

The Artist Who Gave Up Her Daughter

Camille Billops abandoned her four-year-old to become the artist she knew she was meant to be. Twenty years later, her daughter wanted to know: why did you leave me?

Words by [Sasha Bonét](#)

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Camille Billops and James Hatch, New York City, circa 1978.

AT SIX O’CLOCK ON A SPRING MORNING in downtown Los Angeles, 1961, a family of black women convened in the middle-class home of the matriarch. They spoke in hushed whispers behind pulled curtains, careful not to wake the child sleeping in the bedroom down the hall. With their hair still tied back in rollers under silk scarves, and their morning responsibilities abandoned, they had gathered to convince one member of the family to not give her four-year-old child up for adoption. A car door shut in the driveway outside, and 27-year-old Camille Billops entered the house in search of her daughter, Christa Victoria.

If Camille felt any shame or doubt about her decision, there was no evidence of it on her face that morning. The women assembled around her—Camille’s mother, her aunts, her sister, and cousins—each called dibs on Christa, as if the child were up for auction. The strongest offers came from Camille’s sister, Billie, and her mother, Alma, who had raised Christa while Camille juggled the demands of school and work, studying childhood education at California State College, Los Angeles, at night, working at a local bank by day, and developing her art. But Camille wouldn’t budge. She worried that her mother was too old and too tired to raise a child, and she was suspicious of her sister’s husband, who she felt was unpredictable.

“I’m going to take her. She’s mine,” Camille announced to the women. “And there’s nothing any of you can do about it.” Camille woke Christa up, walked her to the black Volkswagen Beetle parked in the driveway, and drove the child to the Los Angeles Children’s Home Society of California. There, she released her grip on Christa’s hand and told her to go to the bathroom inside. When Christa reappeared, grasping her small teddy bear and looking for her mother, she saw the black car driving away.



Camille Billops and her daughter Christa in Los Angeles, circa 1957.



Christa, age four, circa 1960.

IN THE NEARLY 60 YEARS since Camille Billops made the decision to give up her daughter, she has become an internationally recognized artist and filmmaker. I first encountered Camille’s work at the 2017 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women*, which included two of her prints. That fall, after visiting the studio of Emma Amos, who spoke admiringly about a radical artist friend with a quick tongue that she never held, I recalled the name from the exhibition. Emma shared Camille’s number with me, insisting that I speak with her. Camille answered on the first ring and invited me over.

Now 85, Camille lives with her husband, James Hatch, in a sprawling artist loft in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City. She never had another child; after giving up Christa, Camille threw herself into her art and, along with Jim, nurtured the careers of young black artists in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, using their loft to blur the line between public discourse and private domesticity. Over the decades, Camille and Jim have amassed an archive filled with over 5,000 books, letters, papers, and scripts, and twice as many photographs documenting contemporary black art since the late ’60s, when black artists were excluded from showing in many galleries and museums in New York City. They shared rare intimate pieces with me, including handwritten letters from artist Emma Amos, audio files from filmmaker Julie Dash, and first drafts of Amiri Baraka’s plays. The collection is a way for Camille and Jim to assert the existence and insistence of black artistry. “It is important that we write our own histories,” Camille insists. “Otherwise, they will say we were never here.”

Surrounding themselves with artifacts of their journey is, perhaps, also a way for the couple, married since 1986, to be reminded of their own pasts: Both Camille and Jim are losing their minds to dementia. Jim's condition, diagnosed 15 years ago, is more aggressive; in a conversation I had with them in 2017, he often became confused and interjected comments about his Iowa childhood. Camille, unprompted, kept coming back to the matter of giving up her daughter 56 years ago. "You have to forgive your guilt," she says. "I gave her up when she was four. I should have done it earlier. It was hard, but I did what was best for both of us."



Billops and James Hatch in De Neve Square Park, Los Angeles, circa 1961, shortly before moving to Egypt. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

CAMILLE'S FAMILY BELIEVED she abandoned Christa because of the affair she was having with Jim, a white man who was then married with two children. The two had been introduced by Camille's stepsister, Josie, in 1959; Josie had been Jim's student in the theater department at UCLA, where Jim was a professor. Camille was working as a teacher of physically handicapped children in the Los Angeles public-school system and doing amateur ceramics work in her free time. Camille asked Jim to come over and take a look at her pots. Camille tells me that Jim was the first person to tell her that she was a good artist.

