my last large body of serious photography when I was in Rome at the America Academy back in 2001. Beyond the fact that I've been teaching film more, my move to working more with film and video has a lot to do with the things I'm trying to say about gestures, tasks, and conditions. I'm interested in duration and time-based media works best for that.<sup>4</sup>

MBG: How has Ohio informed your work?

KJE: I identify as someone from Northern Ohio. Unemployment, employment, migration from the South, language, weather, benchmarks, and basements. These are the keywords for my craft as I continue to try and get better as an artist. I'm drawn to what gestures might represent.

MBG: Could you talk a bit more about blackness and regionalism?

KJE: When I look through the viewfinder, I'm looking at different histories. During Q&As, I'm still asked, why do I only film black people. First, I answer, "why is it that Steven Spielberg's *ET* [1982] is only white people?" There's usually no answer. Then I say when I'm looking through the viewfinder of the camera, either film or digital, that I'm looking at black folks and seeing a history of a relationship to a place—whether it's Natchez, Mississippi; St Louis, Missouri; Summerduck, Virginia; or Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. I'm responding to a history of people and a place. I can see a relationship between black folk and a place that is different than black folk from Harlem or Detroit or Atlanta or whatnot. That makes the work come alive for me. Like I've said, there are more black Americans than Canadians, but why can't we appreciate the diversity of black folk within a certain landscape.

MBG: Do you still bristle at being called a black avant-garde or experimental artist?

KJE: I would still prefer to be called an artist. I'm still down for the everyday political and the every other day political.

MBG: Kevin, people have got to write dissertations. Don't hate. You can't be just an artist. On that note, why do you refuse to be known as a documentarian or want your work thought of as documentaries?

KJE: Because nothing is real in my work, everything is made up. My work documents artifice. I'm working on a project with a colleague who wants to do documentary. The first thing that I was thinking about was when to start auditioning actors.

MBG: We've spoken before about how you connect black intellectual practice with "being satisfied." I'm thinking about the footage of your family in *Erie* [2010] discussing how working in the factory used to be



Kevin Jerome Everson, *The Mayberry Practice Calf* (2012, 3:50), frame grab

about a certain kind of pleasure derived from a craft, but that eventually as management became less labor identified, it became just work and finally, drudgery. How is labor and this sense of being satisfied inflected in your work?

KJE: For me, being an artist is the practice of getting better. Art is not necessarily a job; I don't just want to do my work well. I want to develop.

MBG: How does this point connect with your audiences?

KJE: I am trying to create a language. Not in the sense of readability, but in the sense of a language for my practice. My audience is the work, the subject, or the object in front of my viewfinder. I want to know the

subject's intellect of that focused condition that I'm filming. Also, I want the subject to project an intellect that the audience doesn't have. The subject or object is always smarter than the audience because they know what they are doing which, in turn, allows me to let them do their thing. That always informs my art and I know how to frame the subject or object in such a way to further enhance that particular intellect. I believe the artist is always trying to create a language. For me, this language is changing and I am always reading it but I can't predict an audience's response. I can only engage with what I see in the viewfinder. I'm not sure if I'm changing the game but I'm changing and challenging my game constantly.

***Chevelle*** (2012, 7:30)

This short features a static, long take directed at the procedural act of a car crushing. Two cars, a Pontiac Grand-Am and later a Chevelle, are placed in the crusher by a forklift. The film details and observes the process by which the cars lose dimension as they explode while being collapsed flat into recyclable scrap that is then lifted away by the forklift. The film obviously suggests something about the history of the American automotive industry and the post-industrial scraping of an industry that fueled the class aspirations of labor. As Kevin and I spoke about the piece, he revealed a more personal investment in the crushing process.

MBG: Much of your work refers to a history of black industrial labor.

KJE: I'm not sure if I can speak on the auto industry because I'm not a historian. But, I'm hip to the Revolutionary Black Workers and their contributions to the working folks. I also know about the experiences of my family members who worked in the General Motors stamping plant in my hometown, Mansfield, Ohio. The workers made a huge contribution to the economy of the city. They were the richest folk in the area, especially with a two-income family. If you had a daughter who was getting married you'd

just work a shit load of overtime to pay for the wedding. No sweat. There always seemed to be money there. It was the old hat. You can rely on that type of money.

MBG: The piece seems to be documenting a sculptural process.

KJE: I shot it in Cookstown, Ontario. The initial idea was that I wanted to film automobile parts and to create art that was formed from those materials. I treated the Chevelle as a found object. It's a General Motors car that was probably made at the Fisher Body Plant in my hometown. I wanted the framing of the image to emphasize the door panels because the hands of my cousins most likely touched those panels as they worked in the factory. There was black labor that worked overtime on that Chevelle. That Chevelle used to give black folk a job in Mansfield. They built it, drove it, and pumped gas in it. So, crushing the car shifts it from one form of creation. The form changes as I use the materials to create sculpture, a post-industrial sculpture.

