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IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"UNPACKING MY IDENTITY": GENEVIEVE GAIGNARD ON RACE IN AMERICA AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF HOME

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Transcript

Caro Fowler

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode, I speak with Genevieve Gaignard, a photographer and installation artist based in Los Angeles, whose self-portraiture and sculpture explore race, femininity, class, and their intersections. In this conversation, we discuss Genevieve's exhibition titled "A Long Way from Home" on view at the Massachusetts College of the Liberal Arts gallery in 2020, and her experience of returning to her hometown in central Massachusetts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Genevieve describes how she sees her photography and collage as opening up distinct spaces of reflection for viewers to grapple with their own complex identities.

Genevieve Gaignard

I think about the works, and you know, there were literal mirrors in the space. Well as somewhat these mirrors... I am trying to remind the viewer with the inclusion of the mirrors that no, no, no, you got to do the work, too.

Caro Fowler

Thank you for making sure that I saw your exhibition at Gallery 51 before we had this conversation, because it really was, it was an incredibly moving exhibition, and its title, "A Long Way from Home." And I guess I was curious about, in the exhibition text, you talk about how you made this exhibition while you were at home, while you came home, and yet such the impetus or such a clear argument within the exhibition is the ways in which home remains an impossible construct for so many people, and America itself has not realized its possibility of being home to so many. I was just kind of curious about what it meant for you to come home. And, and how much you think coming home after you've left is even possible.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah, there's a lot of layers to that. I just have this kind of-, in my, in my being, this draw to being where my family is rooted. Having come back here for the residency, when I think about who I am and the work I make in the art world... and I say the art world, but that's such a small bubble in the bigger, like scope of things. Not everyone's really following that. But I feel like when I'm out there, or when I'm more connected to the bubble, that I-, I'm making change. I'm like, adding to the conversation. And it's just completely different when I come back here and seeing that place that's, that's so familiar, exactly kind of where you left it, almost like no time has really passed, was just like, oh, I'm home. But I don't have that sense of the things that I've gained in that bubble back in Los Angeles.

Caro Fowler

One thing that I think is interesting in your work - and your work very explicitly deals with race and you've talked about that very explicitly, in the ways-, in your own understanding of yourself and the ways in which people perceive you - but your work also really explicitly deals with class, I think. And, and there's a way in which, you know, Western Massachusetts has nowhere near the diversity of Los Angeles.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

It's a pretty white area. But class wise, it is deeply marked by differences in class and by economic disparities. And so I was just curious about how you think about the role of class within your work and its interrelationship with race.

Genevieve Gaignard

When you were talking, I was thinking about how in Los Angeles, you can kind of drive to one area and just see how the area has nothing really. But there's still a vibrancy to it, you know?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

But then you can go, you know, just a half hour away to another section, and it's just like, mansions and, you know, just extreme wealth. And it's like everyone's kind of navigating the city that way. Where here, it's a little more spread out, or it's not as obvious sometimes. And there's some sort of divide that I feel here.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And I had this feeling like... I'm like, this is the south of the north in a way. I always thought, like, I'm in New England

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Genevieve Gaignard

- this is, you know, this is the place where, you know, folks fled to have a free life. If you think of it, like I'm just thinking of it in like a textbook -

Caro Fowler

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- high school, you know whatever you learned in school -

Caro Fowler

Yeah, totally. Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- like, where's that that kind of wash or, you know, half truth that we get taught. And, you know, my dad was one of the first black men to live in Orange. So when I think of that, I'm like, okay, like, yeah, this place isn't... and it hasn't come that far since that, you know? You definitely see more people of color in the community, but it's not... it's not the same as being in LA, for sure. [Both laugh].

Caro Fowler

In some ways I think the fact that there was this binary narrative between like the slaveholding South that was bad and racist, and a good, enlightened North, is part of the reason we're-, the country's in the turmoil it's in right now, is that it, it meant that such a large part of our history could be overlooked or not thought about, or it allowed a lot of people to not necessarily reconcile with their own histories, perhaps.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah. Totally, and it's like, I can't... I haven't been in Los Angeles in, you know, six months, but I drive around here and I see more Trump flags than I see Black Lives Matter lawn signs and that's really scary to me.

