

Please cite the Published Version

Suleman, Babar (2024) Situating love and loss: making a film, re-making a world. *Women's History Review*, 33 (6). pp. 927-936. ISSN 0961-2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2024.2382642>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/636636/>

Usage rights:  [Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in *Women's History Review*

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)



Situating love and loss: making a film, re-making a world

Babar Suleman

To cite this article: Babar Suleman (2024) Situating love and loss: making a film, re-making a world, *Women's History Review*, 33:6, 927-936, DOI: [10.1080/09612025.2024.2382642](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2024.2382642)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2024.2382642>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 25 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 79



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Situating love and loss: making a film, re-making a world

Babar Suleman

Filmmaking, Manchester School of Art, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

The title of the author's film 'HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE' (HD video, 22 min and 11 s) is taken from the inscription on a bench on the top of a hill, at the highest point in the landscape of Compton Verney, designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in his ideal vision of the British country house. By appropriating this statement of contentment as a critical tool to inquire how perfect it really is and who is the 'we' that is so blessed, Suleman inserted their body into the landscape as a reminder of historical absences and erasure, and the legacy of colonialism and queer-phobia. The film is narrated, however, in the register of an address to an absent lover. A personal history and a lover's yearning doubles as a critique of violent and exclusive histories.

This article is based on a presentation in the Creative Interventions panel at the Power and Patriarchy conference in January 2022. It includes documentation from the artist's practice-led research alongside critical reflection and commentary (Figure 1).

I was selected for the Compton Verney Inclusive Histories Research Fellowship in 2021, with a focus on the historic country house and landscape. My supervisors for the fellowship were Dr. Oliver Cox, Heritage Engagement Fellow at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) and Dr. Amy Orrock, Senior Curator at Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park.

I was one of three fellows and our

... brief was to explore hidden histories at Compton Verney and present new perspectives. The Fellows each designed projects based around their research interests. This included exploring stories of disability and voicing queer and non-Western perspectives on the collections, house and grounds ...¹

My fellowship resulted in a new moving image work, 'HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE'. The film was shown at Compton Verney from 16 March to 13 May 2022. It was subsequently selected for a cinema screening by Alice Wilde, Talent Development Producer and Curator for Visual Art at HOME in Manchester, for the 'Spit That Out' artist film programme (part of PUSH Festival).²

CONTACT Babar Suleman  m.babarsuleman@gmail.com  Filmmaking, Manchester School of Art, Manchester M15 6ED, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.



Figure 1. ‘This is where you could have asked me about my life.’ Image source: Babar Suleman, *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE*, 2021. HD Video, 22 min and 11 s.

Document 1.0

Label text for *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE*

The title of this film is taken from the inscription on a bench on the top of a hill, at the highest point in the landscape of Compton Verney, designed by Lancelot “Capability” Brown in his ideal vision of the British country house. By appropriating this statement of contentment as a critical tool to inquire how perfect it really is and who is the ‘we’ that is so blessed, I inserted my body into the landscape as a reminder of historical absences and erasure, and the legacy of colonialism and queer-phobia. The film is narrated, however, in the register of an address to an absent lover. A personal history and a lover’s yearning doubles as a critique of violent and exclusive histories (Figures 2 and 3).

Despite burgeoning scholarship and creative interest in the relationship between ethnicity and queerness with rurality,³ historic houses⁴ and collections,⁵ *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE* is the first, and so far only, artwork that places a so-called ‘queer’ and ‘Pakistani’ body in the context of the British country house, providing a reproachful counter through the novel conceit of unrequited love. Its poetic and romantic mode opens up a new form of critique.

The estate that led to what we now know as Compton Verney came into the possession of the ‘ruthless and ambitious’ Richard Verney in the 1500s but its history stretches even further back. ‘The basis of the house which we see today’ can be traced to the eighteenth century.⁶

As stated in the label text (Document 1.0), the title of the film is taken from the inscription on the bench, installed at the highest point of the hill in Old Town Meadow, that offers a view of the landscape and house. Intuitively drawn to the phrase when I came across it in my initial survey of Compton Verney’s landscape (during a private walk), I thought it an excellent prompt to ask critical questions such



Figure 2. Inscription on the bench. Image source: Artist's own.

as 'how perfect it really is?' and 'who is the "we" that is so blessed?' Walking proved to be a fruitful mode of inquiry as well as a key motif in the film, an apt reflection of the history and richness of walking as a methodology in landscape research.⁷

I then began exploring both the history of the British country house in general, having never been to one before, and, while Compton Verney itself is not a National Trust property, the Trust's recent report⁸ on the ties between British heritage properties and histories of colonialism and historic slavery. Similar studies have previously been commissioned by English Heritage.⁹ Exhibitions and material on Queer bodies in the countryside have also been a useful supplementary resource, such as a recent exhibition at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) 'that poses the question as to whether there is queerness in rural life'¹⁰ which, interestingly, uses criminal conviction records as a starting point for discovering queer lives.

