



**Title**

Michelle Williams Gamaker

**Author(s)**

Amie Corry

**Article DOI**

Not applicable

**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/michelle-williams-gamaker>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Amie Corry: 'Michelle Williams Gamaker', *Burlington Contemporary* (24th May 2023),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/michelle-williams-gamaker>

**About the author(s)**

is a writer and editor based in London.

Cover image:

# Michelle Williams Gamaker

by Amie Corry • 24.05.2023

Michelle Williams Gamaker (b.1979) [FIG.1](#) is a moving image artist based in London. Her works recast marginalised actors from twentieth-century films in leading roles to propose alternatives to colonial storytelling. Her latest film, *Thieves* [FIG.2](#), which is being exhibited as part of her solo exhibition *Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* at South London Gallery, takes as its starting point *The Thief of Baghdad* – an epic studio production that was first released in black-and-white in 1924, directed by Raoul Walsh, and remade in Technicolour in 1940, directed by Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell and Tim Whelan.<sup>1</sup>

For Williams Gamaker, film-making has the potential to act as a form of reparation. In *Thieves*, she reimagines the roles played by Anna May Wong (1905–61), Hollywood’s first Chinese American movie star, who appeared in the 1924 film as a ‘Mongol Slave’, and the Indian-born American actor Sabu (1924–63), who featured in the 1940 version. *Thieves* sees Sabu rouse Anna – who is trapped in her black-and-white screen-image – to seek revenge on the film industry as personified by Powell and Lotta Woods, who was a screenwriter on the 1924 film. An on-screen murder occurs and, with Sabu’s assistance, Anna generates an army of ‘Annamaytons’, who assist in liberating the set from oppressive ideologies and restoring her to Technicolour. At South London Gallery, the film is screened within a complex installation of ephemera, costumes and sets [FIG.3](#) [FIG.4](#) relating to the postcolonial examination of twentieth-century films, specifically, the roles that Wong and Sabu were relegated to throughout their careers.



**Fig. 1** Michelle Williams Gamaker, on the right, on the set of *Thieves* in 2022. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Ellen Jane Rogers).

*Thieves* is the first film in William Gamaker's *Fictional Revenge* series, which follows on from the *Fictional Activism* cycle. *Fictional Activism* comprises the film trilogy *House of Women* (2017), *The Fruit is There to be Eaten* (2018) and *The Eternal Return* (2019), which explore characters from Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* (1947), as well as *The Bang Straws* (2021), based on Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937).



**Fig. 2** Installation view of *Michelle Williams Gamaker: Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* at South London Gallery, 2023, showing *Thieves*. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Photograph Jo Underhill).

**Amie Corry (AC):** Can you tell me about the evolution of your relationship to British and Hollywood studio films, such as *The Thief of Baghdad*?

**Michelle Williams Gamaker (MWG):** By the time I was a teenager in the 1990s I was choosing to spend my weekends watching these films over other activities. Unlike the overwhelming choice we're presented with today, there were only four or five television channels, so I was indiscriminately absorbing this quite curated material. I really began to get a feel for these studio films from the 1920s to 1960s. There's something so lush about them; they're very bold in colour palette, often set in faraway places but not shot in those places and they usually involve white actors negotiating a native community. They were epic and seductive because they had that analogue magic trickery. It's hard for me to process it now, but I think I sided with the protagonists because I was so in love with the glamour they embodied. The experience of watching those films formed my identity during a crucial period.



**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Michelle Williams Gamaker: Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* at South London Gallery, 2023. (Photograph Jo Underhill).

**AC:** They are extraordinary visually; seductive is the right word. And it's confusing because capitulating to their allure now feels, I think accurately, like complicity. When did your critical eye become attuned to their problems?



**Fig. 4** Installation view of *Michelle Williams Gamaker: Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* at South London Gallery, 2023. (Photograph Jo Underhill).

**MWG:** That wasn't until the early 2000s. There were absolutely no conversations around colonialism in my schooling. Being of Sri Lankan heritage, I had some sort of understanding of that history, but it was very removed from my upbringing. I actually wanted to become an actor when I was young; I'd try to find myself in the stars that looked nothing like me. I was always looking for someone to connect with on a visual level, so an actor like Sabu intrigued me because of his Indian heritage. Also, confusingly, so did the character of Kanchi in Powell and Pressberger's *Black Narcissus*, who is played by a white British actor, Jean Simmons, made up in brown foundation and Indian costume. In 2003 I made a video work where I tried to embody Kanchi, also titled *Black Narcissus*, but it couldn't really go anywhere because I didn't yet have the capacity to speak back to the films. So there's a big gap before I began scriptwriting in 2014.