Caro Fowler

As your exhibition shows the lawn is a place where people kind of put literal stakes in the ground about how they identify or how they want to be perceived.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yep. I think that's the bigger point: how they want to be perceived.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. And I think I was, I was curious about the ways in which you were thinking in your exhibition between these exterior homes and how people want to be

perceived and also the sanctity and possibility of a private interior home or a private space. And, and how you were thinking about that in the exhibition. And I should also say, I think this is, this is the day in which the police officers who murdered Breonna Taylor were not held accountable for their actions. And so I think-, I don't know, but I imagine for you this question is particularly palpable today - but the ways in which you think about the possibility of kind of a private interior space and that meaning of home and, and how you're thinking about that in your exhibition.

Genevieve Gaignard

Mm. When I'm making this work, I'm not always aware of all of the meanings that it can hold. Or things haven't come into play, but then they make sense after the fact.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

So yeah, there's like this-, a lot of it is you know, what is really private these days, you know? If you have a cell phone you're pretty much everyone knows everything about you, you know? Or a perceived view of you however you put yourself out there I guess, on social media and what not. Bringing that kind of lawn surface into the space, it you know, that kind of first intent was to have these homes. But then after it was created, it has this kind of funeral space vibe... I don't know almost like a graveyard. Which it very well could be having those names and everything in the space.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

And yeah, I mean, when you're making work that is speaking to the, to the times, and we're waiting moment by moment to see what's happening and it continues

to not go in the way that you want it to go... like, there's, there's only so much hope one can have. And my intent is to give people a safe space to kind of grapple with these harder topics. But in no way are they giving anyone answers. When you brought up Breonna Taylor and the fact that she did not get an ounce of justice, it's, it's really terrifying.

Caro Fowler

I was curious, in terms of also it seemed to me that this installation, you didn't include what I would think of is, I don't know, but what might be considered at this point, a kind of a signature move in your practice, which is you're photographing yourself dressed up in different historical moments and paired periods and characters and, and thinking through the complexity of the ways in which identity is formed or thought about or imagined. And no part of your physical-, that physicalization of yourself and embodiment of yourself in photographs is not in the exhibition. There are found photographs -

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

- in the exhibition, which also reminded me a little bit of Carrie Mae Weems' work, as well. But I was curious if if you thought explicitly about that removing of, of your own kind of physical bodily presence from the exhibition space, or, if that was, or if it just felt really natural to you to move in this direction in your work and, and move away from kind of that earlier body of work.

Genevieve Gaignard

I mean, I've basically been doing the collage work since the beginning.

Caro Fowler Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

And the beginning, what, five years ago? [Both laugh]. I also say, like, my first collages were on my bedroom wall, like... so I've been collaging.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, totally. [Both laugh].

Genevieve Gaignard

But, like, I hear what you're saying but I don't think about... it's kind of like, I feel like I can get to more of the point of things with the collage works.

Caro Fowler

Mhm. That's interesting.

Genevieve Gaignard

And I'm not going to stop making the portraits, but all of the things that go into making the portraits - like, how I work in Los Angeles, like I have my printers and all of that stuff - so it was more of a logistical thing at first.

Caro Fowler

Mm, yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And I also just don't want to be over the head. The kind of like, oh, you get into character, you take the picture, do the thing.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Genevieve Gaignard

Like I don't know how often that can, you know, do the same work that the collage works can do. Like I can pinpoint - although I'm not, you know, again, answering something specific - I am juxtaposing these images, these found images to really reflect back on the viewer, their stance on things.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

So I think about the works and you know, there there were literal mirrors in the space as well. But -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- I think of the collage works as somewhat these mirrors. And I think it's also easy for folks to often say, you know, oh this work is about this artist's perspective, and this is all from the artist's perspective, and I don't really have to connect.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Genevieve Gaignard

Or like I can distance myself, because it's not about me, it's about the artist. But I am trying to remind the viewer with the inclusion of the mirrors that no, no, no, you got to do the work to, you know?

Caro Fowler

I was curious about, I mean, so you dedicated three of the works to the names of Jacob Blake, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. And I was just kind of curious to hear from you how you think those names are being activated in culture right now. And they've become rallying cries and they are, they're important pivot points. But there's also ways in which the complexity of these people in their lives and their families who have lost individuals might also become reduced to a name that then people say without realizing always that there's a-, paradoxically without realizing that there's a life behind it even though it's also becoming a rallying cry for -

Genevieve Gaignard

Mhm, yeah.

Caro Fowler

- Black Lives Matter, if that makes any sense. So I was curious about your own thoughts in creating these collages that I imagine were in some ways kind of meditative practices of mourning for you in making these works. And, and I would just be curious to hear what your own thoughts is on the, the iteration of these names and saying these names and what power does not or power that does have or maybe even the limits of that?

