

REPLY REVIEW

RESEARCH REGARDING

Garrett Bradley works across narrative, documentary and experimental modes of filmmaking to address themes such as race, class, familial relationships, social justice and cultural histories in the United States. Her collaborative and research-based approach to filmmaking is often inspired by the real-life stories of her protagonists. This book explores Bradley's work through the lens of *Devotion* and features conversations with the artist and contributions from the likes of Ashley Clark, Arthur Jafa, Joy James, Tyler Mitchell, Kevin Quashie and Claudia Rankine. This is the first volume in a new series of readers co-published with Lisson Gallery entitled *Re*, which will respond, regard, reassess or refer back to a number of its artists and themes both past and present.

Adopting archival material alongside newly shot footage, Bradley's films exist simultaneously in the past, present and future, not only disrupting our perception of time, but also breaking down our preconceived ideas about objectivity, perspective and truth-telling. These narratives unfold naturally in both feature-length and short form, revealing a multitude of individual and collective stories. The social, economic and racial politics of everyday life—its joys, pleasures and pains—are lyrically and intimately rendered on screen.

Printed in Italy

Lisson Gallery
67 Lisson Street
London, NW1 5DA
lissongallery.com

The MIT Press
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142
mitpress.mit.edu

US \$29.95 / \$39.95 CAN

ISBN 978-0-262-04879-8



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GARRETT BRADLEY Devotion

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Devotion



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IN CONVERSATION WITH

SUZANNE MCCLELLAND

Suzanne McClelland: Robert Altman's *Nashville* [1975]—let's talk about it ... I love how it winds around itself. Loosely, Altman weaves together individual story lines, then he sort of tightens up the weave near the end of the film and yet nothing is packaged or resolved.

Garrett Bradley: I would say the Coen Brothers have that same tendency, but yes, *Nashville*. Or maybe we start earlier, with Bruegel and work our way up? I love the idea of thinking about him relative to Altman.

SM: Which paintings? He always offered viewers multiple scenes all at once. *The Tower of Babel* [1563] by Pieter Bruegel [the Elder] was a painting I encountered in the summer of 1980, traveling through Vienna to Greece and spending hours in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. I have kept a postcard of it up in every studio since then. In middle school, when you were studying the development of written language—cuneiform, Babylonia, Sumerian clay tablets—you talked about it a lot and were deep into the mythology and history. We talked about the origins of written language and divisions of languages around the globe and how writing is drawing and the physical trace of speech. At that time, I was listening to speech and drawing from it in the city, in playgrounds, courtrooms and the streets but your study took me to the origins—the history of this subject. You got deep into it probably around eleven years old. I think it's fascinating that you recall that painting now. I'm wondering why?

GB: One of the earliest paintings I remember talking about was *The Tower of Babel* and feeling like the concept of the ziggurat was really interesting, this idea of things being piled on top of each other. The mythology and stories around *The Tower of Babel* stayed with me in ways that I didn't expect. It looks like a narrative. It's from Genesis [11:1]: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came up upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there and they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar."

A lot of the older paintings made me think about primary text as potent sources for visual material, for narrative.

SM: I understand why so many artists addressed this subject and it's especially relevant in this day of conflicting facts and confusion. Babel is all about misunderstanding. Bruegel did three versions and while his characters and interactions are often extravagantly bizarre, they are mixed up with mundane tasks like baking and laying bricks. The overview is always there but one's mind can only engage with parts of the landscape. It's easy to get lost in the various time zones in his paintings.

You were always interested in belief itself. That's an area where I think you and I cross over, as artists, this interest not so much in religion or its structure, but in why and when human beings believe in the things they believe in—where truths lie and how we behave in relationship to beliefs. You have faith. Maybe it's optimism, but I think it's deeper than positivity. I guess you connected with your Old Testament studies in college. You got deep into the stories in a way that I resisted, maybe because my own mother studied religion and also participated in the institutions built out of them. I abhor those patriarchal structures that exist in every religion.

GB: Do you not have faith, Mom?

SM: I have faith in human beings and the power of language and I believe in the destructive and constructive forces of us and I believe in the powers of the natural world, both what we can see and what is hidden. I believe that science has the capacity to heal and reveal.

GB: I like the idea of different time zones or the impossibility of experiencing his work in its entirety. It does bring up time in an interesting way. Like, in what tense does awareness live in? We may be looking at the laying of bricks in one area of the painting, yet to know there is a lot going on elsewhere. There's

something you're getting at that creates an interesting parallel for our capacity to receive and engage with parallel realities. Where is your interest in it?