Camille grew up in Los Angeles to parents who had come to California during the Great Migration. Like many southern blacks, they came in search of opportunity and a chance to escape the violence inflicted on black bodies in the Jim Crow south. In L.A. they worked in service to white folks; it wasn't necessarily work that they couldn't attain in the South, it was their dignity. In Los Angeles, her father, Luscious Billops from Texas, worked as a cook, and

her mother, Alma Gilmore from South Carolina, was a domestic and seamstress. Their southern traditions folded neatly within their being. Whiteness was still seen by her parents as superior in eloquence and refinement; the Billops would emulate white customs in their home. But when the burlap curtains were closed at night, Luscious would drink like a fish until he passed out and his wife would carry him to bed.

Alma bestowed her beliefs of black female servitude on her daughters, Camille and Billie, from a young age. Camille had been taught that motherhood and womanhood were inextricable. If you were not a mother, then what would you be? But the youngest child will always rebel, and at the age of ten, Camille decided she would never have children.



Billops working at her apartment on 11th Street in New York, circa 1970.



Camille Billops's artwork 9/11 #4, 2005. Courtesy of Swann Auction Galleries.

CAMILLE MET CHRISTA'S FATHER, Stanford, through a mutual friend in 1955, when she was in her early 20s. Stanford was a tall, striking lieutenant stationed at the Los Angeles Air Force Base in El Segundo. As she told bell hooks in a 1996 interview, Camille was drawn mostly to Stanford's appearance and the validation that his beauty would bring in her community. "I loved him, because he was fine," she said. "He was everything I wanted that thing to be"—that thing being the performance of opulence.

A few months into their relationship, Camille discovered she was pregnant. Despite her disinterest in motherhood, she decided that if she and Stanford were going to go through with parenthood, they had to do it traditionally. Five hundred wedding invitations were printed, but before the guests received them by mail, Stanford was gone. Camille called around, searching for him, and the Air Force base informed her of his military discharge.



Billops in Los Angeles, circa 1952.

When she met Jim, his confidence in Camille's work was a catalyst for her shift into a new way of being. His emotional and creative support provided her with permission to be whomever she pleased in any given moment, even if that meant not being pretty and proper, something Camille's family had taught her a woman should be at all costs. She began slowly shedding the cultural influences of middle-class black America and entered a milieu made up of artists and activists who spent their days protesting school segregation and black oppression. It was the early 1960s, the height of the civil rights movement, and Camille was the mistress of a white man who believed in her, a relationship that contradicted all that she had been taught about whiteness. Photographs of Camille with baby Christa show a polished and respectable-looking young woman with permed hair and slicked-down edges, wearing tailored dresses and kitten heels. But in photographs taken with Jim in 1962, just after she gave up Christa, you can see the start of her physical evolution. She cuts off her permed roller-set curls and begins wearing her hair in a small, perfectly picked Afro. As the years pass, her eye makeup becomes darker and more pronounced until she settles into her signature personal style: vividly printed clothing, hair in beaded cornrows, and makeup of thick black eyeliner, resembling the ancient Egyptian symbol the eye of Ra.



Christa, around the time Camille gave her up for adoption.

Jim respected Camille's decision to give up Christa. But he also suspected that Camille was leaving the child for a life he could not promise her; he was still married to someone else, after all. ("Don't give Christa up for me," he told her.) A few months after Camille abandoned Christa at the Children's Home, Jim was offered a Fulbright appointment to teach at the High Cinema Institute in Cairo, Egypt—one of the centers of the 1960s Pan-African movement, in which young American artists and activists like Maya Angelou and Malcolm X developed stronger ties with African nations. He invited Camille to visit before his wife and kids arrived, and she went without hesitation. Before heading back to the United States, Camille told Jim she would not return to visit him unless he left his wife and children; he did. "We chose each other and entered into another life," she tells me. "That's when the world opened."