***The Tombigbee Trilogy: Rita Larson's Boy, Chicken, and Early Riser***

***Rita Larson's Boy*** (2012, 10:53)

MBG: So, each film seems loosely organized around narrativity, history, culture, and place. There's a cartography being enacted. How did you conceptualize this as a trilogy?

KJE: Each short has a relationship to the Tombigbee River, a river that starts in Mississippi and travels through Alabama before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. The trilogy is a collection of films based on famous objects and famous people associated with the Tombigbee River.

MBG: *Rita Larson's Boy* is a series of ten repetitions of actors auditioning for a role, Rollo from *Sanford and Son*. What's Rollo's connection to the Tombigbee and the episode?<sup>5</sup>

KJE: I have family in Columbus, Mississippi and for years I wanted to do a piece on the local celebrity everyone made a point of mentioning, Nathaniel Taylor. Taylor played "Rollo" on *Sanford and Son*. I was writing a feature project [*Spicebush*] that was about the juxtaposition of artifice and craft. I had written a scene where Nathaniel Taylor would teach my son how to act while he was delivering school furniture. I ended up not doing the scene, but the Rollo character still stuck with me. The title of the short comes from the way Aunt Esther always addressed Rollo as Rita Larson's boy and how each time that happened he would drop his cool and immediately respond with a 'Yes, M'am.' Anyway, the premise of the episode is that Fred comes to believe that Rollo and Lamont are a gay couple. The whole episode becomes about Fred trying to turn Lamont straight and also Lamont's suspicion that his dad might be gay.

MBG: Taylor is amazing in Larry Clark's *Passing Through* [1977]. He and Ted Lange ["Isaac" from *Love Boat*] co-wrote it. *Rita Larson's Boy* made me think about how much of the comic effect of Fred Sanford and Aunt Esther on that show was how they were both marked as these signature avatars of the vernacular, one of the Saturday night variety and the other more Sunday morning. Regardless, neither one was inclined to break bread with the likes of Rollo. Rollo is a constant target for Fred and Esther because he is treated as though he has no class, in a social and economic sense, because he is too modern, too not-from-back-home.

KJE: Yeah, there's also the way that the junkyard itself represents back home and the past, not the future. Also, in terms of thinking about black masculinity, it seemed to be that Rollo was the most progressive character on the show. He was open-minded to the idea of being gay as opposed to Lamont or Fred.



Kevin Jerome Everson, *Early Riser* (2012, 5:00), frame grab

MBG: That surprised me as well. But, there is a general way that Rollo is played out as out-of-step with the times. Lamont and Fred ridicule him for different reasons for his progressiveness. Where did you shoot this and what kind of notes did you give the actors?

KJE: We shot it in a church in Cleveland. For me, I always liked thinking about the extent to which so many of the 70s Blaxploitation actors were Shakespearean trained. Acting black is theatre. For me "What it is, Jack?" is the same as "Romeo, Romeo, where for art thou?"

MBG: 'Acting black' intersects with the issue of black performativity. Rollo's cool pose of the 70s black-hip as cultural and political practice becomes coupled to craft and a script. The ten actors are professional actors. Ten black performers of blackness, ten different applicants for a

role of blackness. The repetition is quite poignant. None represent that Rollo-hipness the same way. Did you ever contact Nathaniel Taylor?

KJE: I've tried, but it looks like he changed his name at some point. There's no trace of him.

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The repetition is quite poignant.**

*Chicken* (2012, 3:20)

Chicken: I wonder something about you.

Myrtle: Wh-What do you wonder?

Chicken: If the attraction would still be terrific if I was to tell you the talk an' suspicion about me are based on fact.

Myrtle: What? What, uh, talk an' suspicion?

Chicken: That I got colored blood in me.

*Chicken* is based on a scene from a later work by Tennessee Williams. Myrtle's buzz over the terrific attraction of sex with Chicken is abruptly checked by the one-drop paranoia of interracial desire, taboo, and violation. Everson stages this brief exchange with the barest of mise-en-scene that emphasizes Chicken's boredom and indifference in the face of the off-screen Myrtle and her post-coital gushing. In the midst of zooms, shifts in camera angles, and slight hand held rocks, *Chicken* details a character in control and ever registering.

