

A Spotlight on the Winners

May 20, 2026



Image courtesy of RATHAUS Films

RATHAUS is a production company founded in 2016 by Madeleine Askwith, Alexandra Byer, Shabier Kirchner, and Kevin Steen. Working between Detroit, MI and Brooklyn, NY, the team creates progressive films, branded content, and music videos for clients around the globe. They represent leading creative voices, offering collective support to inspire each other as they each grow in their careers in the industry. For over a decade, RATHAUS has grown their portfolio through the production of a variety of projects including Sarah Friedland's Venice Film Festival award winning *Familiar Touch*, Noah Pritzker's *Ex-Husbands*, Tim Sutton's *Funny Face* and *Dark Night*, Cedric Cheung-Lau's *The Mountains are a Dream that Call to Me*, and Diana Peralta's *De Lo Mio*. They also produced the short films *Daron*, *Daron Colbert* by Kevin Steen and *Dadli* by Shabier Kichner. In 2020, RATHAUS was awarded a Webby Award for Best Branded Documentary for Kevin Steen's *A Surfer's Search*.



Image courtesy of RATHAUS Films



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On April 28, 2026, RATHAUS Films announced three Detroit-based filmmakers as the recipients of the 2026 Rathaus Film Grant. This funding opportunity was started by the company in 2023 as a way to support independent projects by local producers. In addition to the monetary support, this year's winning projects and filmmakers will receive mentorship from the panelists of the 2026 jury.

The 2023 cycle granted \$10,000 to Jofre Beltran for their project City No, Motor, and \$5,000 to Paige Wood for her film Mortal (Hot Comb)at. The 2024 cycle granted \$10,000 to Arrielle Sadé Mock in support of her project Mercury, and this year—in partnership with Song United—RATHAUS was able to expand its impact to support three filmmakers with grants of \$10,000, \$6,000 and \$4,000. The 2026 jury included Darol Olu Kae, Ina Pira, Monique Walton, Kathy Kieliszewski, and Kevin Steen, who reviewed the portfolios of 70 applicants to make their selection of filmmakers who are residing in Detroit and have strong creative visions. There were no guidelines as far as the genres they were looking for, it was the applications with a clear creative vision and plan for how the funds would be used rose to the top.



Image courtesy of Paisley Sutton

The first place winner of \$10,000 for the 2026 RATHAUS Film Grant is **Paisley Sutton**, who won for her experimental documentary titled *The Popes*. Sutton will work with Patrice Cheesman to produce this film that comprises intimate interviews and vivid vignettes, which uncover the intense parallels between her family in 2025 and her ancestors, a first-generation freed family called the Popes who lived in Gilded Age-era Georgetown, D.C.

“Paisley Sutton’s *The Popes* stood out for its sophisticated layering of documentary and experimental storytelling. The concept of blood memory combined with archival imagery and intergenerational dialogue creates a deeply personal yet universally resonant celebration of Black heritage, and the jury was genuinely moved by the vision.”

– Kathy Kieliszewski Jury Member, Journalist, and Filmmaker



Image courtesy of Rachel Debolski

In second place, the winner of \$6,000 is **Rachel Debolski** for her narrative short film, *Bite Marks* that will center around a timid teenage girl who is lured into the night by a late-night text from her crush and a loose dog. This girl faces an unsettling encounter with an older man, and must navigate fear, fantasy, and the unspoken dangers of politeness.

“Rachel’s film leverages the full cinematic toolkit to dissolve the boundary between viewer and subject, creating a visceral embodiment of the protagonist’s physical and emotional reality. Moved by the immersive approach to this personal story, we’re excited to support *Bite Marks* and hope it contributes to the ongoing conversation around the social conditioning of young women and the delicate ways we navigate expectations.”

– Ina Pira Jury Member and Film Curator.



Image courtesy of Bree Gant

Third place winner of \$4,000 is **Bree Gant** for her video and installation artwork called *Map to the Moon*. This work will be a multichannel film that charts a path across the inner worlds and external realities of Black femmes in Detroit. Gant recognizes the moon has a longtime metric and goal for spiritual, political, and technological development in American and global imaginaries. This project looks to earth's satellite as a departure for examining the relationship between consciousness and mobility among the Motor City's largest demographic.

“Bree Gant represents an essential voice in Detroit's contemporary art landscape. With *Map to the Moon*, they present a compelling multichannel work that examines the inner worlds and external realities of Black femmes, reframing the moon as a lens for understanding mobility in spiritual, political, and technological terms. Bree's ability to connect questions of consciousness to place is both rigorous and imaginative, offering a powerful reorientation of Detroit's cultural and geographic identity. We are proud to support this timely and expansive project.”

