

# TINTYPE

MICHELLE WILLIAMS GAMAKER | DISTANT RELATIVE

12 September – 19 October



*Distant Relative* is a reconstruction; somewhere between schoolroom, cinema, and court of law. It is a site of shared and elusive personal histories.

Since 2014, British moving image and performance artist Michelle Williams Gamaker has been developing 'fictional activism': the restoration of people of colour performing in 20th century British and Hollywood studio films from marginalised characters to central figures, who return in her works to challenge the fictional injustices to which they have been historically consigned.

*Distant Relative* marks a chapter in this exploration, with a focus on Williams Gamaker's self-confessed obsessive journey into the life of Hollywood film star Sabu, whom she first came across as a teenager in *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1947).

Sabu was 'discovered' in 1936 by anthropologist filmmaker Robert Flaherty who, after gathering footage in a maharajah's palace, brought the 12-year-old son of a mahout [elephant driver] from Mysore to Hollywood. Flaherty cast him in Alexander Korda's *Elephant Boy* (1937), which catapulted Sabu to international stardom. Sabu went on to major roles such as Abu in *The Thief of Bagdad*, 1940 and Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, 1942. He became a household name,

appearing on stamps and tea sets, endorsing cereals, starring at the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair and featuring in lifestyle magazines on both sides of the Atlantic.

Williams Gamaker is fascinated by the tension between construction and illusion in the studio system fiction machine, that offered a controlled colonial vision of the British Raj and its people, including the casting of white British actors in the roles of Indians. Sabu in effect became the go-to actor for such films: the studios now had someone authentic who didn't need to be 'blacked up'.

Michelle Williams Gamaker's short film, *The Eternal Return*, the third film in her *Dissolution* trilogy, premieres at Tintype. It posits a now-struggling Sabu in 1952 as he supports his family by performing – once more with a troupe of elephants – in Tom Arnold's Christmas Circus in Haringey Arena.

With the inclusion of British Pathé footage of circuses in 1950s and 60s Britain and their bizarre parading of tame beasts as 'exotic entertainment', the film shows the indignity Sabu felt by being similarly deployed. The film thus explores the notion of success in the absence of agency as it imagines the resentment of an individual for whom the price of prosperity was to be typecast.

In Sabu's case, this was the conflation of his background and his career that imposed a seemingly inescapable relationship with elephants; the animals recur throughout his filmography. It also highlights how, in spite of his extraordinary fame, Sabu was always the sidekick and never the lead or love interest.

Also in the exhibition is a selection of Williams Gamaker's collection of Sabu paraphernalia: a small part of the vast array of crockery and teapots (so-called Sabuware), posters, photographs and cigarette cards still in circulation. Williams Gamaker hopes to be the world's largest collector of these items, fully aware that this compulsion is as problematic as the objects themselves. But her archive aims to consolidate into one place an individual distributed for consumption. A large textile, a collage of press photos from the 1950 paternity case Sabu fought, casts the star in a more problematic light, further muddying the water.

In January 2018, Williams Gamaker made a pilgrimage of sorts to Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Los Angeles, the cemetery to the stars also known as the Disneyland of Death. In brown taffeta cocktail dress and stilettos, she located in the 300-acre site Sabu's grave: no.1, Lot 482, in the Sheltering Hills plot. There she began to paint her nails gold while in private commune with the star.

Shortly afterwards she was commandeered by security and ordered to leave. Having come so far, it was at this point Williams Gamaker protested with: '...it's just that I'm a distant relative'.

Once uttered, these words made perfect sense.

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MICHELLE WILLIAMS GAMAKER lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions and screenings include, **As Seen on Screen**, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; **All About You** (with Julia Kouneski) The Koppel Project Hive; **Women Power Protest**, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; **Essex Road 5**, Tintype, 2019; 35th Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur; **Solitary Pleasures**, Freud Museum London; **Transmediale Festival: Face Value**, Berlin; **Library Interventions: Moving Knowledge**, Blenheim Walk Gallery; **Living Beyond Limits Queeratorial Project** and **History Repeats Itself**, MIMA, Middlesbrough; **BFI: Flare!**; **BFI 62<sup>nd</sup> London Film Festival 2018**; **Emma and Edvard**, **Love in the Time of Loneliness** (with Mieke Bal) Munch Museet, Norway; **Concrete Jungle**, Annka Kultys Gallery, London; **The World Made New**, Pi Projects, London; **Work Work**, Tintype, London, 2017; **The Making**, The Agency, London, 2015

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Image: still from **The Eternal Return** ©Michelle Williams Gamaker, 2019