

JA'TOVIA GARY THE GIVERNY SUITE



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To occupy the venues of art history and introduce new imagery to them is one of art's *raison d'être*. An image is always an expression of a specific perspective, way of thinking, and present. In her work *The Giverny Suite* (2019), Ja'Tovia Gary shows the extent to which not only images, but also how we see them, are subject to ideological influences. In the iconic landscapes of Claude Monet, Gary stages the collision between idyll and imperialism. Against the background of this total construction of nature, the Black female body appears to be protected by the usual exoticizing gaze. Yet in view of the blatantly asymmetrical power structure, the figure of the *négresse* in the film adopts a transgressive position. In interviews conducted on the streets of Harlem, the omnipresent vulnerability is every bit as palpable as the strong, warm sense of connectedness among Black women and girls.

Images of self-empowerment—for example of Nina Simone during her concert in Montreux or of the Black Panther activist Fred Hampton—clash with film footage of Josephine Baker as a caged bird, shots of drone strikes carried out in Syria and Afghanistan under the tenure of Barack Obama with the film sequences Diamond Reynolds took with her cell phone following the fatal shooting of her partner Philando Castile during a police traffic stop in Minnesota. All of these many images seem to merge in the question posed by Joseline Hernandez: "Can I live? Can I live? Can I fucking live?"

Not Just Survival, But Pleasure: Black Women's Intimacy and Collectivity Across Space

Yasmina Price

Nina Simone pauses her song and shifts her voice to take on a robotic, stilted cadence: "As a robot gets herself together, and we do it, and we get to the *mid-dle* where we have forgotten our *fee-lings* of love—you will help me, huh?" Simone's brief cyborg impersonation is a striking accentuation of the automated mechanisms of the performance space. Yet this reference to the measured control of a robot also conversely highlights the boundless, enthralling emotionality and exhaustive affective labor of her presence on stage. Taking up the two exterior panels in the first few seconds of *The Giverny Suite* installation, Simone is performing Morris Albert's "Feelings" at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival. She is luminous in a black gown and glittering necklace. Barely a verse into the song, she pauses to add "What a shame to have to write a song like that." A fragment of a verse, another pause. Simone clarifies: "I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that."

A disbelief in the conditions that produce heartbreak is one entry point into the work of visual artist Ja'Tovia Gary. This disbelief is of a particular kind; not an inability to confront the conditions of a world structured by capitalism, anti-Blackness, and imperialism, it is rather a refusal to capitulate to the finality of those structures. Gary operates on a double cognition of the necessity of both destroying irredeemable systems and sustaining liberatory practices. Her work is channeled specifically towards the ecstatic realms of Black women's interiority. Gary's visual practice nurtures this interiority as an ability to navigate hostile environments and produce spaces of refuge.

The Giverny Suite is a digital triptych, a three-channel installation drawing from her 2017 *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)* and 2019 *The Giverny Document (Single Channel)*. This metabolized self-citation allows Gary to tease out new dimensions of her remarkable aesthetic of fluid mosaics. The three-channel is assembled from these earlier works with a rhythm of its own, weaving a multi-tonal collage of original and archival footage, marked with her manual techniques of scratching, etching, and masking. The installation demonstrates the constellation of Gary's influences: documentary *cinéma vérité*, the expressive

experimental exercises of Stan Brakhage, and intricate connections to the varied works of Black independent filmmakers Kathleen Collins, John Akomfrah, Julie Dash, and Arthur Jafa.

The earliest predecessor to the installation, the six-minute *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)* emerged from Gary's visit to Claude Monet's famed gardens. In the short film, she inhabits them like an intruder, a guardian, and a specter. The artist carefully negotiates the terms of her own embodiment in space. This installation is itself concerned with the generative relay between Black women's interiority and embodiment, considering different coordinates of fixity and movement. In the introduction to her book, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*, Kimberly Juanita Brown writes: "Rendered as simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, Black women function within the register of externally imposed enclosures."¹ *The Giverny Suite* considers the tension between being seen and unseen, exploring the way these seemingly contradictory conditions coincide. It meditates on how, for Black women, being perceived exclusively in terms of dominant forms of visibility can be equivalent to not being seen at all. These exclusionary regimes of seeing are the enclosure that Gary is working against in her installation. She seeks to generate a different register, one that can hold the multiplicities of Black women. This register is that of Black women's interiority, a limitless realm that is not bound to external enclosures. Gary's stakes in interiority trouble an easy faith in visibility as an antidote to structural erasure and exclusion—a reminder that the very terms of visibility itself are what need to change.