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah. I wasn't including the names originally. And then I was, you know, taking a Instagram scroll break, and, sadly enough scrolled to Jacob Blake's footage. And I was at just kind of this breaking point of like, I can't take this and I don't know how anyone else can. And I, I know for sure, because I live in a Black community in Los Angeles, that like, the energy is just different. Where here, I'm, I'm so aware of how folks can go about their every day. Because although this thing is bad and it's sad that it happened, it doesn't really affect me. And that is just what is kind of constantly vibrating around me, I think, when I'm here. So that was me, like you said, mourning, honoring, kind of not looking away. I don't know if they're doing any good, per se. But I wanted to, you know, knowing that the audience that was going to go through those doors are mostly people that they can keep going through, their kind of, you know, white privileged ways.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

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And not that they don't stop for a minute and feel like that's, you know, really sad. But there's this thing at the back of their head that they might not even be tuned into, that it doesn't... you know? Like, they can go shopping after that, you know or whatever the thing is.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And so I just wanted the space to kind of, like not let them forget, in the sense of like, you're going through this, and it's like, oh, maybe something feels nostalgic, or what have you. But, there's also something that happens, especially with the Jacob Blake piece, where he kind of blends in to the wallpaper. It's the same wallpaper that the piece is made on. And in conversations I've had with some of the MCLA [Massachussets College of the Liberal Arts] students - you know, because I'm asking them questions like, what did these things trigger? What did these things make you think about? And, and it's, again, it's devastating that these names... we shouldn't, we shouldn't know these names, anyway, the way we do. And yet we do. Yet, they've become, you know, household names in the sense of like, we know, we can maybe reference. Like, I remember one of the students saying like, oh, isn't that the guy who got shot when he was running away from the cops? And I was like, well, actually, no, he wasn't running away from the cops. But that's kind of like, you can put that, a version of that, when you're in a white body that, that you know, there was like in her saying that. I don't think she was trying to be malicious, she's just so removed, like how it doesn't affect her, you know? And again, I don't think I'm answering your question per se, but I -

Caro Fowler

No, you are.

Genevieve Gaignard

- it's, it's doing a lot of things in the sense of like, I just want to, I want to make folks face the uncomfortable things because in this kind of area I feel like there's so much in the way we move around here that is comfortable.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. I think that's fair. How would you say, I mean, how is it acutely... How does that, how is it acutely different than the way you experience it and in the community in which you're supported and lived in Los Angeles?

Genevieve Gaignard

I mean, I'm surrounded by a lot of artists. And -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- I live in a predominantly Black community. And most of my friends are Black. Like it's just different, you know? It's not like, I don't have any white friends or anything, but it's like, it's, it's like, you don't think about it as much. Because it's like, there's so many... there's so much diversity, you're just like... But that's-, and I'm saying that also from a very privileged space. Because where I happen to fall in the art world. Like I'm, I happen to be an artist that's making a living from their art.

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

And not a lot of people get to go there, you know? Though -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- and I think about that a lot. The people you surround yourself with, you kind of can fool yourself, or you can unknowingly fool yourself. Thinking like, wow, there's so many like minded people, we all want, you know, the same thing. We all want to, like, work together for the greater good. And then, you know, you go outside that, that bubble, and it's a lot different, you know? I remember early on, in my six month stay here, going, purchasing some of the Black Lives Matter lawn signs, just for my own community.

Caro Fowler

Mhm. Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And realizing ahead of time that I would get pushback or people that wouldn't necessarily want to put them out. But then actually following through with people, and then having that conversation was even harder than I anticipated. Or like this let down where it's like, I really care about this person. And they live in so much fear that they can't put this sign out.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And that's just a shift in like... You know, even North Adams, I feel like you could have a Trump sign next to the house that has a Black Lives Matter sign. And -

Caro Fowler

Oh yeah. I see that all over the area.

