

*Mariah Garnett:
Dreamed This
Gateway*

**Contemporary
Arts Museum
Houston**

Mariah Garnett: Dreamed This Gateway

Who speaks and who is silenced? What histories or facets of a culture do we privilege and why? How do we both acknowledge and rewrite our history while moving forward with care? Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker Mariah Garnett asks these questions and others in *Mariah Garnett: Dreamed This Gateway*. For this exhibition, Garnett presents operatic videos, including a multi-channel video installation, and a sound work, commissioned by CAMH and inspired by the enigmatic and remarkable life and artistic output of her great-great-aunt, Ruth Lynda Deyo (1884–1960). A spiritualist, synesthete, and composer, Deyo moved to Cairo in 1924, where she began to have visions transmitted by spirits. Deyo meticulously transcribed her visions and communications, as well as her political, social, and financial anxieties in a series of diaries, eventually composing an opera, *The Diadem of Stars*, based on the lives of Egyptian pharaohs Akhenaten and Tutankhamun.

Working in collaboration with experimental vocalist Holland Andrews, Cairo-based documentary playwright Raphaël Khouri, Egyptian musician Nancy Mounir, and professional opera singers Christopher Paul Craig and Breanna Sinclairé, Garnett uses Deyo's materials, as well as conversations with her collaborators, as a point of departure to explore unexpected and poignant connections between spirituality and artistic production. Reckoning with her family's complicity in extractive systems of colonial oppression and cultural appropriation, specifically Deyo's fetishization of Ancient Egyptian culture, the artist pivots from Deyo's singular and solitary search for affirmation, enlightenment, and success, instead Garnett uses a collaborative and multiplicitous approach to art making that centers and celebrates the voices of women, queer, trans, non-binary performers and performers of color across time and space. The resulting works, which feature both highly staged and improvised performances, emphasize sonic dissonance alongside lush lyricism to mesmerizing effect. In *Dreamed This Gateway*, Garnett and her collaborators weave together a rich and fantastical vision of individual and collective trauma and transcendence within the context of our contemporary political and ideological landscape.

Mariah Garnett: Dreamed This Gateway is organized by Rebecca Matalon, Curator, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.



Excerpts and drawings from *Ruth Lynda Deyo Diaries, 1914-1930*

Mariah Garnett

The Pow'r of Life is Love, 2021

Multi-channel video installation,

4K video: color, sound, 13:00 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles



The Pow'r of Life is Love features a staging of a scene from Deyo's previously unrealized opera, *The Diadem of Stars* (1925-32). Set in Ancient Egypt during the eighteenth dynasty, Deyo's opera is a fantastical and mystical interpretation of the tumultuous reigns of Pharaohs Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. While Deyo originally conceived of elaborate stage sets and costumes based on Egyptian artifacts, Garnett's own re-interpretation places us emphatically within the present. Professional opera singers and longtime friends, tenor Christopher Paul Craig and soprano and trans rights advocate Breanna Sinclairé perform a romantic love scene between Tutankhamun and his wife Ankhesenpaaten. The two recount shared mystical visions and sing of love unbound by earthly constraints such as time and space. Developed and filmed in 2021, the work is both a reflection of and response to the physical isolation that attends life during a global pandemic. Though it is equally, and essentially, a meditation on the isolation and constraints experienced by historically marginalized communities. Garnett queers Deyo's original love scene by casting performers with an existing friendship, proposing the transformative and transcendent power of kinship and community outside the bounds of romantic love.

The second half of Garnett's video depicts a surreal, hallucinatory scene inspired by Deyo's obsession with an ancient stone bust she acquired in Cairo, Egypt in 1924 and which she believed to be inhabited by spirits. In the video, a glowing stone appears to speak in a chorus of AI-generated voices. Drawn from Deyo's diary entries, the voice-over narration captures both her fears of failed artistic achievement and financial ruin, and the spirits' promises of eternal love, enlightenment, and material success. The flowery language of affirmation is prescient in its mirroring of contemporary self-help rhetoric and its problematic emphasis on individual agency over collective action, and independent of social, cultural, and economic conditions and constraints.



Mariah Garnett with collaborator
I Was Just A Boy, 2022
Audio, 10:45 minutes
Commissioned by
Contemporary Arts Museum
Houston (CAMH),
courtesy the artist
and Commonwealth
and Council, Los Angeles



Mariah Garnett with Holland Andrews
Dreamed This Gateway, 2022

5-channel video installation, 16mm film transferred to 4K video: color, sound,
25:13 minutes

Commissioned by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), courtesy the
artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

Dreamed This Gateway depicts vocalist Holland Andrews reciting and riffing on text from Deyo's diaries, lyrics written by Garnett's collaborator, Raphaël Amahl Khouri, and a transcript from the psychically mediated conversation Garnett had with Deyo while in Cairo. Set to a melody derived from Deyo's opera, the five different sets of lyrics Andrews sings touch on themes such as gender ambivalence, sexual assault, environmental catastrophe, depression, mental illness, and spirituality as a coping mechanism. Andrews appears amidst a set up of microphones, stands, cables, and pedals, revealing the mechanics and means by which they create their otherworldly and improvisatory compositions. We witness the breadth of Andrews vocal range and technique, as well as their highly experimental approach to sound making which includes using their own voice to generate musical accompaniments. The camera's gaze emphasizes the inward and interior nature of making sound as well as the body's role as an instrument. Andrews's vocalizations grow increasingly dissonant, explosive, and chaotic over time, paralleling the spiritual and psychic unraveling articulated in Deyo's diaries, which at times reveal a woman continually on the edge of dissolution and desperately seeking out spiritual guidance and sustenance.