**Fig. 5** Production still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Jadon Cobb).

**AC:** The relationship with Sabu, as played by Krishna Isthia **FIG.5**, is an enduring one. Similarly, Anna May Wong, played by Dahong Wang **FIG.6**, is the protagonist of your film *The Bang Straws* as well as *Thieves*. *The Bang Straws* recasts Wong as the central character of O-Lan in *The Good Earth*. Wong was famously passed over for this role, a Chinese woman, in favour of the white actor Luise Rainer. Instead, she was offered the role of a sex worker named Lotus, which she turned down. There's a sophisticated exploration of relationality going on.

**MWG:** Both Anna and Sabu sit within this body of Brown protagonists that I've had an extended relationship with, and with whom I've formed such an alliance. My fictional allyship or kinship with Sabu is also partly based on feeling injustice around my own creative agency. There was a period of time when I had stories to tell but I experienced an invisible ceiling or barrier, so it's about telling my own story.



**Fig. 6** Production still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Nadia Coppola).

**AC:** Do you think you'll put them to bed now that they've had their revenge? Or, particularly given that personal affinity, will they continue to live through the work?



**Fig. 7** Still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

**MWG:** I think if they were to come back it would need to be at a different time. I often think about what would happen if they hadn't both died early – Wong from alcohol-related illnesses and Sabu from a heart attack – worn down by the industry. What if they found themselves in a different genre or era? I long to move to a different decade, but I don't know when that is yet.

I don't think *Fictional Revenge* is over, but I'm working with



another screen star now: Merle Oberon (1911–79), who had a very successful career because she was able to disguise her Anglo-Indian heritage. I'm sure that was an incredibly heavy burden for her. *Oberon* will be the first in my *Fictional Healing* series. It occurs to me that a feature film I'm working on based on my own childhood is also part of *Fictional Healing*. There's a bigger arc in the work that I'm calling 'narrative reparations' – technically I could spend my life toggling between Activism, Revenge and Healing, seeing where a story fits. I love the meaningful shuffle of mutable characters to help me realise this.



**Fig. 8** Still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

**AC:** It's interesting that you mention moving decades because there's a lot of time travel in *Thieves*. As a viewer, you're also cognisant of the fact that you're on a set, both in the context of the film and within the space of the installation at South London Gallery. There's a breaking down of traditional walls, as well as periodisation. Is that partly a way of implicating the viewer in these problematic stories and set-ups?



Fig. 9 Production still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Ellen Jane Rogers).

**MWG:** I used to work as a set-builder at Elstree Studios and I think it's really special to build a world. But yes, *Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* is not immersive, it's more the back end of something. It's about revealing layers of production in this transparent way. You watch those old films knowing that the sets are painted on glass. I like to imagine all of the off-stage conversations – painful ones – that occur when the camera isn't rolling, about who gets to perform, who might be cut. The harder politics at the edge of the set fascinate me. I think it strengthens, rather than diminishes, the fiction.

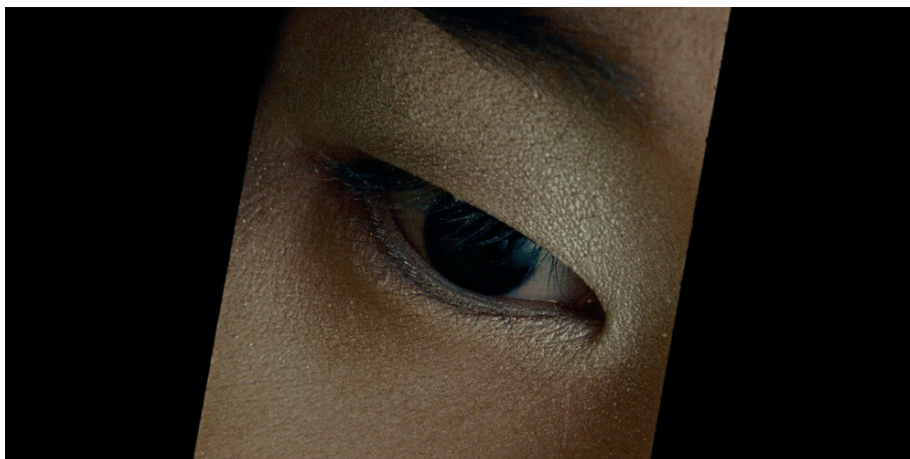
**AC:** The off-set action seems integral to thinking about structural violence and the optics of performative activism as well.



**Fig. 10** Still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

**MWG:** Yes, the politics of labour in the film industry and, by implication, the art industry, is an increasingly core strand of the making. For example, in *Thieves*, there are the Set Workers, who appear in a sort of supportive or facilitatory role in Anna and Sabu's set takeover. I'm interested in porosity between my films. I want to explore a time leak or genre leak, which could enable a cross-fertilisation whereby the Set Workers appear in the new film on Merle. Perhaps that also speaks to the fact that these problems are intergenerational, they're continually evolving.