Genevieve Gaignard

And in the smaller towns, like, it's, it's more just like, oh, we don't want to like ruffle any feathers. And that's what I'm talking about when I'm, when I say like, just moving, like, just keep your eyes down. I don't want to get involved, you know? I think that's kind of the mentality more so here.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And that frustrates me. So it's like, I'm out in LA, and I'm like, I'm doing all this good work... in my bubble. [Both laugh]. Outside of that, I've done nothing, like I have so much work to do. So there's something coming here that pushes me, it's like it-, there's a lot that I've come to grips with and realize. And it's daunting, because everything else is, you know, on the the larger bubble of the world is pretty intense as well. So then, when you just have to, like, bring it down to a handful of people that are in your tiny town, those, those are the conversations that are sometimes the hardest, you know? And it's not just one conversation.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. But that's also what I appreciate about your work. I mean, I find that-, I know that, I mean, I've heard several people discuss - and I think use the term, too - like, intersectional feminism in relationship to your work and thinking about the complexities of, you know, a term that obviously - not obviously - a term that goes back to thinking about what does it mean to be a Black woman and the relationship with that to feminism and the complexity of that. But it also seems to me that, that your work expands out from thinking about that. In some of the portraits that you do, there is a sense of, I think -

Genevieve Gaignard

Mhm.

Caro Fowler

 correct me, there's a sense that you're engaging with different character types or different portraits of people who, who might be more, who might be dismissed by people living in liberal bubbles.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

Or who might kind of-, that to me, there's a sense in your work - and it's part of what I find interesting about it - is that it's not... it's willing to think through and explore parts of the American psyche that outside of liberal places are often dismissed as just wrong, or how could you think that way? Or How could you live that way? Or how could you -

Genevieve Gaignard

Mhm.

Caro Fowler

- express that viewpoint? And trying to think through those, those viewpoints and that perspective, and that embodied experience a little more, as well as your own experience -

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

- which is deeply informed, obviously, by questions of racism, etc. So I would just kind of be curious if that resonates with you.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah, like, I kind of think of it in the sense of like, being biracial, like I have to own two sides of a story. I'm also white presenting -

Genevieve Gaignard

- so most folks wouldn't identify me as being a person of color. And so I have the ability, when I take on these characters, and also I kind of know, like, because I'm

basing a lot of these off of stereotypes. Because I'm interested in breaking the stereotypes at the same time. Or saying, you know, there's a little bit of truth to the stereotypes, but that's not the full story. Those are kind of the things I'm interested in when I take on the different characters. But -

Caro Fowler

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

- I don't think it would be as successful if I didn't allow myself to be or take on the role of, I don't know, I'm thinking about one character. The shot is called "Neighborhood Watch," where it's like this seemingly older woman in her house, looking out the window. And, you know, and I'm thinking, like, she's seeing a person, a figure with a hoodie on. You know, like, who is that? Like, you know...

Caro Fowler

Right.

Genevieve Gaignard

And it's, and so much of that is like, when did the sweatshirt become such a threat? You know?

Caro Fowler

Right.

Genevieve Gaignard

And so, yeah, that does resonate with me. I'm interested in, in kind of flipping people's perceptions. Especially because I think, unless you know at fir-, you know, most people don't know at first that they're all me. So there is this kind of, if it's a show of photographs, you know, you can kind of see a person walk

through and be like, wait, oh, I'm starting to see similarities. Like, wait, what's going on here?

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Genevieve Gaignard

And like, how can that person be that person and that... Then I think that's what is interesting. Like, you can see someone's gears turning and doing the work. You know, I had a show at the California African American Museum and some folks would walk in and say, who's this white woman? How come she gets to have a show here? And that museum has amazing gallery guides. So there was always someone there to be like, well, actually, if you read the text out front, this and this and this, like, she's biracial, and this is her story, this is what she's doing. And then there's that switch of like, oh, yeah, like, I have a cousin like that. I have a, I have a sibling like that. You know, like, there's...

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

The photographs do, do have, like, do play a strong role in the bigger story of my practice. And I think, yeah, there's still there's still characters to, to visit, that will continue to do just what you've kind of talked about. You know?

Caro Fowler

Yeah. What, one of the-, I think one of the main points in the exhibition that the wall text says and you also have a couple of works in the exhibition that crystallized around it, is, is white lies, and the idea and, I mean, the reality that freedom and justice for all in the United States is, it's just it's a lie. And I was curious when that, you know, when for you that really became a clear articulation.

Genevieve Gaignard

I think I had flashes of it kind of early on. We had some neighbor kids, that started out being our friends, but something happened. And then all of a sudden, we were, oh, there are the monkey kids. Um, things like that, that just like, you're just like, oh -

Genevieve Gaignard

- oh, I see how [lauhging], I see how just you knowing who my father is or who my parents are like that you can... whether you see me as however, like, that doesn't change, like that hatred. And that's, and that's kids saying that to us. You know?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

So they heard their parents say that. Like, that's...

