

# Garrett Bradley: American Rhapsody

## December 19, 2019–March 22, 2020

**Contemporary  
Arts Museum  
Houston**

## CENTER GALLERY



### **America, 2019**

Multi-channel video installation; 35mm film transferred to video: black and white, sound, 23:55 minutes

New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum purchase, Carmen Donaldson fun, 2019. 33

Set to a rhythmic soundtrack by Trevor Mathison of the Black Audio Film Collective (1983–1998), *America* (2019) presents a fabricated visual archive of early African American cinema in the form of 12 vignettes. Inspired by a 2013 survey conducted by the Library of Congress proposing that 70 percent of silent films made between 1912 and 1929 have been lost, as well as the discovery and restoration of what is believed to be the earliest surviving film to feature a black cast (*Lime Kiln Club Field Day*, 1913), *America* presupposes the existence of a body of cinema made by and for African Americans and since lost to history. While each vignette mines a specific historical or cultural event—such as the premier of D.W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 or the founding of the Negro National League in 1920—they are at heart depictions of the everyday lives of early-20th century African Americans.

Weaving together newly shot performances by non-trained actors and found footage from *Lime Kiln*, Bradley offers up a counternarrative to a history of film and its representations of blackness. Released in 2014, over a century after it was first shot, *Lime Kiln* stars Bert Williams, famed Caribbean-American actor, and Odessa Warren Grey. In the film Williams vies for Grey’s attention, eventually winning her affections as they spend a day of leisure and love at the fairgrounds. While *Lime Kiln* is not absent of stereotyped depictions of blackness—Williams plays the role in black face, although he is the only actor to do so—it is unique in its rendering of middle class black life, pleasure, joy, and tenderness during Jim Crow segregation. Spurred by its discovery, in *America* Bradley poignantly asks what it might mean to model a history of black visibility and representation that privileges depictions of pleasure over spectacles of pain.

**AKA, 2019**

Video: color, sound, 8:00 minutes

Courtesy the artist

*AKA* (2019) is the first in a trilogy of films about relationships between women, in this case relationships between mothers and daughters born into mixed-race families or families of the same race with varying skin tones. Like many of Garrett Bradley's films, the experimental short developed out of hours-long conversations between the artist and her female protagonists. She began with a series of questions regarding race, upward mobility, and the relationship between white women and black women, which the artist posed to friends and family, and on social media—an ongoing resource in her work. In one instance, one of Bradley's subject's repeatedly asked her mother, "Are you color struck?" The term, made famous by Zora Neale Hurston's 1925 play of the same name, refers to the notion of "colorism," which describes both interracial and intraracial forms of discrimination based on the color of one's skin. Bradley subsequently used the phrase to shape the visual and sonic landscape of the video—specifically *AKA*'s prismatic and shimmering effects, which contribute to the work's hallucinatory and dream-like atmosphere. Her dialogues with mothers and daughters would also determine much of the choreography and locations of scenes, articulating an approach to filmmaking that both arises from and honors the visions and voices of its subjects.

**Alone, 2017**

Video: black and white, sound, 12:00 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Shot in New Orleans, Louisiana, *Alone* (2017) provides a glimpse into the life of Aloné Watts. As the documentary short opens, we find Watts in bed as she contemplates a recent marriage proposal from her incarcerated partner, Desmond Watson, who was arrested in 2015 on nonviolent charges. We follow the main character as she meets with Watson's lawyer on courthouse stairs, tries on wedding dresses, and tells her family of her plans to wed, resulting in an explosive confrontation as they beg her to reconsider. *Alone* provides a close look at the ways in which the United States prison system impacts not only the incarcerated but also the daily lives of their loved ones as they attempt to navigate its bureaucracies—including paying significant sums of money to private telecommunications companies to stay in contact. In a country where African Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of white people, the film also points towards the enduring legacy of the Thirteenth Amendment, which in 1865 both abolished slavery and opened doors for new laws designed to criminalize black life, also known as Black Codes, which would, for all intents and purposes, maintain the black body's status as public property. *Alone* considers the continued precariousness of black life and the black American family through an intimate look into the ways love and loneliness remain intricately bound for the incarcerated and their families.