– Darol Olu Kae Jury Member and Film Director

**Meet the team RATHAUS team:**

Madeleine Askwith is a creative producer from Aotearoa, New Zealand who has shot all over the world. Maddy produced Cedric Cheung-Lau's *THE MOUNTAINS ARE A DREAM THAT CALL TO ME* (Sundance 2020) and Tim Sutton's *FUNNY FACE* (Berlinale 2020). She co-produced Matthew Porterfield's *SOLLERS POINT* (San Sebastian 2017) and production managed Tim Sutton's *DARK NIGHT* (Sundance 2016). Maddy has also produced award winning documentaries such as *EARTH WORKS* (Viceland 2017) and *RUNNING IN NORTH KOREA* (The Olympic Channel 2019). She is a 2020 IFP-Cannes Producers Network Fellow.

Kevin Steen is a Detroit-based, award-winning Film Director who has earned recognition for his contributions to a plethora of commercial and narrative driven projects. Steen's film *Daron, Daron Colbert* screened in competition at prestigious festivals such as Clermont-Ferrand (France 2023) and Locarno (Switzerland 2022). Kevin recently won the 2020 Webby Award for Best Branded Documentary for his short film *A SURFER'S SEARCH*. He has also earned recognition from the National Film Festival for Talented Youth (2010), Mountainfilm (2020), and multiple Vimeo Staff Picks. He is a co-founder of RATHAUS Films.

Alexandra Byer is a producer based in Brooklyn, NY. She most recently produced Tim Sutton's fifth feature *FUNNY FACE* (Gravitas Ventures) and Cedric Cheung-Lau's debut feature *THE MOUNTAINS ARE A DREAM THAT CALL TO ME* (Sundance Film Festival 2020). Byer was nominated for the John Cassavetes Award at the 2020 Independent Spirit Awards for Tom Quinn's *COLEWELL* (Gravitas Ventures). She also produced Diana Peralta's *DE LO MIO* (HBO), Matt Porterfield's *SOLLERS POINT* (Oscilloscope Laboratories), and Tim Sutton's *DARK NIGHT* (Sundance Film Festival 2016; Arbelos Films). *DARK NIGHT* won the Lanterna Magica Prize at the 2016 Venice Film Festival where the movie had its international premiere.

Cedric Cheung-Lau is a New York based filmmaker. His first feature film, *THE MOUNTAINS ARE A DREAM THAT CALL TO ME* had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020. Previously, Cheung-Lau directed the short "Topography of a Hotel," which had its premiere at the 2015 Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. He has also been the Chief Lighting Technician on a number of critically acclaimed films such as *A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT*, *LOVE AFTER LOVE*, *CHRISTINE*, and *PATTI CAKE\$*.

Shabier was born and raised in the Caribbean island of Antigua, where he shot and directed his short film *DADLI*. Named in 2018 as one of Variety’s Cinematographers to watch and more recently as one of Filmmaker Magazine’s 25 New Faces of Independent Film. Kirchner’s work as DoP can currently be seen in Steve McQueen’s *SMALL AXE* collection of five films. Shabier’s other feature film work as Cinematographer includes Celine Song’s *PAST LIVES*, Harry Wootliff’s *ONLY YOU*, Crystal Moselle’s *SKATE KITCHEN*, Matthew Porterfield’s *SOLLERS POINT*, Amiel Courtin-Wilson’s *EMPYREAN*, and Thomas Woodrow’s *WE’VE FORGOTTEN*.

Bradley Tangonan is a film and commercial director based in New York City. With a keen eye for powerful visual narrative, he brings stories to life through a heightened blend of verité and magical realism. Bradley’s work has been featured on AdAge, ADDY Awards, Tribeca X, VICE, Nowness, One Club, Condé Nast Traveler, Vimeo Staff Picks, The Atlantic, National Geographic, and The Smithsonian Institute.

Alexander Christenson is a Palo Alto born, Los Angeles based filmmaker. He received BAs in Screenwriting and Philosophy from Loyola Marymount University. His short films, *This Always Happens* and *A Phone Call From My Best Friend*, were both Vimeo Staff Picks. His promo for The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation featured Leonardo DiCaprio, John Kerry, Van Jones and is streaming on [leonardodicaprio.org](http://leonardodicaprio.org). Additional clients and recognition include The New York Times, Sotheby’s, Filmmaker Magazine, Short of the Week, Nowness, Shots, The 1.4 Awards and Booooooom.com.

For those interested in applying, you can follow Rathaus on social media and their website.

<https://www.rathausfilms.com/>

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