As someone who is often identified as both 'Pakistani' and 'Queer', terms I problematise in my practice, I feel that the country house does not seem to have been created for someone like me (no surprises there!) but, in fact, directly and indirectly at the expense of people who come from my background (in terms of class, as well). My filmmaking proposal therefore aimed to rectify it by visually and conceptually inserting myself into its history and asking questions about significant absences in narratives and representation. However, as an artist, my approach is one of subtlety and romance. Therefore the moving image work shows my body within the landscape accompanied by poetic voiceover that speaks to the absence and/or neglect of a 'hypothetical



Figure 3. View from the hill / bench area. Image source: Artist's own.

beloved'. The heartless beloved, of course, can be read as a metaphor for Empire while simultaneously positioning the reproachful protagonist as a stand-in for all the people who have not been included in history or feel alienated/excluded from it. It is, however, primarily a highly personal device: allowing me to draw from personal heart-break and relationships to infuse the work with romantic longing and disappointment. The lens of romance as a device for critiquing Empire, ultimately, allows for going beyond a protest against exploitation and towards evoking the absence of a relationship based on love and respect. It also reflects the desire for assimilation that differences in power and privilege can often inspire in those that are marginalised.

My phenomenological and felt experience of the landscape and historic house is intended to constitute a new history while channelling a poetic tradition that can be traced back to Sufi poetry or the Urdu ghazal. The work's multi-faceted and multi-layered approach oscillates between east and west, encounter and confrontation, romantic ode and damning critique, absence and presence, past and present, hope and grief.

As part of my research process, I attended an Artist Workgroup (as well as other events) with the London-based artist duo Daniel & Clara to discover, and engage with, the practices of other contemporary artists who are working with and through landscape. Daniel & Clara work extensively with landscape and their Art Council England funded project, *Landscape Imaginary*, '... exploring the relationship between psychology and place, looking at how we imbue places with meaning, and how in turn landscape,



Figure 4. 'This is where we could have watched the sun rise together.' Image source: Babar Suleman, *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE*, 2021. HD Video, 22 min and 11 s.

weather and the environment impact on our state of mind and imagination',¹¹ has been a useful research resource and visual reference for me.

I was also, of course, aware of and alert to recent Turner Prize nominee Ingrid Pollard's landmark work in 1988 of positioning a black body within the British countryside:

Ownership of land, commerce, economic development, and English involvement in the Atlantic slave trade are elements in this work that look at the construction of the Romantic countryside idyll. Balanced with a representation of single figures in the landscape that challenge assumptions identity and ownership.¹²

In her photography, Pollard has 'taken the English countryside as one of her principle themes, largely by documenting her discomfort with it.'¹³

There was also a knowing appropriation of the land art movement, saturated with white male artists, during which 'artists made minimal and temporary interventions in the landscape such as Richard Long who simply walked up and down until he had made a mark in the earth'.¹⁴

I also thought through ideas of restrictive and exclusive land presented by Nick Hayes,¹⁵ Corinne Fowler's exploration of the countryside's colonial connections¹⁶ and Susan Owens' work on creative interpretations of the British countryside¹⁷ (Figure 4).

Document 2.0

Transcript for the film

This is where you could have touched me.
 This is where we could have had conversations.
 This is where I could have undressed for you.
 This is where we could lie down together and look at the early stars.
 This is where you could have kissed me.

This is where we could have watched the sun rise together.
 This is where you could have gently whispered to me.
 This is where we could have danced together.
 This is where you could have understood something about me, and I could have understood something about you.
 This is where you could tell me you loved me.
 This is where you could have entered me.
 This is where you could have asked if I would like to hold your hand.
 This is where you could have held my hand.
 This is where you could have asked me about my life.
 This is where we could have built a life together.
 This is where you could have hugged and comforted me.

* یہاں پر تم ہوتے تو کیا بات ہوتی

* Roman: Yahan per tum hotay to kya baat hoti

Literal: What conversation would be had if you were here?

Figurative: How marvellous would it be if you were here!

How perfect is this, how blessed are we

When this is where you never were.

