

American Cinematographer

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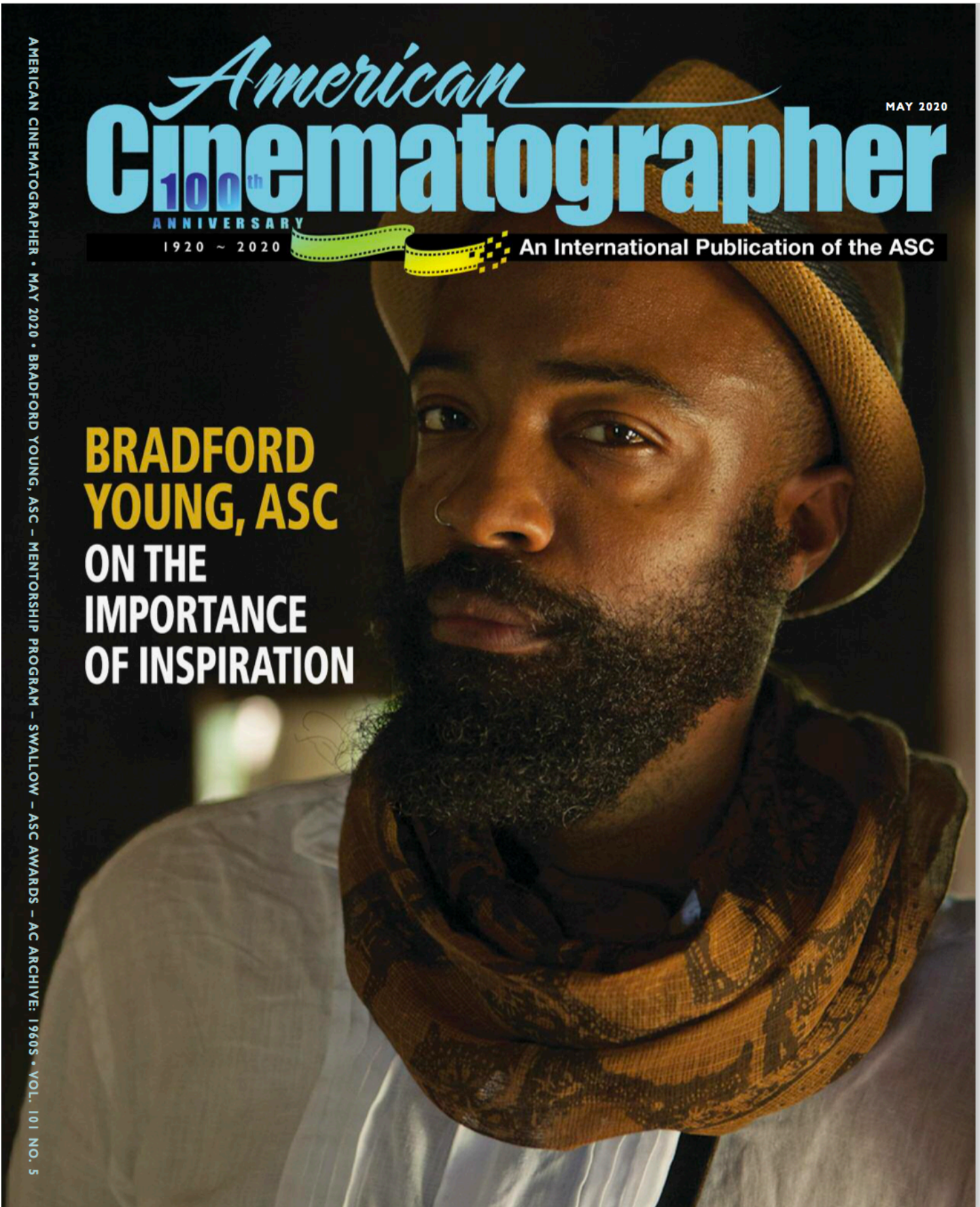
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Stars Align



AC checks in with three Rising Stars of Cinematography from past years to discuss their current projects, and inclusion and mentorship in the industry

By Patricia Thomson

Our recent March 2020 issue included the fourth installment of AC's annual Rising Stars of Cinematography, so we thought it was time to check in with some of the promising directors of photography selected in previous years. From our 2017 roster (AC Feb. '17), we caught up with Carmen Cabana and Kira Kelly, whose respective TV series — Hulu's *High Fidelity* and Netflix's *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* — recently commenced streaming. And one of last year's Rising Stars, Anka Malatynska, chatted with us about shooting Hulu's *Monsterland*, scheduled for release later this year.

Carmen Cabana
High Fidelity

"When it comes to love and music, everything is enhanced, richer, bolder — just full of life," says Carmen Cabana. Her latest project, *High Fidelity*, is very much about

love and music, coupled with a rich, bold look.