SM: Mistakes, misunderstandings and translation glitches. The Bruegel painting was made around the time of the Reformation, a Protestant and Catholic divide. Christians sat through their services in Latin. They were sending their money to Rome. Lots of reasons for separation. The Polyglot Bible was printed right around the time that this painting came out and I think the Antwerp version was printed in six languages around 1566. As far as I know, the sixteenth century was one of the first times that the Bible was made accessible in such a wide range of languages. Building the Tower of Babel is all about the impossibility of a single language and then I guess it's God punishing this king who wanted to build this vertical tower—these guys were always in a state of conflict in their absurd scramble to climb.

Garrett, back to Altman's film *Nashville*. He clearly identifies fierce divisions in American culture. The Vietnam War was ending and the protests were everywhere in the musical landscape of the country. A peace agreement was signed in January 1973 but the war didn't end until April of 1975. I recall as a teenager that the world seemed divided between pro-war and anti-war citizens and it was especially complex because the American and European expansions were so violent, both covert and overt. When artists dig deep into a subject it reflects things that are going on in their immediate world. It has to in some way. Misunderstandings come from a lack of listening and lack of observation.

GB: *Nashville* was made during a time when zoom lenses were a kind of dominating aesthetic, at least in the US. What I love about watching his films and films of this period, were those multiple focal lengths within a single frame. And, you know, how he used sound to connect different story lines. You might have five people in a room, and every person has a mic, it's a very precise way of creating chaos, and also mimicking reality—connecting multitudes and simultaneity into a single

frame. I can't think of any other mainstream theatrical film space where that had really been done previously. Normally, a sense of connection is created through physical cuts between people or spaces. So, it was unusual and I think totally new, to create the same effect in two very different ways.

SM: Yes he shows those divisions and the synchronism—just as Bruegel illustrates. What do you think about the humor in Altman? Is it to address division or perhaps simultaneity? He's showing people's isolation from one another and then, the unexpected connections.

GB: The film riffs on its own playfulness and construction. It is interesting to think about another Bruegel painting in this context, *Children's Games* [1560]: Is this chaos or coexistence? I feel like the humor you're tapping into is like, it's remarkable that anything gets done in the world, that we don't bump into each other more often. Maybe coexistence is chaos [laughing].

SM: There might be harmony in what appears to be chaos—a beautiful dissonance? Certain things work when they overlap. Beliefs, or maybe intentions, become shared on some level. Bruegel's *Children's Games* tells us so much about shared desires and a need for human exchange, play, fantasy, joy, physical intimacy and the thrill of spinning and hanging upside down. I'm going back to the *Tower* because it remained in your memory banks for so long—since your childhood. Why did it stick for you? There's this ambition to conclude or create a unified thing in *The Tower of Babel* painting. Do you relate to that?

GB: Yes. And not to be too literal, but making a film can be exactly like these two paintings. Reaching for a collective goal, working toward a unified thing—having to learn multiple languages that span, mood, culture, money, time. The chaos of these paintings has deep emotional resonance for me because they feel real and they move away from the romanticism of

“order,” of fascistic notions of efficiency or perfection in order to get something done. I do believe hierarchy is necessary in achieving a goal, but it can be done so horizontally. Intention for instance, could be a ‘north star’ which, as long as it’s maintained, can be achieved in a variety of different ways and which from a distance, could look exactly like this – chaos.

SM: There are multiple intentions at play in *Nashville*, just as there are in *Children’s Games*. And all of those individual, isolated scenarios in *Nashville* reflect major differences in American cultures. Altman builds structure from the beginning within the recording studio scenes—each studio isolates a genre but also a political ideology, as well as various types of faith and collectivity. Each genre has its own sense of timekeeping, its own rhythm, with gospel singers all in the same room but the country dude in his isolation booth yelling at the “long hair” piano player. Musicians play, but artists work?

Also the overall connective tissue is the roving, wandering political van with its body-less voice. It is a thread running throughout the whole film, even during the car crash—the pileup—one of the most deeply absurd scenes I’ve seen in any film. The van keeps talking unaware of its surroundings because it’s on monologue. Another thread throughout the film is the British reporter, loony, insensitive, projecting her assumptions upon reality. Mesmerizingly hungry—for what? A singular “story”?

GB: Geraldine Chaplin.