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

But then I would, you know, but then I can go like a whole chunk of time. And because I wasn't around, I didn't really even make work about, you know, kind of unpacking my identity until I got into grad school, because I saw other students of color making work about their Black experience. And I, you know, something kind of clicked. And, but, you know, I went to Greenfield Community College. And you know, a lot of those classes, you're getting assignments. And so I, you know, a self portrait assignment, I think I painted half my face white and half my face black. But I wasn't going into the classroom talking about race. Like, I didn't

have the language. And I didn't, like it was more of an instinct. But no one was talking to me about that. So I didn't feel like even if I was doing subtle things to address it, there wasn't a community of people that knew how to enter it that way. And yeah, so I guess it's like I kind of al-, like, I'm also thinking of a family trip to - because my dad's from New Orleans - when we would drive, we would drive like, I think it's like a 31 hour drive. And I remember a waitress that we stopped at a Waffle House or whatever they have there. [Both laugh]. And the waitress, like, all of us are sitting together, my two, my two brothers, and my mom and my dad, me. And they the waitress goes, is this all on one check? So like, separating our family, you know?

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

Or not reading us as a family.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

Subtle things like that, I think. And I think I had, you know, a few Black friends in other towns that were connected to my parents. Like kids of friends of my parents. I think always having that feeling of not being enough of this or that, like not Black enough, not white enough. And so I think that there's this-, it's my inner child, like kind of creating the stuff I'm creating, I guess, in a way. I feel like there is a sense of really just trying to work through this stuff that I didn't have the language for. My parents didn't really sit down and talk about these things to me. And, you know, maybe nothing severe enough happened that they thought that - I don't know why they didn't necessarily or maybe I don't remember having those conversations. But I never, it's like I always knew I wasn't fitting the mold, but I wasn't, I didn't, I didn't like experience severe injustices.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. But I think it also sh-, I mean, I am interested in the way in which childhood, as a theme, seems to run through some of your installations. And, and like I remember with the installation at Mass MoCA, I think what I thought was interesting about it - many things - but one of the things was the ways in which the, the child's room, like there was a sense of, um, you somehow convey that sense of like... like, there's a sense when you're a child, I think that, that perception is very open. Or, like, there's such a possibility for like, the, the rules of like gravity and, and other things don't -

Caro Fowler

- necessarily apply. Like, I think th-, but the other side of that is that there can also be like monsters under the bed, right? Or kind of [inaudible]. But it is to say that there, you know, there's something so fragile and also beautiful in this moment when children are creating their world and creating their understanding of themselves. And that, that I think that those those slight-, those, those comments, however, while one might not call them like a blatant sign, you know, that, that they are, that they are incredibly damaging, because they-, it is such a, it's a time in which perception is so varied that it really, it can be destructive if a child doesn't know how to process it, or doesn't know what to do with it and frame it.

Genevieve Gaignard

Mhm.

Genevieve Gaignard

Yeah. I'm like, even as you're talking, I'm like, oh, wait, I remember like, in high school, Lizzie McGuire - ha, sorry [both laughing] - came up to me and was like, so you're like mulatto? And I wasn't...

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Genevieve Gaignard

I didn't know what that was. I'd never heard that. I don't know. I was in high school. I don't know if I was like, a junior, freshman. I don't know what I was. But -

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

- and I went home. And I was like, this girl asked me if I was mulatto? And I was like, I just got really mad at my mom. Because I was like, well, you have to tell me that stuff. Like, I don't know what that means. You know? I need you to tell you that so I'm not like going out there blind to this, you know? Now I get asked, like, why do you only photograph yourself? And I'm like, because I'm working through my own shit. I can't, you know? It feels a bit odd to - although I used to photograph my family a lot and other people prior to grad school - I just was like, I'm on this journey of like, figuring it out. And I again, don't have the answers. But if I can help just like one other kid, feel like there's someone out there that kind of knows what they're going through, then I feel like it's worth it because it took me a long time to find those folks on my path.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Genevieve Gaignard

And, and it's been really great to see how so many different types of people find an entry and a connection to the work. In more of the class reference, it's like, doing what you can with the materials you have, like making something beautiful, even through all of the hatred. So you know, like that "Salty Karens" one, it's like you're drawn to it, because it's all these beautiful flowers and butterflies floating around and yeah, there's this really hard truth weighting the bottom of it. But all of this stuff is happening all at the same time.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. I think that's a pretty good note to end on. Thank you.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.