

Grace A Williams

Intermission

10 August — 11 November 2018



Exhibition guide

*Since action never stops, when
movement ceases upon the stage
it continues behind. No rest, no
interruption. An intermission
signals an awakening of the critical
faculties forcing the audience to
intervene in moments of dis-illusion.*

Denis Diderot in *Oeuvres de Theatre de M. Diderot, Avec Un Discours Sur La Poesie Dramatique*,
(Reprint Forgotten Books, 2017).

Cover Image ~ Grace A Williams, *Intermission* (still), 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Intermission is a new two-screen projection by London-based artist Grace A Williams, commissioned by The New Art Gallery Walsall.

The work focuses on the gaze of two unknown men whose enigmatic portraits appear on nineteenth century photographic slides found by the artist. Hand tinting the images using a traditional process regularly undertaken by women in photographic portrait studios, Williams references the pivotal and often uncredited role that women played as colourists and 'ink and paint girls' in late nineteenth century commercial photography studios and early animated film.

'Creative work' was closed to women in these industries but they were employed to skilfully prepare images, meticulously hand colouring negatives and glass plates to make the images appear more lifelike and pleasing. Subverting this practice by applying colour in free-flowing abstract washes, Williams draws attention to the forgotten portraits as well as the undervalued, even silenced, work of women in early film and photographic industries. Like the many women who worked behind the scenes in photography studios across Europe by the late 1860s, the identities of the men at the centre of her work are lost to history. Removed from their original context and propelled into the mainstream via the exhibition, their portraits become open to multiple, and potentially complex, contemporary readings.

The artist's use of dual screens traces early cinema, where an intermission signalled the physical break in projection necessary for the practical changing over of film reels. This concept is carried through into the image sequences, which are interrupted at irregular intervals, returning the spectator to reality and pushing them to reflect on what they have just seen.

Zoë Lippett
Exhibitions and Artists' Projects Curator
The New Art Gallery Walsall

GRACE A WILLIAMS IN CONVERSATION WITH ZOË LIPPETT

ZOË LIPPETT: What is the significance of your exhibition title, *Intermission*?

GRACE A WILLIAMS: The title *Intermission* is borrowed from the language of early cinema where it describes the break in projection necessary to change from one roll of film to another. The material celluloid could not be developed into extended lengths so many feature length films required two film rolls. I have always been interested in the potential of this pause or interval and its distinct connection to analogue material.

In his writings on theatre, eighteenth century philosopher Denis Diderot described the intermission as a moment of critical awakening, forcing an audience to break their suspension of disbelief and return to reality. This definition became key to the development of my work and its presentation across two screens as a physical manifestation of this discontinuity. The idea of intermission is also carried through into the projections. Each of the image sequences shift at different time intervals and are interrupted by moments when the screens go blank.

ZL: You have a long-standing interest in archives and analogue material. How did you come to work with magic lantern slides?

GW: I have collected magic lantern and photographic glass slides for a long time out of a personal interest in the analogue materials that paved the way to modern cinema. During my research, I came across a critical history on the importance of women's collecting, which chimed with my own process of compiling a compendium of historic images and interpreting these from a contemporary perspective. Patrizia Di Bello's, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Marina Warner's, *Parlour Made* (Creative Camera, 1992: Vol 315) were particularly influential in revealing how the activity of collecting images and arranging them in albums was regarded as a socially acceptable feminine tradition in nineteenth century Britain. For me, this opened up an unusual but extremely useful visual history of women in the home.

There is often no date or information to accompany the glass slides I collect and so there is complete openness in determining origin, purpose and identity. Artistically, this provides the opportunity to expose social, philosophical and visual differences in the reading of images, historically and today.



Grace A Williams, *Intermission* (still), 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

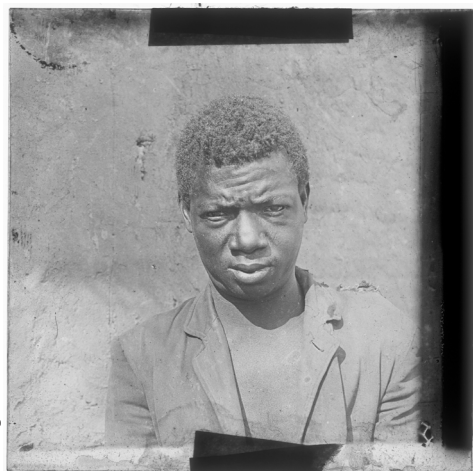
ZL: *Intermission* focuses on the portraits of two unknown men. What attracted you to these particular portraits?

GW: The selected images are taken from a larger group of glass slides, purchased as a collection, which I would categorise as ethnographic portraiture. It was common practice in late nineteenth century Europe to document different cultures as a subject of study; a highly problematic practice. I was immediately struck by the potency of these images: the gaze of both individuals is so powerful and knowing. Despite being historic images, their representation in a contemporary context enacts a reading of race and identity that completely

undermines their original purpose of defining colonial 'othering'. This feels particularly pertinent in a moment where voices eradicated by white eurocentrism, including women and ethnic minorities, regularly lumped together as 'other', are being reinstated.

ZL: Do you know anything about the identity of the men or the photographer?

GW: The images did not come with any provenance information. Their displacement evokes a transitional identity, which is continued in the work. Found images cannot help but suggest a loss of identity, of being forgotten, but it is extremely likely that the individuals in these images would never have seen



the photographs or perhaps even been told what was happening when the image was taken. They are silenced images. The transition of these private images into the public mainstream via the work is not an attempt to reinstate this loss of identity. Instead, it references Diderot's critical awakening from disillusionment, which I see as the continued dominance of male eurocentric narratives.