**AC:** Yes, they're live and present. It seems significant that you're exploring mutability through the fixed source material of *The Thief of Baghdad*. Can we talk about the props and ephemera that make up the installation element of *Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass*?



**Fig. 11** Still from *The Bang Straws*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2021. Digital video, duration 17 minutes. (Courtesy the artist).

**MWG:** A lot of the information I use is quite superficial; it's commonly accessible information, such as fan pages, Wikipedia, and then there's other knowledge that's more felt or speculative, which derives from purchasing memorabilia on eBay. I'm interested in the detritus of fiction, the visuality of storytelling and the significance of props – their ability to take the story in a particular direction. Certain objects – the dagger, the lion-headed rug **FIG.7** – have their own narrative film histories. I've been purchasing ephemera relating to these films and people for years, for example, original *The Thief of Baghdad* posters. I'll then work out a place for them. In the script for *Thieves*, Sabu originally walked over the posters, but how it actually played out on set was that Krishna touched a poster depicting Sabu as a child on a flying carpet and their touch of this ossified object initiated a transformation **FIG.8**: Sabu and Anna find themselves back on the set of *The Thief of Baghdad* but they have a sense of agency previously denied to them. The script is quite true to key scenes from the 1940 film but purchasing these objects enables writing from a textural space. My practice is becoming quite busy with a collaging of physical objects and texts. It's becoming quite cluttered!



**Fig. 12** Still from *The Bang Straws*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2021. Digital video, duration 17 minutes. (Courtesy the artist).

**AC:** Perhaps then there's a relationship between the objects and the dialogue, some of which is 'found' in that it's from the original film, actors' interviews or writing of, in the case of *Thieves*, Michael Powell?



**Fig. 13** Still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

**MWG:** Dialogue has become an interesting form of film history and I'm only just becoming confident in it. When I begin a script, it's like a puzzle and there are bits lacking. Props serve as helpful guides in the storytelling. I was walking my dog a while ago and a hearse passed me on its way to the cemetery and a 'funeral' sign fell at my feet. The gates closed and I couldn't follow them. That prop sat in my studio for a long time before it found its purpose in the film. When the character of the Sultan – a white actor in 'brownface' – is murdered by the Silver Maiden **FIG.9** at Sabu's behest, the sign is placed at the head of the Sultan's body **FIG.10**. Both figures are drawn directly from the 1947 film.

I'm very open to things that land with me, it's another way of writing and it's a useful strategy because it means I'm not fully in control. It's not quite hoarding, but I would say there's an inability to separate myself from objects. I want to spend some time considering it in psychoanalytic terms: about the object fusing with the subject. I can't let go easily.

**AC:** Do you feel that you're saving them from obscurity?



Fig. 14 Production still from *Thieves*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2023. Digital video, duration 27 minutes 27 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Nadia Coppola).

**MWG:** Yes, although that's problematic as it has colonial connotations. Maybe it's not saving but more of a consolidation – to do with a repatriation or a gathering of something lost or fragmented across time, like the multiple images. In Hollywood there are thrift stores full of uncategorised images of film stars. It's such an overwhelming detritus of imagery and you realise how fast that fiction machine was. I want to ask for things to be looked at with a bit more care.

**AC:** Agency appears to be the dominant affect of *Thieves*. It's interesting how you play with that through physicality and the senses. In the beginning, Sabu and Anna are voiceless, they've been silenced and have to communicate telepathically and through touch, rather than words, which also speaks of censorship within the archive. And then a lot of the action is galvanised through movement: Anna controls the Annamaytons through gesture. It brought to mind Laura Marks's work on touch and haptic imagery. Marks posits that, in contrast to a voyeuristic distance, the haptic image enables an excessive closeness with the viewer. There is an eroticisation to the relationship between the haptic image and spectator: the viewer responds as to another body.<sup>2</sup>

**MWG:** Telepathy is something I've been desperate to incorporate for years. It's a covert strategy; we need a way to communicate when the system is toxic. And yes, I often think of the haptic gaze, because it's another sensed way of absorbing images and I think that cinema is all about that. But it's also about the way colour and sound register in storytelling. I learnt so much from working with the sound designer Sara Pinheiro and composer Aaron Cupples on this film. The haptic is about tactility but it's also about whatever makes the act of viewing a truly transporting one. I think it has to

be multisensory to achieve that cinematic transformation movement.

**AC:** Part of that sensorial effect is, for me, engendered by a feeling of closeness with the characters, sometimes literally, in terms of extreme close-ups, or because the tenderness between them feels proximate.

**MWG:** I started to investigate close-ups in *The Bang Straws*, where Anna's eye [FIG.11](#) and the locusts [FIG.12](#) – which descend on the farmland in catastrophic swarms in a famous scene in *The Good Earth* – are shown at a magnified scale. I often want to bring a sort of unbearable discomfort to the viewer through proximity, but it can also just be about taking up space. Playing with scale is part of the visual disruption. You see that in *Thieves*, with Sabu as an epic large-scale hero stepping on the miniatures in the opening scene.