Created by Sarah Kucserka and Veronica West, the show is a gender-flipped version of Nick Hornby's 1995 novel and Stephen Frears' 2000 big-screen adaptation (shot by Seamus McGarvey, ASC, BSC). This time around, it's a female record-store owner (Zoë Kravitz) who's been dumped and is struggling to rebound.

This role reversal "refreshed the story," says Cabana, who shot all 10 episodes of the series. "I loved that the production wanted to do a female-gaze version, with a female protagonist who shows women's perspectives on the dating world."

On the show, Rob (short for Robyn) addresses the camera directly, mulling over the quandaries of romantic love. She often does so while striding through the streets of Crown Heights, her semi-gentrified Brooklyn neighborhood, where practical locations were shot.

"*High Fidelity* was about making the camera feel like a friend walking right next to Rob, chatting," says Cabana. "That's why the camera had a close proximity, little foreground and wider lenses." The cinematographer shot with dual Arri Alexa Minis, framing for 1.78:1. She used customized Panavision Primo lenses, "which produced beautiful flares." She often exposed at T4 to retain some depth in

the background except when getting inside Rob's head, "when we were always wide open." That's when the "Magic 50," as Cabana dubs it — a 50mm Zeiss Super Speed — was put to use. "We used the Magic 50 every time we wanted to blur the background and get very close to Zoe's face to isolate her from everything else and just connect with her emotion." Angénieux Optimo zooms were occasionally used as well.

As for that rich, bold look, "I wanted a glossier, more magical version of Brooklyn, but to preserve the elements that make it so charming and appealing," Cabana says. "For instance, the color of lighting was 100-percent based on reality." She played off the color mix on Brooklyn's streets: neon signage on old storefronts, and street-lights that were enhanced with Arri SkyPanels or gelled PAR cans to extend their light farther. For interiors, inspiration came from musical sources. For example, all of De Salle's club scenes "have the color palette of a Pink Floyd homage concert featuring drummer Nick Mason that I attended in my spare time during prep," says Cabana. "The light show combined four or five colors, but they co-existed well without looking like a circus." Another inspiration was album covers. "They pop so much," Cabana says, "and I wanted a reference for colors that could live with



◀ Clockwise from left: Cinematographers Carmen Cabana, Kira Kelly and Anka Malatynska. ▲ A club scene from Hulu's *High Fidelity*, shot by Cabana.

each other." She cites Kiss' *Rock and Roll Over*, Led Zeppelin's *Celebration Day* and *Houses of the Holy*, and Syd Barrett's *The Madcap Laughs* as some examples.

Color is Cabana's sweet spot. "As a woman, and being from Colombia, I find that color is my preferred paintbrush when it comes to telling stories, although certain stories, like my upcoming [Blumhouse-Amazon] film *Nocturne*, call for a desaturated look and a muted palette," the cinematographer notes. When using colors, she never hesitates to dip into Surprise Peach, Moss Green, Cerulean Blue, Henna Sky and other hues that aren't often used. *High Fidelity's* numerous nightclub and bar scenes gave her

plenty of room to play. "The clubs were my paradise. I was like a kid in Candy Land!"

Kira Kelly

Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker

Imagine *The Great Gatsby* by way of the Harlem Renaissance with snippets of Busby Berkeley thrown in. That's *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker*, a four-part limited series that tells the story of America's first female millionaire, who made her fortune in hair-care products for black women.

"It was my first period piece, which I was so excited about," says

AC: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about change in the industry, especially for female cinematographers?

Carmen Cabana: I'm optimistic for sure. If I compare now to 2005, when I started in the business, it feels like there has been at least a 15- to 20-percent improvement, at least in my own experience. That's baby steps, but it's definitely on the upswing.

So many of us have been doing really good work and proving we can deliver on time, deliver good material, tell a story, handle a set with big challenges, and be leaders. I think producers are finally starting to look at us on more equal terms.

We have a bit of a crisis, though, in electric. You find a lot of women in camera, but it's very hard to find female electricians, grips and gaffers who are experienced and available and remain in G&E. We need more women in that field, and we need more workshops and opportunities to train them.

I think there's a shortage because of the bullying from some [male] electricians and key grips that's been happening for years. A lot of women have just left the field or exist in the shadows or move to the camera department. If you think about it, every day we're on set is already a battle — against time, against the elements, against specific challenges — so to have to fight a battle for respect on top of that can truly drain you. Coming up, I faced a lot of discrimination from certain gaffers — they wouldn't respect me or do what I asked. That inspired me to become a gaffer myself, so nobody could lie to me and say, 'We don't have that,' or, 'We can't do it like that,' because I knew what we had in the truck and ways to get something done.

So I want to encourage more women to stick with it. Do what you love and don't be afraid to stand your ground.