

# ARTFORUM

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Mariah Garnett, *Other & Father* at ltd los angeles by Jan Tumlir



**Mariah Garnett, *Other & Father*, 2016**, two-channel HD video transferred from 16 mm, color, sound, 11 minutes. Installation view.

Titled “Other & Father,” Mariah Garnett’s first solo show at ltd los angeles revolved around a BBC television news feature shot in Belfast in 1971 that addressed the challenges faced by a young couple of different denominations at the start of the sectarian fray that came to be known as the Troubles. The Protestant half of this relationship happens to be Garnett’s father—a parent the artist would not meet until 2007, after a separation that lasted most of her life—here just inching past adolescence, sporting a very glam haircut and shown alongside his then girlfriend. Garnett was twenty-six when she and her father reunited, still young enough to relate as a peer to his televised image, though obviously not to the man she encountered three and a half decades after the program’s airing. Perhaps it was this relative closeness to the on-screen persona that inspired her to produce this show’s titular work, a film in which she plays her father’s part, in a shot-by-shot remake of the BBC footage. The original and its copy were projected on facing walls of the gallery’s back room, requiring viewers to continually swivel their heads between “father” and “other.”

Even before considering what it all means, one had the impulse to compare, to measure the accuracy of the reenactment, noting any telling deviations. Garnett’s acting is impressive: Adopting her father’s sartorial style, his somewhat hunched bearing, uncertain gestures, and impish expressions, she credibly passes for him. The Irish trans actress Robyn Reihill, cast in the role of his girlfriend, also delivers an astute portrayal. And perhaps even more remarkably, despite the almost half century that has elapsed between the two films, the city of Belfast looks about the same. Yet within this close correspondence, subtler signs of generational division become acute. Of particular note is the way the two sets of subjects relate to the camera. Beyond the obvious distinction that, in the first instance, they are captured live, whereas in the second, the performances have been rehearsed, both films, in their different ways, are docudramas; both capture in time the construction of new identities for dissemination. In light of Garnett’s deft impersonation, one becomes sensitized to the cues that her father is himself perhaps taking from his favorite pop stars—notably Bowie—in interview etiquette. His self-presentation, however, betrays discomfort, an endearing insecurity that the artist mimics in all its nervous details with a precision that verges on callousness. That she knows instinctively how to inhabit the picture is evident, and yet one senses a whole other layer of emotional struggle beneath the facade.

There is, of course, a host of political reasons for this unease. The BBC film was meant as a salve to help quell mounting tensions with its tale of love against the odds, but upon airing, it actually served to break up the couple, sending them fleeing from Ireland separately to escape potential backlash in their native land. Revisiting her father's youthful trials, the artist summons up a present-day context no less prone to intolerance and discrimination. The couple in the remake implicitly point us toward new zones of conflict around gay marriage and transgender rights.

In the front room of the gallery, another video, this one presented on a flat-screen monitor, showed Garnett's father watching the original BBC special on a desktop computer (*Dad Watching Himself*, 2016). The viewer quickly intuits that Mr. Garnett had never seen it before—a seemingly conscious choice on his part, which in itself speaks volumes about the difference between his generation and his daughter's. Today, it can be said without exaggeration that the control of one's being in the "second life" of media is no longer an aspirational option but a base-level rule of social survival. Garnett's father's response alternates between rueful nostalgia and astonishment at the newsmakers' dramatic distortion of the facts of his life. The suggestion that the young couple was preparing to marry, a narrative through-line of the news show, was wholly invented, according to him. Garnett sits by his side, mostly silent and listening compassionately as he corrects the record, but the truth of the matter, in this work, is projected elsewhere. What is passed between parents and children is increasingly not only history but media history. Garnett's work ultimately comes across as a highly nuanced form of camp, in which the inequities of dominant representations can no longer simply be cheerfully travestied: They demand painful immersion in the "devil" of the details.

—Jan Tumlir