KJE: So, Tennessee Williams is from Columbus, Mississippi. But again, the association of the all the films is loose. I was interested in the style of the kitchen table monologue along with the choppy rhythm of Tennessee

Williams' dialogue. The dialogue comes from *Kingdom of Earth* [1968]. "Chicken" is a grounded character that has this kind of downstairs mentality. To me, he is as much an observationist as Loboy is in *Early Riser* and 'Rallo' in *Rita Larson's Boy*. Sidekicks are artists performing a service and looking for form. Nothing gets by these characters.

*Early Riser* (2012, 5:00)

The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books.

Chester Himes<sup>6</sup>

The Harlem novels of Chester Himes are chilling comedies of violent irrationality. Men and women are set ablaze, bludgeoned, amputated, run down by all manner of conveyance, and have their throats slit like hogs. In this Uptown, people do not simply die from gun shots as much as their corporeal beings are itemized in a haphazard toss to the air of brain, blood, and teeth with a healthy dose of bone and random tissue—disintegrated. In this Harlem, mother-rapers out trump motherfuckers every time as black people stir in dark places, sweating, banging themselves, and drinking smoke. Yet Harlem is mutually informed by 'hate is like a gun' and 'home is where the hatred is.' As Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed always say in a variety of ways, their job often appears to be really about 'Keeping Harlem safe for white folks.' For Himes' detectives, a crime and subsequent investigation occur, but solving the crime never means a return to the social order, for the a priori crime *is* white supremacy and antiblack racism. *Early Riser* is comprised of the intercutting of two single take, long shots. The film restages a scene from the film adaptation (Ossie Davis, 1970) of Himes' *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1965). Gravedigger and Coffin Ed beat down a character named Loboy in a police interrogation room who is the

only witness to a robbery crew escaping in a delivery van.

KJE: Once when I was applying to Sundance, we were asked to talk about our favorite scene after a film. For me, I've always loved this scene from *Cotton Comes To Harlem*. Loboy's sees his partner [Early Riser] get run down by the delivery van and ends up giving Gravedigger and Coffin Ed the information that the robbers were white. Even though they wore masks, he knew they were white because of the way they ran. "Cuz they run white, damnit!" To me, what's so cool is that Loboy is an artist and that he is the only one capable of making that observation. Of course, in terms of the trilogy, the bale of cotton that becomes central to the film and the Himes novel is a symbol for migration, the past, and the way the river carries a significant and historical product. For me, noir films are mainly form and I like *Cotton Comes To Harlem* because people come out of the shadows with a backstory that disrupts the form.

*Ten Five In The Grass* (2012, 32:00), *The Mayberry Practice Calf* (2012, 3:50), *Second Place* (2012, 2:54), and *The Wooden Calf* (2012, 1:53)

The black western richly provokes the mythology of the American West and the idea of film genre as a historiographic imagineering by tacitly revealing how the narrative form has covertly borne a racial and cultural ideal. The genre's classical themes of nation-building, the civilizing of savage lands, utopianism, and the discreteness of good and evil become refabulated as Everson draws attention to absences, disavowals, and the difference of a culture other than pale riders. Everson's *Ten Five In The Grass* examines the craft of the black cowboy. The film illustrates Everson's interest in everyday intellect by observing the rituals of the grooming of horses, riding, and roping. The piece is set in a practice space in Natchez, Mississippi run by Fred Mayberry, a rancher and professional rodeo calf roper. *The Mayberry Practice Calf* is a silent film that observes the ritual of calf-roping practice. The hand-held shooting focuses on the repetitious act

calf-roping practice. The hand-held shooting focuses on the repetitious act of roping practice with an old tire repurposed as a calf dummy. The roping exercise illustrates the formal process of developing a skill, the way one becomes identified as a cowboy by way of proficiency. The short piece suggests how the black western and the black cowboy demonstrate a tradition and a procedure. *The Wooden Calf* offers a similar detailing of this process with a focus on lasso practice with a wooden calf model. *Second Place* is a poignant observation of the black bull riders preparing for rides and riding bulls. The contemporary content (a modern rodeo) and the vintage look (Super-8 film stock) produce the effect of blended and dialogical temporalities. These black westerns, or more precisely, Everson westerns, consider the generic practice on the level of repetition and performativity. In this way, blackness functions as a cultural tool and an artist's prerogative.

**I'm not a doctor so I don't heal and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts...Art has got to be made.**

KJE: "Ten five in the grass" is an expression for the length of rope used to rope fast calves. I shot the films in Lafayette, Louisiana and Natchez, Mississippi. I've always wanted to do a western and I shot one black cowboy last year that became a test for this new stuff. I originally wanted to do a feature length western that was going to include Chester Himes, Bronze Buckaroo, and other things. I always liked the way that "Harlem" was used in titles for the black-cast westerns.