SM: She exhibits all of the misunderstandings between two English-speaking countries, assuming similarities when there



is so much difference. Every scene she barges into, she enters with her mouth open and eyes and ears shut, never reading the room. “Opal from the BBC”. (She loves saying “BBC” as she inserts herself into the bubbles of life). She has no sense of space or observational capacities, therefore no respect for the worlds she invades. No neutrality, and her curiosity wanes as reality presents itself.

GB: Yeah, her character was disturbing and also strategically placed. As a “reporter” she allowed “us” and Altman to jump from one place to the next. She was, in addition to sound, our visual connector between spaces, in the same way that the van becomes a chariot for the audience, a way to get through space. Looking at *The Tower of Babel*, or at *Children’s Games* who would Chaplin be in this? Does that translate over to painting? A guide?

SM: Bruegel displays an overview of social behaviors—the way we move around and with each other. He allows the viewer to absorb a large swath of humanity from an impossibly powerful position up high, so maybe his point of view is as the guide. The only character who really seems to have the benefit of an overview is us, but perpetually outside of the frame.

GB: What is outside of the frame is complicated with moving images, because the amount of time you can film something is finite. The film will run out. I assume that’s in part why we edit. The implementation of editing might be one reason that a guide feels necessary, because films work off the premise that you can’t stay in one place forever—change is inevitable.

Switching subjects a little, I was excited to talk with you about duration and thinking about painting as durational. You mentioned that you make a distinction between external and internal duration. What does that mean, exactly?

SM: With film, television, theater, literature, life itself, there’s a linearity that runs through time—it’s actually a physical matter and one must roll with it or jump ship. I consider this

an external duration. Most poetry is considered in a spatial way I think, so I separate this practice from literature. I think that with painting we experience form spatially.

A scene takes time to absorb—at different speeds, of course—then we are left with memories. There is the use of memory in both internal and external duration, but they sit in my body differently. I experience painting as internal duration, because the object itself is sitting still, but you're having an experience, looking at it, reading it closely and from various distances, and feeling it in a sensory way, all simultaneously, and then you leave the painting, and you still have those memories in your body and come back to them and nothing is ever the same as the first impression. We may all have really precise memories of the same object but different points of view. I am curious about the difference between memory of an object and the perception standing in front of it. I don't think that any two people ever have had the same exact experience with a work of art and yet we try to connect through the experience.

How do you feel about duration in sculpture or something physical that you walk through or around three-dimensionally—urban plans, design, architecture, landscape? Anything that forces you to move.

GB: I love the idea of thinking about sculpture as this thing that exists between film and painting.

SM: In the case of *America* [2019] the circularity makes it sculptural or architectural, really. By passing each screen or moving around it like a carousel it ends up functioning both as a still object and a moving picture. It's as though we are passing through the forms—with them—in time. And then maybe transparency allows for stillness? It depends on how you use your camera, if you let your camera function in a passive way, and there's no action in the scene it does give you the option of experiencing it like a still object—as in *Alone* [2017].

GB: I was interested in a physical metaphor for how history, memory and insight develop. *America* is both a circle and an

X, a place of intersection, a time capsule. The transparency of the flags offered a space for viewers to make their own connections by way of their own curiosity, height, or movement through the room and would inform how they were going to see things that were just for them, that were totally unique to their own time and their choices in the space.

To be able to sit and look at a painting and allow things to unfold and reveal themselves and change with a timeframe dictated by the viewer. I envy that there is no pressure or fear that something is going to change before you're ready for it to. When we think about duration in painting, things are going to unfold at a natural pace, you know, and that is not the case with films. Filmmaking is so human, but so unnatural in a way.

SM: I see. What's natural, though? Let's stay with your word "unfold", that's a really beautiful movement. It's true that film moves of its own volition and that a painting allows the viewer to control the changes, so then the anxiety comes with not knowing when those things will change?

GB: I think I'm building off something mentioned earlier, around the finite nature of filmmaking and the impossibility of filming forever. That it does stop and so in anticipation of that end, a certain kind of method is developed to maybe deal with that anxiety. I'm interpreting it as anxiety. Anxiety that in and of itself gave birth to an entirely new artform which is editing. Films are about movement and light, even if they are "still." Maybe it's something different that I'm responding to, something that has more to do with the era we live in. An anxiety around the role that screens play in our lives and the effect this has on the work. So I'm saying two things, really.

