

I Multiply Each Day

4 December 2021 - 2 April 2022

Larry Achiampong (UK/Ghana), Christopher Ulutupu (Samoa/Niue/Germany),
Michelle Williams Gamaker (UK)

The Booth: Emily Parr (Ngāi Te Rangi, Moana, Pākehā)

I Multiply Each Day is an exhibition dedicated to artists working in moving image and premieres these artworks for the first time in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The exhibition title is a mantra taken from the opening lines of Larry Achiampong's film *Beyond the Substrata* (2020), a prophetic call to arms that dissects the socio-political threads of race, class, gender and gentrification.

As asked in the film, "What's the value of a myth if you're crushed by it? What's the point of the fight if we're the only ones to feel the pain?"

Through moving image, the artists tell stories pertinent to de-colonising narratives that, while personal, invite the spectator to consider their role in these accounts. Each artist employs a kind of 'fictional activism', a strategy first defined by Michelle Williams Gamaker and used in her practice to interrogate inequality in representation.

The exhibition features a major new commission by Te Whanganui-a-Tara based artist Christopher Ulutupu. It also features the Aotearoa premier of Achiampong's *Beyond the Substrata* and is the first time Williams Gamaker's trilogy *Dissolution* (2017-2019) will be exhibited worldwide.

Two of the exhibiting artists have been recognised by the Film London Jarman Award which supports the most innovative UK based artists working in moving image and is inspired by visionary filmmaker Derek Jarman.

Exhibiting in The Booth is Tāmaki Makaurau based artist Emily Parr. In dialogue with the themes explored in *I Multiply Each Day*, Parr's presentation centres on her own genealogical history and the proximity of her great-great-grandparents former home at nearby 9 Eden Crescent.

The exhibition is accompanied by an essay by writer, artist and curator Dilohana Lekamge.

Larry Achiampong, born 1984, UK, Ghana

Beyond the Substrata

2020

4K single channel film with stereo sound

18 minutes, 39 seconds

Larry Achiampong's *Beyond the Substrata* explores the politicisation of and violence meted on the black body. The film speaks to a tide of racist rhetoric rooted in the UK and its spiralling effect. As an artist born in London of Ghanaian heritage, Achiampong's film explores the cultural realities of growing up in poverty as a young black male in East London and the wider social and political issues affecting this area, including race, class, gender and gentrification.

Beyond the Substrata is set in an abandoned supermarket, its significance deliberate as a place of consumption where the choices on offer are rarely substantial.

Achiampong's use of the Western supermarket additionally refers to it as a space that victimises the black body. With its pulsating and beat-driven soundtrack, dancer Kanika Skye-Carr cloaked in hooded black clothing moves through the supermarket's empty aisles—her feverish gestures watched on the Malevich-like square surveillance screen above. Her graceful motions are combined with fast, erratic gestures with empty shop stands thrown to the floor and newspapers strewn and discarded. The appearance of once not out of place slogans like 'Great Offers' and 'Happy to Help' become increasingly jarring phrases to the film's narrative and mood.

Setting the tone and pace of the film is a striking voiceover from multidisciplinary artist and musician Rebekah Ubuntu whose commentary brings to bear a distinct 'us and them' reality. As stated by Ubuntu, "You're on the viewing deck and we're in the passenger seat." With increasing fervour, anger and frustration, Ubuntu's narration is empowering for those fighting against a preordained narrative of whiteness. Perhaps as an intentional strategy, Ubuntu's narration embodies a divisiveness endemic of widespread racist mentality that highlights migration, whilst mentioning the Windrush scandal and the UK's departure from the European Union as relatable examples of what minority groups face. The commentary, like the motions of the dancer and the musical score, build on and exacerbate an environment of fear where the status quo is reversed.

Beyond the Substrata connects to the artist's broader practice which has consistently addressed the complexities and injustices that have arisen as a result of the histories of colonialism, displacement and migration. Made in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic and political upheavals that saw the shocking storming of the US senate,

Beyond the Substrata speaks to a fervent mind-set of othering and ignorance that continues to beset the contemporary world. As a prophetic call to arms, the film's chilling last sentence resounds, "We've seen the re-runs."

Courtesy of the artist and Copperfield London

Michelle Williams Gamaker, born 1979, UK

Kanchi's Alphabet [Krishna Isha]

2020

Archival pigment print reproduced as wallpaper

Kanchi's Alphabet accompanies Michelle Williams Gamaker's film trilogy *Dissolution* which explores marginalised characters from Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film *Black Narcissus* (1947). The alphabet features as a script-reading test in *House of Women* (2017) and is recited by the film's protagonist, Krishna Isha, in *The Fruit is There to be Eaten* (2018). The associations used to annotate the letters in Kanchi's alphabet reveal an interest in LGBTQI+ issues with reference to a de-centred, non-Western geography.