Giverny I (Négresse Impériale) is a dance of paradoxes. Monet's gardens, while beautiful, are also a manicured disciplining of the natural world attached to a colonial history. The short dramatizes the subversive trespass of a colonized subject at play in the colonizer's garden. Gary shows herself sitting, standing, and strolling among the luscious greenery. A series of edited shots cut between her appearing and disappearing in different areas of a clearing. Gary plots herself in the garden with the ability to traverse it in defiance of normative movement. The film is a surreal staging of a mobile Black subjectivity, which the realist ordering of the garden's physical space cannot contain.

The central projection of the three-channel installation incorporates *The Giverny Document (Single Channel)*—the 2019 forty-minute extension which shows Gary in

Monet's garden alongside other Black women—in other spaces: Nina Simone in Montreux, a series of cinéma vérité interviews with Black women and girls in Harlem, Diamond Reynolds in Minnesota, and Josephine Baker in Paris. The *Suite* is populated to foreground a complex Black womanhood which places Gary in the lineage of Kathleen Collins—whose *Losing Ground* (1982) was a direct sourcing for her 2015 short, *An Ecstatic Experience*. Gary's focus is a multivalent exploration of Black women's autonomy: as individual entities, non-monolithic collectives, strangers, and icons. There is a brief but memorable appearance by *Love & Hip Hop* star Joseline Hernandez speaking into a phone camera: "What the fuck. Can I live? Can I live? Can I fucking live?" This is not an entirely rhetorical question. Gary uses this clip to highlight the concrete uncertainty of how Black women are expected to live in material conditions that condemn so many to an acutely layered, and often uneven, precarity.

The Harlem interview clips carry on this question of livability and safety. They are organized as a re-inscription of *Chronique d'un été*, a 1961 film by social scientist duo Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. With street interviews anchored in the simple question of "Are you happy?" they turned the colonially-produced ethnographic modality onto the French public, ushering in a landmark of the cinéma vérité style of documentary filmmaking. In Gary's installation, the question becomes "Do you feel safe?" directed exclusively at Black women and girls. These are diasporic engagements: The women she speaks to are from Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Guyana, North Carolina, and New York—itsself a mapping of the currents of migration and legacies of enslavement that mark colonized and stolen lands. Critically, *The Giverny Suite* includes differences of opinion, presenting a prismatic set of answers that diverge—most clearly across generational lines—and sometimes even contradict each other. Hovering around the individual responses to the questions, and provoked by the question itself, is the knowledge of all the ongoing structures that imperil all Black women, albeit unevenly. By foregrounding this question of safety, the installation makes an adamant claim for Black womanhood against disposability.

Gary negotiates a number of spatial collapses. Her time in Giverny coincided with the murder of Philando Castile by Minnesota police, the murder of Alton Sterling by police in Louisiana, and the Pulse nightclub shooting in Florida. Bridging the geographic distance and emphasizing the

shared stakes of the foundational anti-Blackness of policing, Diamond Reynolds' Facebook live cell phone documentation of her boyfriend Castile's killing appears throughout *The Giverny Suite*. In one of the clips, Reynolds films herself having to contend with the murder of Castile while protecting her young daughter, who was also in the car, with the added violence of police officers barking "Keep your hands where they are!" at her. While Gary cites the footage, she does so with gestures of shielding. As Reynolds' agonized wail pierces through the image, parts of the video, including Castile, are hidden from view with bars of color and microscopic fragments of leaves and flowers. This ethics of concealment suggests a method that considers how filmmaking can be put to use for something other than absolute exposure. The installation seeks to circumvent participating in the traffic of images of Black people being brutalized by the state and the commodification of Black pain for spectacle. With strategies of partial visual opacity, Gary relies on sound as a mechanism for connection. The two women are sonically united in mourning: as Reynolds is saying "I don't know if he's okay or not," the "not" reverberates, glitching and mixing with a recording of Gary screaming.

