

FILM

SOUND GARDEN

February 03, 2020 • Ayanna Dozier on Ja'Tovia Gary's *The Giverny Document* (2019)



Ja'Tovia Gary, *THE GIVERNY SUITE* (detail), 2019, film, 42 minutes, three-channel installation, stereo sound, HD and SD video footage, color and black-and-white, 1920 x 1080, 16:9 aspect ratio, dimensions variable.

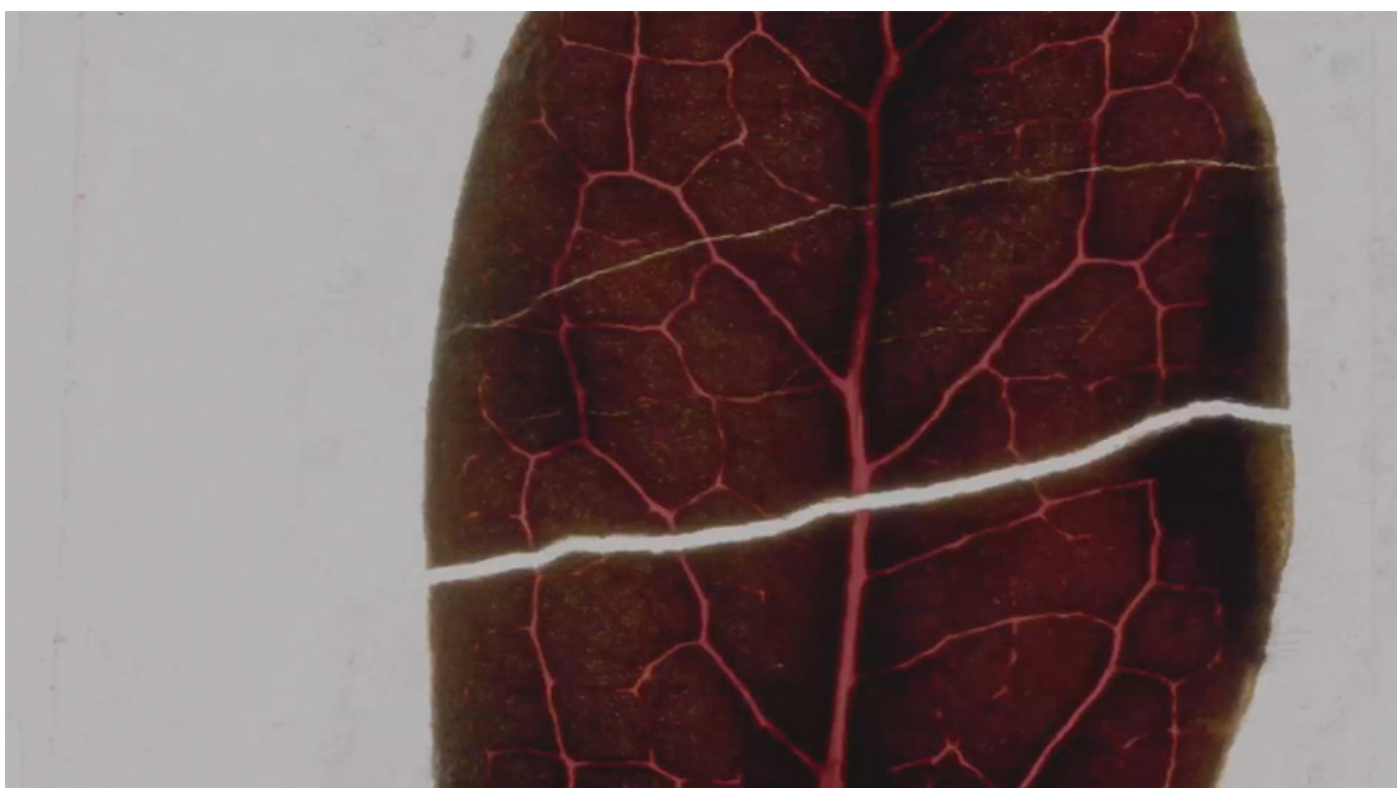
“You know how the young folks are.” – woman to Ja'Tovia Gary

“Yeah, I do. They're too crunk.” – Ja'Tovia Gary

THE GIVERNY DOCUMENT IS A NOISY FILM, full of music, yelling, screaming, crying, scratching, wailing, and laughter. But the most deafening moments unfold in silence, when viewers are left to assess what is missing, what cannot be represented. Consider the deep pauses and puzzled faces of the Black women and girls standing on the corner of 116th Street and Malcom X Boulevard in Harlem, thinking of how to answer filmmaker Ja'Tovia Gary's

question, the one that structures this movie: “Do you feel safe in your body, in the world?” Their responses vary widely, as do the places these women hail from: Sierra Leon, Guyana, North Carolina (Gary herself was born and raised in Dallas, Texas, and purposefully invokes that detail in the film). Their replies do not resolve the question, but rather reveal how, for Black women and girls, safety is always a negotiation with the world and oneself amid a backdrop of white supremacy and patriarchal terror (many of the young girls report being followed by men at night, for instance).