MBG: When I was looking for information about Fred Mayberry, I came across the Real Cowboy Association, a touring black rodeo group, and decided to re-watch *Black Rodeo* [Jeff Kanew, 1972]. I still enjoy how Woody Strode functions in that film as an inheritor of John Ford, a sign of



the American West, and the historiographer of the black cowboy legacy. The film does make some interesting gestures towards linking cultural nationalism with the promise of the American West.

KJE: Woody Strode was a world-class bulldogger. Like the mechanic in my drag racing film [*Cinnamon*, 2006], rodeo cowboys invest a lot of time and money in something that is over in seconds. But what interests me most is how these black rodeo associations give black cowboys an opportunity to display their craft. There's a different sense of history and tradition than the white rodeos. Black rodeos are a historical event and a family affair with folks always coming out for rodeos. It's an instance where the community gathers and supports its own.

MBG: In *The Mayberry Practice Calf* and *The Wooden Calf*, there is the repetitiousness of practicing. Could you talk about how this connects with developing as an artist?

KJE: Yeah, I wanted to focus on the roping exercise without necessarily dwelling on the accessories or the costumes. I didn't ask these folks to put on chaps or dusters, I wanted to observe them just doing their business. So, they were wearing their regular clothes and just practicing. I wanted to show that cowboys have their own language and complexity and also I liked the way that they are casually taking care of their business. That's part of why I don't identify these works as documentaries I'm asking them to teach me a language. When I was working on *Cinnamon* [2006], I was exploring the relationship between composition and performance. For me, the mechanic was the composer and the driver was the musician. Being around the cowboys did the same thing for me. I've been practicing my roping with a dummy and it inspired me to do some sculpture, a bronze-cast roping dummy.

MBG: What was it like shooting a rodeo?



Kevin Jerome Everson, *Ten Five in the Grass* (2012, 32:00), frame grab

KJE: Well, I called the film *Second Place* because I missed shooting the guy who won first place. The focus for 8mm was too delicate. I tried to do single takes because I like that form of shooting where you have to find the action.

MBG: When are you going to shoot your first feature length Western?

KJE: I'll make a longer film next summer based on the stuff. Church bells, moonshiners, catfish, shoe cobblers and some other scenes. I didn't write anything down because I didn't have the mental mindset to deal and figure the shit out. I just went to Mississippi but nothing happened. Anyway, I

was basically just reacting to what I was seeing. It's kind of like my oldschool street photography and just shooting. There is nothing wrong with that though. I was just falling back on the old, looking for things like folks practicing their craft. That's fine, but when I think about the stuff I shot in 2010 and 2011, the work seems flat.

MBG: We've spoken a lot about 'flatness.' Your son was murdered and then there was a trial. It's incredible that you continued to work during that period.

KJE: When my boy passed away, I didn't have the mindset to plot and plan. I was showing up with the equipment and just reacting. It's not like I feel the work was bad, but I knew that emotionally I couldn't do things the way I was used to doing them. Producing art was hard during mourning. It still is. DeCarrio was the person who saw the stuff first and we collaborated on a ton of stuff. I'm going to miss that. I just loved being in Mansfield and watching the [Cleveland] Browns or [Cleveland] Cavaliers with him. When it was half time we would go shoot some stuff, *Undefeated* [2008], *Thermostat* [2000], or *Company Line* [2009]. It took minutes, but it was a lifetime for sure. But producing art has been difficult and actually easy. The difficulty is what I just said. The easy part is that it's my responsibility to make art. I have a responsibility to my family, my hometown of Mansfield, close friends, and a history of former students to keep making that art. I'm not a doctor so I don't heal and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts. I tell my students I am an artist and a teacher, but mostly an artist. I want them to believe that. So I prove it every day, week, month, season, and year. Art has got to be made.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael B. Gillespie, "'To Do Better': Notes on the Work of Kevin Jerome Everson." *Kevin Jerome Everson* (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Ernest Hardy, "The Lives of Black Americans, Depicted Via a Single Alabama Dry Cleaners," *LA Weekly*, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.laweekly.com/2013-03-14/film-tv/lives-of-black-americans/>.

<sup>3</sup>Ed Halter, "The Practice of Everyday Life" *Artforum* (May 2010): 33.

<sup>4</sup>Everson is a Professor of Art at the University of Virginia.

<sup>5</sup>Each actor reads the same script: an episode entitled "Lamont, Is That You?" (October 19, 1972). The episode restages the comic conceit of *Norman, Is That You?* (Ron Clark and Sam Brobrick, 1970), a Broadway play about a Jewish couple dealing with the fact that their son is gay. Redd Foxx and Pearl Bailey would later star in the film adaptation of the same name (1976).

<sup>6</sup>Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997): 103.