The Giverny Suite draws a connection between different geographies, yoked together by their shared histories of violence. Alongside the devastating recording by Reynolds are clips of military drone footage, newsreels of Haiti post the US occupation, and Fred Hampton, a Black Panther Party chairman. Along with other Black revolutionaries, Hampton used the language of "internal colony" to describe the state of Black people in the United States. He was making an explicit connection between anti-Black terror in the Americas and global mechanisms of colonialism and imperialism. By sequencing Hampton with Castile's murder and images of US military operations in Syria and Afghanistan, Gary lays out a broad mapping of these co-constituted systems of violence. In his appearance in the installation, Hampton also designates the complicity of "negro imperialists." These words—which correspond sharply with images of drones operating during the Obama administration—are emphasized as they briefly flash in green lettering on a black background. This visual rendering of the typed words is reminiscent of early word processing graphics, another indication of the multivalence of Gary's visual language. Amongst many other co-present choreographies, her three channels transcend absolutist divisions

between analogue and digital film, using them instead as collaborative materials.

Interwoven with these images, the clips of Josephine Baker stand out starkly as the one element of traditional cinematic fiction in the installation. Gary cites specifically from Baker's appearance in *Zou Zou*, a French film made by Marc Allégret in 1934, which made her the first Black woman to star in a major motion picture. Baker was an incandescent performer, whose playful dance sequences and status as an icon comprised a negotiation of French colonialism and the restrictive visual regimes that framed her mobile, cosmopolitan persona. Against the static strangleholds of dominant cinematic technologies and colonial-racist scaffoldings of power, Baker was a fluid figure whose seductive and agile bodily contortions could also be read as a tactic of escape. She refused to be pinned down. In the film, Baker plays a circus performer who falls in love with her show partner, played by Jean Gabin, only to have that love rejected. Gary's particular choice of visual citation shows Baker in the literal gilded cage of one of her performances. Trapped and alone, she is denied any reciprocity of care.

Accenting her loneliness in the narrative of *Zou Zou*, as a cinematic icon Baker was also often isolated. This singularity is reflected in Gary's position as the lone Black woman in Monet's garden. One of the acts of mending in *The Giverny Suite* is to create relief from isolation by bringing these women together. The affective force of the piece is a collective repair, a form of love that occurs through and against solitude and disposability. Gary's methods are a generous form of gathering which comes through her interrupted sequencings of the cut, the stutter, and the flicker. These fragmentary techniques are woven together so that even in the striving towards communion and wholeness the former lines of separation are not erased. Gary's repetitive and interruptive visual method echo in the sonic glitches of recurring musical motifs. Throughout the installation, a specially commissioned mottled remix of Louis Armstrong's cover version of Edith Piaf's 1947 song "La vie en rose" by Nelson Bandela (a.k.a. Norvis Junior) and Shirley Ann Lee's "How Can I Lose" of 1968 are repeated and scrambled. Through sound and vision, Gary creates a malleable mosaic—a whole whose discrete parts remain individually visible.

Amongst the documentary and archival footage is Gary's work with the celluloid itself. She finds liveliness

in the material, fixing flower petals and leaves from Monet's garden to transparent filmstrips—a technique similar to that of experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963). The effect is dazzling: a soothing, microbial, granular choreography that electrifies the installation. These microscopic close-ups are one end of the multiple scales of Gary's attention to Black women's geographies and space-making practices. The expressive and generative charge of Gary's installation is a multi-scalar, filmic, Black women's cartography, which brings together these women from their disparate temporalities and spatialities in a gesture of capacious care. With her installation, Gary enacts the imaginative production of an alternative space of togetherness.

Negotiating what can be seen and what should be hidden, Gary combines moving sonic pieces, a fluid visual grammar, and fibrous images as part of a process of reincarnation, which draws from her earlier pieces, to yield this complex and mesmerizing three-channel work. Gary's adamant stance of collective care is antidotal to Black women's structural precarity, with a particular eye to the way the matrix of white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism, which is the United States project, has been secured by raced and gendered mechanisms of dispossession. Crucially, the register of *The Giverny Suite* is not just survival, but pleasure. This mobile triptych, spilling over itself, cultivates a luxurious world-making process through visionary flexibility and an intimate set of repetitions. With patient urgency, *The Giverny Suite* conjures a gathering, orchestrating a choreography of Black women who hold each other across space.

Work Details

The Giverny Suite, 2019

Three-channel film, HD and SD video footage,
color and b/w, stereo sound

39:56 minutes

Installation with two Orisha altars, antique settee,
various wooden frames

Variable dimensions

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (US) and Galerie Frank
Elbaz, Paris (FR)

1 Kimberly Juanita Brown, "Introduction," in Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, p. 14.

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