After joining Jim in Cairo in 1962, this time for good, Camille began experimenting with sculpture; her first exhibition at Gallerie Akhenaton, in Cairo, comprised a small collection of ceramic pots and sculptures modeled on those close to her—especially Jim, who would become her muse. Camille had a voracious appetite for exploring any medium she could get her hands on: photography, painting, printmaking, and eventually filmmaking. She

spent many years creating and showing her work in Egypt, Germany, and China before returning to the US with Jim, only to find her own country less than welcoming to black women artists.



Hatch and Billops with their cat, Shango, 1972. Courtesy of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library at Emory University; used with permission.

IN 1965, AFTER COLLABORATING on a self-published book of poetry called *Poems for Niggers and Crackers*, which included poems written by Jim and Ibrahim Ibn Ismail about racialized violence in America with illustrations by Camille, Camille and Jim returned to the United States, where they settled into New York City's East Village. Jim had secured a teaching position in theater at City College of New York, while Camille worked toward her MFA at City University of New York, where she also taught ceramics.

It was less than two years before the United States Supreme Court would make interracial marriage legal in all 50 states, and racial and gendered injustices persisted across all sectors of America. The art world was no exception. The erasure of black artists, particularly black female artists, from museum and galleries throughout the 1970s and 1980s led many of them to form coalitions of resistance without financial support or institutional

funding, often gathering around the kitchen tables of their Manhattan walk-ups, forming collectives like Women Artists in Revolution. “I was with all of the various nigga bitches,” Camille tells me. “May Stevens, Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett. We were fighting so hard, but they wouldn’t let us in. So we said, ‘Well, fuck you and the horse you rode in on.’”

Camille and Jim began hosting shows and selling their work in their small studio loft on East 11th Street. In the early ’80s, a friend of a friend came to them with an offer: he was selling a bare, 4,000-square-foot loft in SoHo, and told Camille and Jim that if they could gather \$11,000 in cash, it was theirs. Over the years, the couple built out the loft with a studio for Camille, an office for Jim, and a library that was open to their peers and students from City College. “We invited everybody here: friends, students and white folks, gallerists and curators. We sold art right off our walls,” Camille says. “I stopped begging a long time ago when I discovered I could sell art without having to kiss booty.”



The 11th Street loft, 1972. Hatch can be seen at his desk in front; Billups is in the back, working on her pottery.

IN THE EARLY 1980S, Camille’s work began to shift from the figurative toward the biographical. (She told bell hooks that the most revolutionary thing an artist can do is make work about their own life: “Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together.”) Camille began staging plays in her living room, then eventually transitioned into 16 mm filmmaking, through which she explored

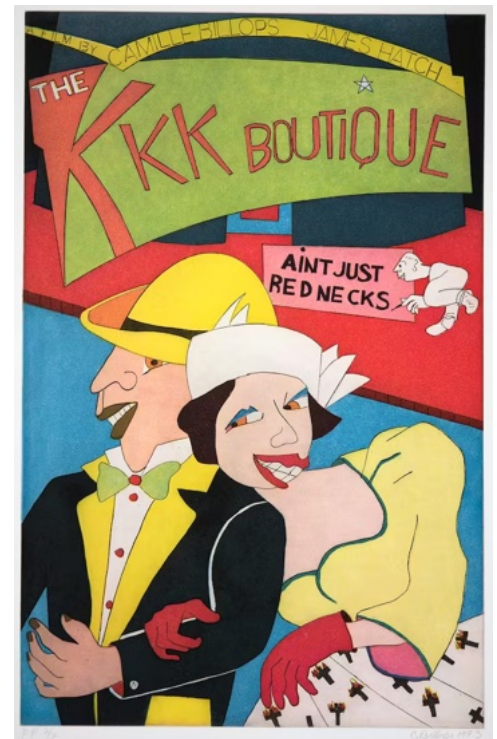
themes that she witnessed as a child but wasn't quite able to interpret. Her memory collided with the new world she had carefully and meticulously molded, and she began dissecting the normalcy of suppression that led many to addiction in her family.

Then, in 1981, Camille received an envelope containing a cassette tape. It was from Christa, now 24 years old. Christa's adoptive mother, a jazz singer in Oakland, had begun to sense a sadness and longing in her daughter and had encouraged Christa to find her birth mother—to find closure.