In *The Fruit is There to be Eaten* a group of young women learn about the flora and fauna of the British Isles under the watchful eye of two nuns. Taking place in a visibly fictional restaging of a nunnery in the Himalayas during the British occupation, the group dutifully recite names of English flowers. Following instruction, they repeat in unison "A is for all heal, B is for bats in the belfry, C is for cherry palm" until they dolefully reach the end of the alphabet. Listing names and using the alphabet as a mode of learning is a device seen throughout the film trilogy and is used to reference how culture is continually repeated.

As the class continues, Krishna Isha, now in the role of Kanchi following her successful audition in *House of Women*, questions the value of this knowledge and the usefulness of learning about a culture of whom many will never experience for themselves. Isha further disregards the mother culture by reciting an alternate alphabet to the Sister's dismay, "Ann is African, Bill is bisexual, Caroline is a cartographer, David is from Darjeeling".

Isha's alphabet contests the Western-centric and classist nature of knowledge distributed in the English alphabet and rebuts the Sister's assertion that they share the culture of their mother house. Continuing to shake the foundations on which the nun's virtues are grounded, *Kanchi's Alphabet* activates Williams Gamaker's strategy of fictional activism by allowing a space for a multiplicity of readings and the generation of an alternate outcome.

Courtesy of the artist

Michelle Williams Gamaker, born 1979, UK

House of Women

2017

16mm film transferred to HDV, colour, sound

14 minutes, 5 seconds

The Fruit is There to be Eaten

2018

HDV, colour, sound

26 minutes, 36 seconds

The Eternal Return

2019

HDV, black and white, sound

17 minutes, 1 second

In the artist's film trilogy *Dissolution* comprising *House of Women*, *The Fruit is There to be Eaten*, and *The Eternal Return*, Michelle Williams Gamaker explores marginalised characters from Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film *Black Narcissus* (1947). Based on Rumer Godden's 1939 novel, *Black Narcissus* revolves around the tensions of a group of Anglican nuns whose values are challenged by the burgeoning sexuality of silent dancing girl Kanchi who tempts the young general to run away with her.

In *Black Narcissus* the coveted role of Kanchi was played by white English actor Jean Simmons. Wearing brown panstick make-up, adorned with jewels and coloured silks, Simmons and many actors of her time participated in the studio tradition of blackface. The casting of white actors in such roles reflected a desire by British and American studios to control a version of the colonies on screen and sets were constructed to give an illusion of an exotic backdrop that studios wished to present to audiences.

Informing Williams Gamaker's three films on display here is her own personal framework as a woman of colour and self-confessed cinephile whose practice aims to rewrite the fictional injustices of 20th century filmmaking and their reinstatement of spectres of imperialism. By employing methods of recasting, Williams Gamaker uses documentary and fictional modes to restage scenes from Hollywood and British

studio films to reveal their imperialist roots. She uses a strategy called *fictional activism* which the artist first defined as a way to interrogate inequality in representation. As noted by the artist, fictional activism doesn't just rest with the text, activation and tools used by the filmmaker but should actively produce images that interrogate and trouble the viewer on an emotional and political level.¹ Each of the films presented in this exhibition open up space for different interpretations to be created and importantly move beyond rather than remain in co-existence with their original source material.

The trilogy begins with *House of Women*, originally conceived as a four-channel video installation called 'Casting Kanchi' and later shortened to the version on display here. In *House of Women*, Williams Gamaker re-casts the character of Kanchi by asking only ex-pat or first-generation British Asian women and non-binary individuals living in the UK to apply. The film centres on four hopefuls competing for the role, Krishna Isha, Jasdeep Mandola, Tina Mander and Arunima Rajkumar. During the interview process each one is asked to speak and recite lines in front of a camera which includes lines from *Kanchi's Alphabet* and Rumer Godden's novel *Black Narcissus*. Alongside these recitations, the interviewees are asked about their own lives and family history, resulting in a docu-fictional text.

As Williams Gamaker notes, 'Part of the process of Fictional Activism is to resist drawing from one source, but to take multiple sources to encourage a plurality of sources as a strategy to make the film that we encounter harder to digest as a fictional object.'² Employing key photographic devices such as the black box, clapperboard and racially problematic colour chart, the deliberately clinical context in *House of Women* works to reconstruct an alienating framework of whiteness.

House of Women ends with Krishna Isha cast as Kanchi and they appear as this character in the second part of the film trilogy, *The Fruit is There to be Eaten*. Set during the British occupation of India, the film begins with Kanchi's arrival at a nunnery in the Himalayas where devotion to the culture of their mother house – the British Empire – is taught to the convent's community. In the 1947 film, the building where the nuns reside is known by locals as 'The House of Women' named after a previous ruler who kept his harem of ladies there.

The Fruit is There to be Eaten is the most pointed of the trilogy to reference the story of the 1947 film *Black Narcissus*. Centring on the character of Kanchi and two Anglican nuns, *The Fruit is There to be Eaten* focuses on the impact of Kanchi's

¹ Michelle Williams Gamaker "On Fictional Activism: Exploring the Film Trilogy Dissolution (2019).", in *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms*, edited by Katy Deepwell, Valiz, 2020, pp 41 - 53.