ZL: What was the impetus behind hand tinting the found images and what does this process involve?

GW: In the early years of photographic and cinematic industries women carved fledging careers on the back of 'hand tinting', the process of applying colour to slides and film reels for a more 'lifelike' look. Nineteenth century photographers advocated

hand tinting or overpainting to compensate for the limited monotone quality of photographs. Portraiture making became reliant on the skills of women adept at colouring to make flattering likenesses of their clients and portrait studios regularly employed women to tint their photographs. It was in this capacity that women first enjoyed entry into the marketplace of photography. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were so numerous in the field that they presented an economic threat to their male counterparts.

In order to tint the slides I followed the traditional process of mixing watercolour pigment with gum arabic over a prepared translucent watercolour surface. Hand tinting in early cinema is something that has always struck a chord with my interests, particularly its use

in early trick films such as the Lumière Brothers' *The Serpentine Dance* (c.1899), where women were commissioned to tint each frame by hand, staying 'within the lines' of the dancer's costume. As an analogue method it offers abstract and often magical effects.

ZL: You have used vivid colours and free-flowing washes to work into the original images. What is the significance of these vibrant tones, their gradual shifting, and the intermittent breaks in each of the projection sequences?

GW: The colour palette references the earliest of magic lantern slides that were tinted using a limited range of pigments which were often extremely garish. My decision to use abstract marks instead of hand tinting in the tradition of carefully

Lumière Brothers, still from *The Serpentine Dance*, c.1899.



colouring portraits was a sort of rebellion against its quietness. I wanted the tinting of these images to be prominent, loud even, igniting the surface of the image and highlighting the mark of so many 'ink and paint' girls who went uncredited. This is echoed in the physical breaks in the projected sequence of images, intermissions, forcing viewers to subtly discover the differences between tints and reflect on the previous image in relation to the one newly presented.

ZL: I think it's interesting that nineteenth century portraiture making became reliant on the skills of women and their ability to bring 'life' to an image through the application of colour. Is this work partly an attempt to reclaim the important role of women in the history of early photography?



Magic lantern projector made by Aubrey Franks Ltd, Manchester, c.1890. Permanent Collection Science and Media Museum, Bradford.

GW: Absolutely. I would describe the core of my practice as uncovering the narratives of hidden women. Using artistic interpretation, I attempt to bring to light to all the ways women have been, and continue to be, exposed to inequality. When I was making this work the debate in modern cinema was raging around unequal pay in Hollywood. Women in the film industry may be credited now, but there's still a long way to go. If my work can get people to debase the single uninterrupted narrative that sidelines the vital roles women play, then it will always be worthwhile to me.

ZL: The exhibition includes examples of magic lanterns from your own collection. What interests you about this early type of image projector and the histories surrounding their use in Victorian society?

GW: Magic lanterns present one of the earliest forms of projection technology and to this end they terrified audiences by producing ghostly spectacles. The camera itself has a reputation as an occult object capable of stealing the soul and 'peeling faces'. It is the magical, even supernatural, connotations of these technologies that fascinates me.

I always want to know how things work and I find it incredible that some of the most rudimentary technologies still form the basis of modern digital processes. I like to know how the lineage of someone tinkering with parts in the nineteenth century leads to the most advanced artificial intelligence in the future.

Grace A Williams (b.1989) lives and works in London. She holds a practice-led PhD in Fine Art and Philosophy from Birmingham School of Art and works as part of the Sackler Research Forum at The Courtauld Institute of Art. Selected recent group exhibitions include 'New Art West Midlands', 2018, The Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry and 'SYN', 2017, VIVID Projects, Birmingham. She is currently the recipient of a 2018 National Trust Short Residency Award at Mr Straw's House in Worksop, Nottinghamshire.

Intermission is Williams' first UK solo exhibition and presents new and previously unseen work commissioned by The New Art Gallery Walsall.

www.grace-a-williams.com

EVENTS:

In conversation

Saturday 22 September, 2pm

Join artist Grace A Williams for a free talk about her work with curator, Zoë Lippett. Drop-in, all welcome.

Halloween-themed performances with Mirror Mirror Education

Saturday 27 October
15 minute performances
available throughout the day.

Join London-based charity Mirror Mirror Education for a series of Halloween-themed magic lantern and optical illusion performances, inspired by nineteenth century stage magic and early cinema. £2 per person, free for parents/carers and children aged 2 or under.*

MAGIC LANTERN WORKSHOPS WITH GRACE A WILLIAMS

Family Workshop

Tuesday 30 October, 1 hour sessions
available from 12 noon-3pm
Scribble, draw, colour, tint and project!
Create your own magic lantern in this fun family workshop and then watch as the room comes to life when images are projected into the space, creating a collage of colour. £2.50 per child, free for parents/carers.*

Adult Workshop

Saturday 3 November, 11am-1pm
An intensive practical workshop looking at the history of tinted glass slides and working from traditional designs to create your own unique hand finished glass plate. £10 per person. All materials provided, no previous experience required.*

* Places are limited and must be booked in advance on 01922 654400



Limited edition print

Grace A Williams has produced a special Giclée print to accompany her exhibition.

Intermission is available in edition of 20, priced £75.

See Gallery Shop display for details.

A large print version of this guide is available on request.

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