“It was a great shock to me,” Camille says. Christa wrote, composed, and recorded a song for Camille, as art was her most fluent form of communication, too. “Naturally, she was an artist like me. It's in her blood,” Camille tells me proudly. Christa's lyrics asked if Camille would meet with her.



The KKK Boutique, 1994, color offset lithograph by Billops. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Brandywine Workshop; used with permission.



The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks, 1993, etching and aquatint by Billops. Courtesy of Manneken Press; used with permission.

After receiving the tape, Camille, generally fearless by nature, was terrified. “I had already learned how to live with my guilt about giving her up,” she says. “I wasn't trying to come out from beneath the water.” However, after considering the artistic possibilities, Camille sacrificed her comfort for the opportunity to share their story through art. Camille, not fully able to predict the emotional consequences of this commitment, contacted Dion Hatch, Jim's son from his first marriage, and asked him to be the cameraman and director of photography on a film documenting their reunion; the film would be mistitled *Finding Christa*. “That was Camille's approach to everything,” Dion tells me. “Make it art.”

Camille called Christa and invited her to visit her in New York City. Camille, along with Jim, would meet Christa at Newark Airport with a warm but brief embrace. Christa, beaming with a palpable energy, would greet Camille as “Bootsie,” the name she had called her mother when she was a child; even then, she was not allowed to call her Mama.



A still from Billops's documentary *Finding Christa*, in which Billops and Christa reunite at Newark Airport, early 1980s. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

FINDING CHRISTA, RELEASED IN 1991, is a 55-minute documentary that combines Camille's parents' home-video footage, present-day interviews, and staged reenactments that mirror Camille's signature surrealist style. (The misleading title of the movie—Christa was the one who found Camille, not the other way around—belies its creator's preference to undertake a project that adheres to feeling over fact.)

The film opens with a childhood image of Christa, her adult voice pleading, “Why did you give me away?” Later, we see a pregnant Camille with her family in 1950s Los Angeles, footage that reveals a young, polished woman. Perhaps this was her best acting performance, pretending to be content with her circumstances. The most emotionally gripping moments in the film happen when Camille interviews the women of her family who had fought to keep Christa, as they divulge that they never stopped searching for her. In one scene, Camille asks an elder, “Why do you think I gave Christa away?” In

true auntie form, the older woman gives Camille the side-eye and responds, “You don’t want me to answer that.” They all believed Jim was the culprit.

Christa comes across as forgiving and grateful toward Camille in the film; it’s evident that the young woman, also an artist, feels connected to her biological mother. They became artistic collaborators—the only form of bonding that Camille was capable of engaging in. But Christa yearns for an affection that Camille was not equipped to offer her. In one scene, Christa says that Camille sees her like an octopus, wanting to extend all parts of herself around the woman that birthed her, and that she sees Camille “like a cactus,” sharp and defensive. Camille’s appearances in the film can come across as cold as she shows no remorse and her explanations of what ultimately led her to her decision lack depth. She becomes repetitive, saying, “I was not a good mother,” without giving context to what that meant for her at the time.



Christa, Los Angeles, circa 1961. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.



Christa and her adoptive mom, circa 1989. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

Reenactments throughout the film fall flat, as Camille’s acting is less than convincing, and some scenes feel contrived. One reenactment shows Christa overwhelmed as she sits alongside Camille looking through family photo albums when her adoptive mother, Margaret, calls to check on her, and Camille continues speaking to her in the background. Christa is torn between the two women of differing significance to her identity, wanting to appease them both. Margaret is later shown lovingly handing Christa over to Camille as Christa prepares to move to New York to study and pursue her singing career, with the guidance of Camille. The film concludes with Camille expressing gratitude for Margaret. “You did good, Margaret,” Camille says. “I would have died, and if I would have died, she would have died.” The final frame falls on Camille. She is holding a lit sparkler in the dark of night, her face gleaming behind the smoke. We hear her say, above a soft lullaby, “Welcome back, Christa. Welcome back.”

Dion, working as the cameraman, tells me that the power exchange between mother and daughter on set was palpable. During filming, which would take over a decade to complete, Camille let Christa stay in her home and Jim began mentoring Christa as an actor, encouraging her talent and earning the

ire of his wife, who felt she was suddenly in competition for her husband's attention. While Camille embodies a more obvious dominance, she becomes threatened by Christa's subverted power and becomes territorial.

