poppy
a film by Nonnie Christine Egbuna
I like to say that I am an artist before I am anything else. I have committed myself to telling stories that matter—those that offer revolutionary perspectives, or catalyze revolution by the power of their content. I believe that film is a distinctly powerful art form for its capacity to impact viewers both visually and sonically, and that visual storytelling has the power to quite literally change the world.

I strive to make art that fills the gaps of representation that exist within the current media landscape. In this respect, I draw inspiration from the great Black and/or female and/or otherwise “othered” moving image creators who have come before me: Barry Jenkins. Shonda Rhimes. Lena Waithe. Ryan Coogler. I do not take for granted the fact that art is everywhere, and I draw heavily from my every day interactions with the world and the people around me. I write what I know and I create from my personal experience; in this way, my art is both a societal change maker and a personal tool for healing, exploration, expression, and growth.

As I wrote in a spoken word piece a few years ago:

This shit is all art to me.
All masterpiece on crumpled page
And spontaneous, harmonious melody.
Baby...I sing you daily.
Poppy is a project that has been on my heart for many years, one that presented itself to me recently as a story I needed to tell, and soon. The urgency with which I set about creating this film stems from my personal connection to its subject matter; a story about mental illness and its outcomes, about friendship, love, and choice, Poppy is a film that encompasses many aspects of my recent personal narrative.

When I was diagnosed with clinical depression two years ago, I could not see any light in the situation. At my lowest, I operated on a day-to-day basis solely thinking about survival—keeping my grades up, eating at least one full meal a day, and adjusting to new medications. Now, I am at a much higher point. I am mentally and emotionally healthier, and I am ready to do with my mental health journey what I know best: to make art out of it.

This project is an exploration and expression of mental illness, through the lens of film and filmmaking practice. The final product, Poppy, is a short film following a young woman—Q—who celebrates her birthday on the anniversary of her best friend—Zion’s—suicide.

In creating this film, I have stepped into a new chapter of my personal mental health narrative. I have realized that, in many ways, I am and/or have been both Q and Zion. I have been so well-acquainted with darkness as to consider seeking it eternally, and I have gotten up on countless mornings and chosen the light, chosen the life. I can tell both stories, this story, from both sides, because I have lived both sides. Creating Poppy has empowered me to better understand the nuances of mental illness both generally and personally, and to ultimately turn my pain into power.
The film opens with a flashback; Q sits with Zion as he gets a tattoo of a poppy flower on his forearm. The two consider the significance of a black man getting a flower tattoo, and of the poppy flower’s symbolism of sleep, death, and peace. The next scene, set in the present day, shows Q choosing to self-medicate with marijuana as opposed to taking her prescription anti-depressants. Her father, Marcus, solemnly takes note, and lets her know that dinner will be ready soon.

In the flashback, Q and Zion celebrate at the birthday party thrown for them by their friend Dre. In an unforeseen display of abandon, Zion agrees to take oxycodone with Dre. In the present day, Q and her father eat dinner; realizing that Q does not want to celebrate, Marcus brings out a solitary cupcake and quietly sings her happy birthday.

In the final scene, Zion does a conceptual “dance of death,” with Q visiting the site of his suicide one year later.
the film in stills
the film in stills cnt'd
the film in stills cnt'd
cast

Reana Johnson
"Q"

Cartier Jamarey Robinson
"Zion"
crew

nonnie egbuna
writer & director

kennedy ware
director of photography

delmar kaiser
director of photography
crew cnt'd

joshua yip
lighting director

miranda gershoni
sound director

eric barstow
production supervisor
behind the scenes
mental health resources

national suicide prevention hotline
1-800-273-8255

crisis text line
text HOME to 741741

SAMHSA substance abuse hotline
1-800-662-4357
acknowledgments

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Cole Russing

*Poppy* is dedicated to those who never got their flowers.