**AC:** Can we return to the revenge element in *Thieves*? Did you think it was necessary to work through the *Fictional Activism* cycle before enacting revenge? How cathartic was the process?

**MWG:** To have a screen death and to visualise the 'brownface' that I've been referencing throughout the *Fictional Activism* films was a very heavy thing to shoot. The Sultan's death marks a symbolic exorcism of cinematic demons, which includes the practice of racist make-up techniques. I knew it was also an exorcism of my own cinematic demons – this complicity we have as viewers is really the problem of passive viewership. I'm a firm believer in fictional escapism, but as someone who has thought a lot about agency, as an artist of colour, as a tutor, there's something important about refusing to talk anymore, about realising something through direct action. I would never advocate for physical violence but there has to be a moment when something is punctured, or someone is shaken.

I learnt about the practice of *gherao*, which Sabu and Anna deploy in *Thieves* [FIG.13](#), through filming a labour activist called Dr Adrishea Kumar in Kolkata. He explained how it formed part of militant protests in India in the sixties: workers would physically encircle their bosses and it could result in violence or death. In *Thieves*, Sabu and Anna encircle an incarcerated Lotta and Michael. Anna suggests Lotta's words have the power to wound, and Sabu wants answers for the reasons behind Anna's monochrome predicament, but none are forthcoming. Having gone through a lot of strike action at Goldsmiths, London, where I teach, I'm fully aware of fighting a system that won't budge, which refuses to acknowledge the rights of a workforce. So direct action took the project to a much more meaningful and opulent space because once the Annamaytons were conjured, I could see that what was growing in the script was a set takeover. Sabu and Anna don't want to talk anymore, they want to do something. It's interesting seeing modes of protest mirrored in my practice. The article I co-wrote with

Jade Monserrat and Cecilia Wee in 2020 was published at a time when we were experiencing so much institutional performativity.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, we didn't want to talk anymore. We wanted change.

**AC:** Does the film set, and the community it fosters, provide an energising space to counteract some of the exhaustion felt at having to fight so hard, for so long?

**MWG:** Absolutely – a good film unit is everyone pulling in the same direction for a collective vision **FIG.14**. During the final sequence of Sabu and Anna dancing, I collapsed and wept – a little dramatic I know – but it was a collective victory, Anna had returned to Technicolour!

**AC:** It's emotional – the medium of film is really working on multiple levels.

**MWG:** Yes, I think it's okay within film to enable a temporary wounding or hurt. I sometimes worry that a younger generation of audience don't allow fiction to hurt them. This was something I always did, even from the theoretical viewpoint of allowing myself to cry with a character. I think it can be a safe space to explore complex emotions and go to very uncomfortable places, but then the spell is broken when the credits roll. Once it's over, you can more or less walk away.

**AC:** Thinking through some sort of explorative reckoning then, the original films certainly aren't obsolete – in fact, this year the BFI is presenting a Powell and Pressberger season. It'll be interesting to see what sort of critical discourse accompanies that. You chose to represent Powell in *Thieves*, which is a first. Usually, the directors appear by implication or off-camera. Is the relationship with Powell a complicated one for you?

**MWG:** Yes, it's what I've termed 'critical affection', and it's definitely not all on Powell. To love something in someone's work we have to hope there's space for critique because it should make the love more robust. I want my film to invite debate. It seems almost impossible that people would invest all their time in the creation of an image but actually, that's all I would love to do. To have that agency and space to fully conjure something, that comes from a place of pure pleasure. But I can't only sit with pleasure; I've spent too long in a critical space to indulge without question. And this is where the notion of complicity returns.



## Exhibition details

### Michelle Williams Gamaker: Our Mountains are Painted on Glass

South London Gallery

31st March–18th June 2023

## Footnotes

- 1** *Thieves* was commissioned by Film London Artists' Moving Image Network, with funding from Arts Council England, and co-commissioned with the South London Gallery and Dundee Contemporary Arts; with additional support from National Lottery through Arts Council England, the Foundation Foundation, the British Academy and the Wolfson Foundation. *Our Mountains are Painted on Glass* will travel to Dundee Contemporary Arts in late 2023.
- 2** L.U. Marks: *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis 2002.
- 3** J. Montserrat, C. Wee and M. Williams Gamaker: 'We need collectivity against structural and institutional racism in the cultural sector', *Arts Professional* (24th June 2020), available at [www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/article/we-need-collectivity-against-structural-and-institutional-racism-cultural-sector](http://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/article/we-need-collectivity-against-structural-and-institutional-racism-cultural-sector), accessed 22nd May 2023.

THE  
**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved  
ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