Gary’s forty-minute experimental film, her first feature, incorporates and extends her 2017 short *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)*. *The Giverny Document* bounces through a plurality of texts: Gary on the streets in Harlem in a wig, evoking Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronique d’un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961); Gary in Giverny, sans wig; surveillance footage of drone strikes; Fred Hampton advocating for education of the Negro lest we befall the imperial mindset of the colonists; and Nina Simone’s vying with her cover of Morris Albert’s “Feelings” at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival.



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The medium’s material texture is emphasized throughout, often to playful effect. Animation is drawn directly onto the film stock: a diamond, an anchor, a crescent moon, and a comb, among other emblems. Glitches recur, often in sync with the soundtrack’s tempo, evoking the familiar jam of digital images. But these bugs are analog aberrations, achieved through

cameraless footage, à la Stan Brakhage, of hand-pressed leaves, activated by light and movement. Gary troubles *mise-en-scène* with these celluloid tears, fracturing the frame's capacity to hold a scene or body together. These schisms dominate the scenes of Gary in Monet's famous gardens in Giverny, France, drawing attention to the disjuncture her Black body brings to a landscape exemplary of White European cultural production that emerged alongside brute colonialism.

Black artists have long struggled with the documentary image, recognizing its ethnographic history of negatively shaping perceptions of global Black populations. For makers such as Portia Cobb, Jamika Ajalon, and Yvonne Welborn—all Black feminist experimental documentarists—documentary is a critical terrain to reclaim, often through experimental tactics that reveal how images have multiple “truths” in their production, circulation, and meaning. What Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation,” then, enables Gary to best draw out the Black noise of daily life. Sequence of being, walking down the street, elongated periods of emotional exchange and anxiety accumulate to produce an affect of lived experience that evades narrative capture and transcends representation, understood here as the flattening of a body into an image read purely for its content. Artists like Gary are working against representation to reveal a way of feeling and responding to documentation of Black life differently. Her aesthetics recall Hartman on the urgency of scrambling the archival validity of representation: “Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method [fabulation], as is the imperative to respect Black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excesses of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism. . .”



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Following the opening shots of cameraless film and repurposed 16-mm images of a waterfall set to Shirley Ann Lee's "How Can I Lose," Gary incorporates cell phone footage of *Love & Hip Hop* star Joseline Hernandez speaking to the camera: "Can I fucking live?" This clip's "portrait mode" has become the default format for documenting our lives. The Camera phone format reemerges in Diamond Reynolds's 2016 footage of a Minnesota police officer killing Philando Castile, her boyfriend, a clip incorporated midway through the film, while Gary wanders Monet's gardens.

The internet's archival resources have made citation a near-mandatory element of digital production, and images of quotidian Black life have become key components of contemporary media. Gary complicates the over-willingness to deploy images of Black pain, death, sorrow, and trauma by distorting archival footage. Her presentation of Reynolds's livestream, for example, strategically omits the dead body of Castile, puncturing the frame with collaged leaves. We are not experiencing the digital replay of this event, but rather viewing a distortion that encourages audiences to feel with Diamond and her daughter, the Black bodies often erased from representations of pain.



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And then there's Simone. The full version of her 1976 Montreux closing set performance, "Feelings," is an unrestrained, ten-minute agony. Simone struggles to accept the song because she does "not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that." Her performance attempts to work through that disbelief, emotionally. She wanders through the blues and performs despair; it registers through Simone's movement, the continual and vulnerable pauses and huffs, the plucking of keys. In Simone's performance we glimpse the politics of Gary's work: It is not the representation of Black women that concerns her, but rather the production of a lived body through affective means, "flesh that needs to be loved," as Toni Morrison would assert (this is also the title of Gary's show at Paula Cooper Gallery). *The Giverny Document* channels the power of embodying lived experiences which cannot be collapsed through representation; its moving images do not participate in the coercion of Black life but rather speak to its noise, its anarchic potential of survival on an arc ever-leaning toward emancipation.

— Ayanna Dozier

A three-channel version of The Giverny Document, titled THE GIVERNY SUITE, will screen at the Los Angeles's Hammer Museum as part of "Hammer Projects: Ja'Tovia Gary" from February 2 to May 17, 2020, and in New York as part of Gary's solo exhibition, "flesh that needs to be loved," at Paula Cooper Gallery from February 15 to March 21, 2020.

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