Camille acknowledges this candidly, saying, "She took up space in a way that was threatening to me. This caused friction when she was staying with us."



Camille and Christa in Los Angeles, circa 1981. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

FINDING CHRISTA WON the Grand Jury Documentary prize at Sundance in 1992, making Camille the first and only black woman producer and director ever to be given the award. But the postproduction success of the film led to the deterioration of the very reconciliation that it purported to document; Camille felt that Christa was trying to take credit for the film. "She was beginning to claim the film, saying it was her film," she says.

"I would correct her and let her know, 'This ain't your place. You don't own this,'" Camille continues. "I suppose there was some essence of competitiveness." She insisted that Christa not be present at the Sundance award ceremony, against Jim's suggestion.

The film may have raised more questions than it provided answers—at least for Christa. After filming wrapped, Christa was still consumed by the question that she would continue to pose to Camille off-camera: why did you give me away? “She had what all adoptees call ‘the great wound,’” Camille says. “I tried to explain to her that I didn’t want to be a mother. But it was complicated.”

Mammys Little Coal Black Rose

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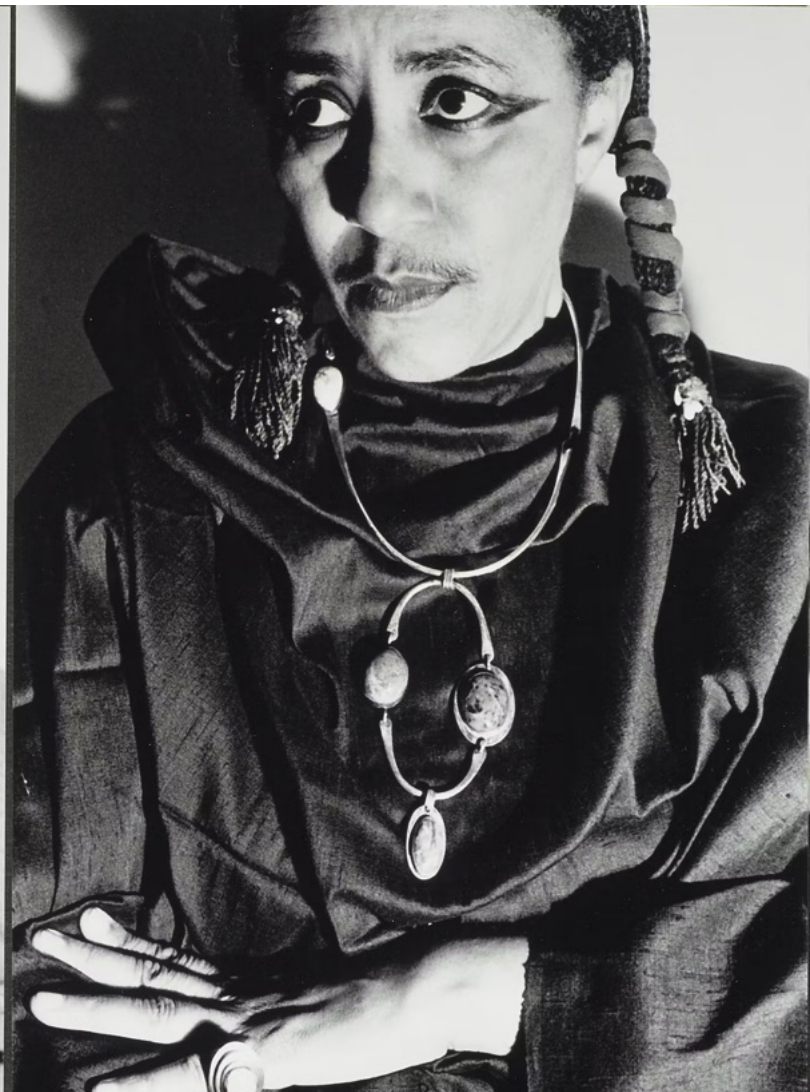
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MUSIC BY
RICHARD A. WHITING