SM: Every day there is something that demands your evaluation or wants to convince you of something, or pushes you into action or maybe subdues you if you are too present, too loud. That creates anxiety. It challenges our internal belief systems. Then there's friction between what we want, what we believe, and what the external world is telling us we need. We

have pressure to participate politically in order to have agency in our lives and improve the social landscape. Then there is pressure to believe in singular leaders rather than collaborative entities, which is problematic. Political social movements like the women who started Black Lives Matter did it successfully. They succeeded in dismantling the charismatic singular star "leader." BLM is more of a network of mini-systems. Bruegel shows us a map of social interdependence and bubbles of isolation on the same field. He allows us to view intimate human activities without obscuring or erasing anything—no cluster interrupts another. Erasure and blocking can cause anxiety.

GB: Maybe that's also part of this screen problem, or today problem, feeling as though we have fewer options for ways to observe and experience. Questioning if the ideas we have are really our own or just echoes of things that follow us? Going outside, getting away from the screen is radical. But what if the screens follow us? On the street, in the train. How do we go sit in a movie theater or a space and watch something after all that? A new kind of anxiety. Painting and writing feel exceptionally comforting in their ability to ground us in a certain kind of way, this unfolding can be grounding.

SM: A painting has a frame—you are either in or out. Painting takes time to absorb, but it's the viewer's time. You can pick up and leave at any point. You talk about a desire for a kind of groundedness, but the ground is always shifting in life. Experiencing film is like swimming in a river, you enter it and you can either let yourself go with it, or stiffen and resist the current. But getting out of moving water is harder to do than walking away from a still frame. There are choices in both experiences.

Are viewers looking for a comfort zone—searching for a reflection of themselves, whether idealized or reduced—or to be faced with the unfamiliar? Maybe what you're saying also is that we're constantly being challenged, because we're constantly being preached at and convinced and controlled by rapid image production and this has been a problem since television took over. When viewing or making a painting I always ask: What is legible? Do we demand a nameable sub-

ject? Where's the energy? Where's the air? What's the gravity?
Where is the light emanating from? What's the point of view?

GB: Yeah, there's a sort of intolerance for a lack of legibility. Fundamentally, what we're up against, in every faction of society, is the premium that's put on something that is explicit, something that is black or white, good or bad. The actual duration is quite illusionary in filmmaking and I'm wondering for you, when you watch—rather, when you look at a painting ...

SM: Oh, I like that, “watch” a painting.

GB: Are paintings in real time? How are you thinking about that for your own work or for Bruegel? Like, is this real time?

SM: Looking takes time and a painting hangs back, demands nothing, whereas a film expects you to stay with it. I'm still stuck on this idea of watching a painting. Or “looking” at a film. When watching, the still object opens out, it unfolds, to use your word. Sometimes form becomes nameable or spatially positioned, creating stability. Sometimes I make a predefined scheme and then execute the recipe. It gets interesting as I dismantle any stability, like taking blocks out of a mound to test its sturdiness, the reverse of the *Tower of Babel*. I think about finding a point of precise satisfaction, a precarious balance, mainly because I'm interested in how doubt looks.

GB: Right.

SM: Water and air move in a way that film can capture or *be with*. Painting can only display or depict, or provide an impression of one frame that lingers after a visit.

The *Yes*, *No*, and *Maybe* paintings I've been making over the past year have a lot to do with the process of making a picture that is constantly remaking and interrupting itself. They point

to anxiety in the air where nobody gets to finish their thoughts or speak a complete sentence anymore without interruption.

Recently I revisited Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" [1978]. I am still compelled by her notion of maintaining connections to the "yes" within us. Sometimes when we focus on resisting larger moving forces, we neglect internal desires that are *still*. I liken it to standing up and resisting the currents in that river and not sinking into the muddy bottom. Also I am reminded of the eel, *Anguilla*, in Rachel Carson's "Journey to the Sea" [1941]. She travels from salt to fresh water, returning to the sea to spawn and die; an end that is predetermined by 'nature'. Duration suggests an end at some point, walking away from the relentlessness of a frame or abandoning the plan, or is it interrupting it?

GB: Wow, yeah I interpret water and air as elements that are powerful and even domineering yet also totally malleable, adapting the shape of whatever it fills. And so in that way, it seems to me that duration is less linear than it is dependent on the medium it's working in. Also, I love the idea of a painting that interrupts itself. It feels connected in some way to the challenges that archive presents—this idea of something that is both fixed and fluid all at once. Duration suggests an end point, but maybe the question is: Who ends it?

SM: Maybe you do and that's a good ending in and of itself!