² Michelle Williams Gamaker "On Fictional Activism: Exploring the Film Trilogy Dissolution (2019).", in *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms*, edited by Katy Deepwell, Valiz, 2020, p 47.

arrival and the earthly desires the wildness of their surrounding environment in the Himalayas evokes. Central to the breakdown of the nuns religious calling is the revelation Kanchi makes that they are existing in a film-set in 2017 which is reiterated at the film's outset. Following Kanchi's revelation of their false surroundings, the characters and the values they embody traverse as one of the nuns succumbs to her personal desires and the other requests to be transferred after acknowledging her faltering duty. A transgression of characters also occurs through the merging of the roles of the dutiful Sister Clodagh and the tormented Sister Ruth. Played by the same actress, the Sister's embrace of carnal desires results in a further queering of this desire in the film's final scene.

The Fruit is There to be Eaten sees the greatest transformation of Kanchi as a vocalised and bold protagonist whose open questioning of their surroundings and the nun's teachings transforms the narrative and the characters outcomes.

The Eternal Return is the final film in the trilogy that looks at the historical side-lining of actors of colour. Krishna Isthā assumes the role of the Indian-born actor Sabu who starred in *Black Narcissus* and rose to fame as a child actor playing the character Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* (1942). Sabu was the son of the famous elephant rider Mahout and Sabu's career was often conflated with a character he played called Toomai in the 1937 film *Elephant Boy*. For Sabu, this association created an inescapable relationship with elephants that left him typecast as a sidekick rather than as an actor who could play a leading character or love interest. In *The Eternal Return*, Williams Gamaker explores how an actor like Sabu was trapped by the studio's classification of their identity, and explores the phenomenon of how a performer of colour might be treated as analogous to the animals he appeared with.

Krishna Isthā's role in the *Dissolution* trilogy brings a mutability to the characters with Isthā's own transformation as a non-binary individual complementing the ever-changing protagonist whose increasingly masc-presence allows the characters of Kanchi and Sabu to be played. The power of Williams Gamaker's three films come from her ability to generate a multiplicity of interpretations that in nuanced and complex ways, result in a mirroring of a fictional realm that powerfully foregrounds the historical complacency in perpetuating colonial views.

The films on display here play on a continuous loop in chronological order: *House of Women*, *The Fruit is There to be Eaten*, and *The Eternal Return*. To aid your viewing, a staff member can advise at what point the films are in their screening.

Courtesy of the artist

Christopher Ulutupu, born 1988, Te-Whanganui-a-Tara

Hidden amongst clouds

2021

16mm film transferred to HDV, colour, sound

Christopher Ulutupu's newly commissioned film extends the ongoing series *New Kid in Town* which draws on his own real-life experiences growing up in a large Samoan family in the largely Pākehā populated region of Nelson. Ulutupu's films often feature members of his family in scenarios that explore representations of Pacific people and the ongoing effects of colonial narratives.

Hidden amongst clouds newly imagines stories of Samoan mythology and questions the moral virtues that they uphold. Tales of spiritual figures are a central feature of children's fables and are used to shape an individual's character, emphasising morals like truth, obedience and the concept of consequences. Often with religious undertone, a centring of particular behaviours prompts fear of not conforming and so these fables also encourage a divergence from unconventional pathways. Ulutupu draws attention to the origins of such tales and how customary spiritual beliefs in the Pacific were impacted when Western frameworks of Christianity were introduced. For example, the arrival of Western religious values in the Pacific threatened the existence of queer culture and long-standing acceptance of fa'afafine and fakaleiti, resulting in the marginalisation of pre-colonial ideologies and cultures.

Hidden amongst clouds is informed by popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Men*, both widely recognised for their symbolism of queer culture through their narratives of the outsider as the hero. Evoking the supernatural in his film, cinematic tropes of the smoke screen and night-time woodland setting reflect an environment of fantasy where a summoning of powers or a spiritual awakening may take place. In one scene, two figures hold candles as the central figure delivers a speech from her phone. Building in momentum, the figure assumes the role of a preacher – evoking a call to action by referencing how history becomes repeated and replaced. Perhaps taking on the role of a contemporary spirit whose address challenges the virtues of the unwitting millennial or Gen-X'er, she states;

"Bro you aint no Shakespeare, Shakespeare isn't a Sophocles, you think you're a big mogul shelling your ego lining Zuckerberg's pockets. Tweet my moko."

This is an excerpt from the performer and artist Ana Scotney's personal monologue SCATTERGUN/MATEMATEAONE.

Embracing a 1990's aesthetic that harks back to the supernatural fantasy television series and their embedded symbolism, *Hidden amongst clouds* reflects Ulutupu's ongoing interest in themes of belonging and the importance of recontextualising and reimagining narratives of colonial stereotypes. By eschewing the usual moral underpinnings often commonly reinforced in children's fables, Ulutupu presents a space where the divergent and eccentric hold the power and a new set of virtues are foregrounded.

Courtesy of the artist and Jhana Millers Gallery