Christa had begun establishing herself as a singer and performer in New York City outside of Camille. Jim and Christa continued to nurture their relationship, meeting daily at the Tai Chi courts downtown. Even when Christa and Camille were not speaking, which happened intermittently for years, Jim assisted Christa in writing and revising her self-published spiritual memoir, *On the Path*, published in 2007. On the acknowledgments page she writes, “To my mother ‘Bootsie,’ thank you for telling me, each day to work a little, find joy a little, and hit the ground running.” But the moments of joy became more and more infrequent compared to the shouting and searing cruelty, when they couldn’t find the courage to admit to one another: *I can’t be what you need me to be.*

Over two decades following the completion of *Finding Christa* and as many years trying to establish a relationship that would feel compatible for both of them, Camille gave up. She did not have the emotional capacity to sustain a relationship with her daughter outside of creating with her. In 2013, Camille advised Jim to send her daughter an email saying that Christa was to no longer initiate any communication with them. In a 2014 note posted on her Facebook page, Christa references this email, saying she had “given up twice.” Christa made attempts to reconcile by sending flowers and letters, but Camille never budged. When people would mention Christa’s name at the loft, Camille would say, “We’re not talking about her. You’re forbidden from mentioning her here.”



IN 2016, AFTER THREE YEARS of not speaking to one another, Camille received a call informing her that 59-year-old Christa, alone in her Bronx apartment, had died of heart failure after refusing a necessary operation. “It was early in the morning,” Camille says of receiving the call. “Like a blast from the furnace. You have to stand very still and face it.” Deeply affected, the 83-year-old’s physical health began to decline rapidly. “It really took a toll on Camille,” Dion tells me. “She wouldn’t admit it, but I don’t think she expected to outlive her daughter.”

These days, Camille’s own health is deteriorating. Her moments of lucidity are infrequent. But she still remembers to grieve Christa. Of all her worldly experiences, her mind keeps bringing her back to the only child she ever bore, an inescapable connection that she could not have anticipated. Still incapable of truly expressing her grievances verbally, she says that she created the films *Suzanne, Suzanne* (1982), *Finding Christa*, and *String of Pearls* (2002) as a trilogy, speaking to the consequences of buried suffering and inherited trauma in the black community.



I Am Black, I Am Black, I Am Dangerously Black, 1973, by Billops. Courtesy of Swann Auction Galleries; used with permission.



For Japanese with Mirrors, 1975, by Billops. Courtesy of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library at Emory University; used with permission.

Camille challenged assumptions about what a black woman was capable of beyond motherhood. She chose herself, even when everything around her said that her purpose was to serve, soothe, and comfort—a rejection of the position of mammy, a domestic expectation often assigned to black women. After watching the women she respected going to work to serve white families, then returning home to serve drunken, abusive men who were angry about their positions in the world, Camille courageously decided to disentangle herself from the tradition of endurance. “I didn’t see this as feminist then,” Camille insists. “I just knew I wanted to reverse it. I wanted to be free of motherhood.”

Her genius lies in her ability to imagine black futures when black people were being publicly mangled during the fight for equality. When others were rightfully concerned about whether they would live to see tomorrow, Camille

spent her days documenting the landscape for others to look back on. The future that Camille envisioned was one that benefited the well-being and advancement of not just one individual being that she had birthed, but an entire generation of artists and scholars who were nourished by her contributions and preservations as an artist and archivist.

Ultimately it was Christa, an equally dedicated artist, who ended up as a casualty of Camille's ambitious defiance. Christa had said that meeting her birth mother and her biological family saved her life, but some may argue that it led to her demise. Giving her up, reuniting, and then giving her up again are choices that Camille cannot cease knowing she made, even in her present condition. "I had to bury it," she says now. "It has to have a place. Sometimes I feel her when I am working."



Billops, New York City, circa 1980.

Camille Billops passed away on June 1, 2019 at the age of 85, several weeks after the publication of this piece. The last time I saw Camille in April, she was as charismatic as ever. Even in her final months, she maintained her defiant and magnetic spirit and I am grateful to have spent time sitting at her feet and inhaling her stories. Billops is survived by her life partner and muse James Hatch, who still resides in the loft that they built together in SoHo, as well as the artist community of New York City that she fostered.

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