A director's commentary

Visits to Compton Verney's 120-acre landscape acted as field trips. The actual process of filming was itself a form of research, and opened up many new creative avenues and directions. Some examples include:

- Walking as a method of worldmaking. It is also a reflection of the literal and metaphoric distances between Empire and its subjects as well as the magnitude of the country estate compared to my physicality.
- Though I do get closer and closer to the historic country house as the film proceeds, the editing of the film takes many liberties. As I walk towards it, I am also seen walking towards nowhere in particular with nothing in sight. I spend time in reflection, pausing often, stepping back as well as stepping 'forward'. Such an approach to editing conveys the futility of 'arriving somewhere' or 'reaching a destination' or progress or any other neat resolution. Ultimately, and unbeknownst to many a viewer, I end up even further away from the house in the last scene than the first scene (the bench seen in the former is a few feet behind my initial starting point).
- As I visit different parts of the landscape, my voiceover (see Document 2.0 for transcript) reinterprets it as a site for disappointed love and dashed hopes. On a related unabashedly romantic note, there is a fairytale-quality to the setting, especially to eyes not used to lush grounds and impressive homes, and the work can be seen to contrast it with the distinctly un-fairytale like ending of the Empire's relationship to its subjects.
- The film uses sound sparingly, eschewing conventional sonic cues like the wind and birdsong. The only sound is my voice, occasionally interrupting the silence to externalise an inner world. There is an imperfect quality to this, purposefully so.
- In one of the scenes in the film, my body is seen half-immersed in the on-site lake. I initiate ripples in the water that mirror how any intervention of mine is but temporary and slight, compared to the intractable weight and extent of history.

- Multiple pathways are taken as I walk into or away from the same site. This is a way to point to alternative decisions, routes and scenarios that could have been undertaken for history to have been otherwise.
- The insertion of the bare brown skin in the English idyllic is the would-be lovers' union: an intercourse between two polarities. There is a seductive 'what could have been' quality to the film, inviting and engaging with the lover even when grief-stricken. This problematises any supposed ending, a clean divorce or final farewell. A heart-breaking history echoes in the present, a billowing tree leads a shy dance (even if it peters out before gaining momentum) and remnants of thwarted desire and raw nature can still be glimpsed, hidden just underneath the neat orderliness of the constructed landscape.
- An uprooted tree invites a look at the underbelly.
- The faceless figure takes on identity mid-way through the film. Does seeing who it is change how we relate to it? Perhaps so but more importantly it grounds it in the personal to release any unfair burden of, or claim to, representation for a whole group of people even if it can usefully allude to it, depending on a viewer's reading.
- I am seen reclining against the sphinx sculptures (an accessioned part of the collection) that flank the bridge as a gesture evoking mythologies (both Greek and nostalgic or glorifying fables of Empire) and the idea of the 'riddle' (the film's title can be read as a riddle).
- Walking across a bridge from both the left and right side hints at parallel universes and alternative time.
- Towards the end, the water body is seen separating my body from the actual structure of the historic country house. Despite the long walk towards it, it remains aloof and inaccessible, a monument unchanged by my ephemeral and vulnerable presence, my creativity or any efforts made to reach it.
- The only real reward, ultimately, is that in the midst of the colonial legacy, the manicured landscape and the deeply disturbing history, I am the only, if solitary, representation of humanity. Therein lies the most scathing critique of the surroundings (Figure 5).

While the film is site-specific in one way, it extends far beyond its setting to speak to British heritage and countryside, Stately Homes, Empire and other related constructs (the 'cruelty of man' being one of the unifying ideas). Compton Verney may have provided the opportunity for this intervention but the film is not conceptually contained within its grounds. The film is not parochial but it is deceptively simple, opening up deeper recesses the more an audience brings to it: Whether it is the history of Empire and country house or a familiarity with Urdu and Persian poetry, an understanding of queer of colour performance or land and body art, the film allows for multiple entry points, evading any single reading and never requiring absolute understanding.

In finishing this article two years after I began the fellowship, I keep discovering new aspects to the work while it continues to reveal more about where and who I was at that point in time.

The film has also informed newer work, such as my commission for b-side festival (funded via the British Council International Collaboration Grant), an augmented reality and moving image work titled 'Requital.'¹⁸ While there are many points of



Figure 5. 'This is where I could have undressed for you.' Babar Suleman, *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE*, 2021. HD Video, 22:11 mins.

departure (not the least visually, as it is set on the striking Isle of Portland on the Dorset coast), the newer film shares certain characteristics with this work: the pace, the framing, the evocation of myth, the dialogue with the neglectful beloved and the relationships between body and landscape, marginalised identity and history to name a few. I see the two works as companion pieces. Despite its melancholy, *HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE* is the more hopeful work while there is a substantial sense of finality to *Requital*. This is also apparent through the colour schemes - the former is fertile and green, even if superficially, while the latter is 'on the brink', steeped in the greys and blues of the English coast.

HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE represented a pivotal step change in my practice. It was the first time I had publicly appeared in one of my own films. It firmly articulated my relationship to place and worldmaking. While used in a more obvious manner in other works of mine, there were seeds of magic and myth in this work too (act of worldmaking, the sphinx). It continues to show an acute awareness of consensus histories even as I seemingly (but purposefully) side-step them to prioritise the personal, romantic and/or erotic. I find the void of unrequited love to be an endless resource for me to speak from to any other concerns, allowing me to marry the personal and site-specific to the universal and global.

Document 3.0

Blog text, as published on the power and patriarchy conference website

Scale

Whether it was the historic country house or landscape itself or the task in front of me, I was struck at first by scale. Grandeur, sure, but even that had much to do with scale.

My physicality seemed minor:

Ripples I made in the water, disappearing seconds after I conjured them.
 My body, a dot receding into the landscape.
 My presence across a few days, perhaps a footnote in a history that spans centuries.

Interior

Beyond this world is another world. The world of the interior. It is bigger than houses and landscapes, countries and centuries, the here and now, yesteryear and future.
 It is a world that accompanies me wherever I am. It may not be visible but it exists and pervades.
 It is the world I primarily exist in.
 My voice, its only messenger.

Mapping

I set out to superimpose my world on the world in front of me.
 Grief spilled forth from the rolling hills, across the lush meadows and through their waters, and past its bridges.
 An atlas of unrequited love.

Labour

I walked and walked, I tried and tried, I hoped and hoped.
 In the end, it is just labour. Labour that does not change what happened or fix what is broken.
 But perhaps, something was learned and something could be healed. It is not for me to say. This text was originally written by Babar Suleman for the Compton Verney Inclusive Histories Research Fellowship (2021). Suleman's film, HOW PERFECT IS THIS HOW BLESSED ARE WE, was exhibited in the gallery from March 16 - May 13, 2022. You can find out more about the fellowships [here](#).¹⁹
 Fellowship supervisors: Dr. Oliver Cox, Heritage Engagement Fellow at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) and Dr. Amy Orrock, Senior Curator at Compton Verney.

Notes

1. Compton Verney, 'Inclusive Histories at Compton Verney', <https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/inclusive-histories-at-compton-verney/>.
2. HOME Manchester, 'Spit That Out 2023: North-West Artist Film Programme', https://homemcr.org/event/spit-that-out-2023-north-west-artist-film-programme/?dm_i=6OM7,PSJW,4UVG1X,36YTW,1.
3. Kye Askins, 'Crossing Divides: Ethnicity and rurality', *Journal of Rural Studies* 25 (2009): 365–75, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016709000321> (accessed September 6, 2023).
4. Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), 'girl.boy.child', <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/girl-boy-child>.
5. Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), 'Permissible Beauty', <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/girl-boy-child> <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/permissible-beauty>.
6. Compton Verney, 'History of Compton Verney', <https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/about-us/history-of-compton-verney/>.

7. Hannah Macpherson, 'Walking Methods in Landscape Research: Moving Bodies, Spaces of Disclosure and Rapport', *Landscape Research* 41, no. 4 (2016): 425–32, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01426397.2016.1156065> (accessed September 6, 2023).
8. National Trust, 'Addressing Our Histories of Slavery and Colonialism', <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust>
9. Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, eds., *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/slavery-and-british-country-house/>.
10. The Museum of English Rural Life, 'Queer Constellations', <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/event/queer-constellations/>
11. Daniel & Clara, 'Landscape Imaginary', <https://landscapeimaginary.art/>.
12. Ingrid Pollard, 'Pastoral Interlude', <http://www.ingridpollard.com/pastoral-interlude.html>.
13. Phil Kinsman, 'Landscape, Race and National Identity: The Photography of Ingrid Pollard', *Area* 27, no. 4 (1995): 300–10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20003600> (accessed September 6, 2023).
14. Tate, 'Land Art', <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/l/land-art>.
15. Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).
16. Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020).
17. Susan Owens, *Spirit of Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020).
18. Babar Suleman, 'Requital.', <http://babarsuleman.com/art/requital>.
19. See footnote 1 above.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Babar Suleman is an artist and writer, and holds a practice-led Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Art from the University of Oxford. A Fulbright scholar, they graduated with an MFA from Parsons School of Design (New York). Recent commissions and grants include The Elephant Trust, British Council's International Collaboration Grant awarded via b-side festival, Platform Art Projects, Art Council England's Developing Your Creative Practice, and Compton Verney Art Gallery's Inclusive Histories Research Fellowship. Suleman is a Senior Lecturer in Filmmaking at the Manchester School of Art, UK.