Screening Room no.6: in the absence of ruins

A conversation between Cairo Clarke and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia
Hi Cairo. It's so nice to be chatting to you. And talk about your film in the absence of ruins, up on our screening room. It's also quite a special conversation because usually we record all of our chats on zoom, but we are now, all three of us, in Naples. Looking at the Vesuvio, kind of, if we would go on the terrace, and chatting about your film that is very much based around Pompeii.

Cairo
Yes, it is a good setting

Giulia
A very relevant setting.

Alex
Very special.

Giulia
Maybe we could just start by having you briefly introduce yourself or your practice.

Cairo
Yeah. So I'm Cairo Clarke. I am a curator and writer based.. Well, usually based in London, but more recently have moved and relocated to Napoli, which we are now. And, I guess my practice has been kind of opening out different curatorial methods and writing methods to be exploring the kind of messiness in between pillars or structures of memory, of storytelling, of how

we think about knowledge production and dissemination. And think that's pretty much it, it's quite hard to describe yourself.

Giulia
Yeah. Sounds clear, though. Yeah, and also just a little bit about maybe the film, how it came about and why it was made.

Cairo
So it was in response to an invitation from Stella Bottai, who is a curator who is working on a project that launched in 2020, called Pompeii Commitments and Archaeological Matters. And it's a first contemporary art project based in Pompeii, and through the archaeological site. And the idea is for Pompeii to be used as this kind of site of potential. So different artists, researchers, and curators were invited to make a commitment to that space, which is kind of like a questioning or research offering, really, rather than a kind of traditional commitment to something. I thought the invitation was really exciting and interesting, because my work usually, I didn't feel super connected to Pompeii, or that kind of site. But I was really interested in being able to look at the different materials and what they have in their collection of especially food and plant based…. what's the word? Archaeological matter? Yeah. So that was really interesting, but I kind of thought I would just make up a project based on what I had found, because I didn't feel super connected to it. And then through looking at food sources, I started to kind of make these connections. Without necessarily having a direct link to that place. How was I… As I was finding out things that related to me or to the food from like my family and my culture, such as like onions and lentils, and these things that are very linked to Indian cuisine, was I connected to this place or was I like projecting something on it as like a person from a diaspora and then it just kind of like expanded a lot into that.. into just a real web of research that was initially meant to be an essay. But it felt really reductive to turn all of this research into a formal essay. And I was more interested in this kind of strange messy links and connections I was making. So it became an exercise of like layering different times and histories and thoughts and questions on top of each other through

sounding out my research and then visually layering it as well. And so it's yes, like a video essay.

Giulia
Yeah, it really works. Well. Do you feel? Do you feel it more to be almost, sorry this a really boring question, but it is very clearly a video essay. But I feel like with video essay sometimes the "essay" feels more important than the "video" or vice versa. Yeah, but it does feel extremely balanced, it feels like it wasn't like the essay came first and then the images. Also because you use a lot of family archive footage and images and you relate back to your own personal sort of history for using these images, and then linking all sorts of theoretical readings and stories and discoveries. Yeah, so I imagined that also writing the essay, you were already, maybe looking through these memories.

Cairo
yeah, kind of, I think I was like making links. So I was looking through the kind of images and things that they were sending to me from Pompeii. So, like images of shells I was interested in and food and flowers. And then at the same time, I was just making these connections to.. just jotting down kind of like thoughts and words. So it could never really be formed as an essay, it was already intertwined. And just to share a written text wasn't the right way to visualize the connections that I was making. And then just to have it as like a video, I don't usually work in moving image, or image in general. So there needed to be some kind of balance between the two. But then really, interestingly, I remember being like when that was published, I was super scared, because I hadn't ever published anything that wasn't text of my own. So I was really like, Stella, maybe I should also have a full transcript document of the whole thing, because maybe people wouldn't get it. I don't know, there was a whole anxiety about... Just a kind of real shift in like, how my writing was like taking shape, or like the materiality of like, an essay or body of research had really changed with this with this piece of work.

Giulia
Because it's also like art, it's not just like a text. I know, it's hard to say that as a curator, but I do feel like you're the artists in this video, not the curator.

Cairo
Yeah, I don't think curate is the right word. Yeah, for like my role in that work. But then, it was in an exhibition in Dublin that I was also co curating. And the invitation to co-curate was based on the curator Sara Grevou seeing that film and wanting to put it in an exhibition. She had a very loose idea of wanting to make a show about museological time and rethinking museums and collections and stuff. So I felt really weird about being the curator and also having work in the show. But apparently it made sense to people. So it worked out in the end, it's just I think I just have to get used to… like I'm figuring out what space I'm kind of working in at the moment. Yeah. It's quite strange.

Giulia
It feels a bit like a map as well, the film, I think it was interesting, where you were describing how you were working, and you were getting images sent and built a map of like your thoughts, but also very, literally a map because you're kind of linking, you know, the ruins in Pompeii, or these archaeological objects to India, to the Caribbean, to London, to like, all these places that you have connections to. And I guess that relates very much to your questions about belonging and kind of embedding or.... embedding your stories into a place or projecting them.

Cairo
Yeah, there's definitely a mapping or like layering, or thinking about how you can make a map that's not horizontal. And more layered and like up and down and around. So I think that's what I was trying to do and crossing over different periods of times. And intentionally though, of course, like I was linking that period of time of eruption also with then like, which triggered like family memories from like the 60s of my uncle trying to find certain foods like lentils in London and stuff. So it was kind of like very

personal connections, but again, trying to make this very layered map that I think.... Another thing which I mentioned in the piece is about unofficial sources of knowledge or history. And so I wanted to make those links between the things that I was finding that are very kind of official through like the Pompeii collection and archive and archaeologists, almost like fact or something, with these other things that were happening at a different time but at the same time through like this family movement in history and like personal stories and stuff that felt just as official, like, just as linked So yeah, something like that.

Giulia
You kind of become the archaeologist. The archaeologists that are disrupting this sort of notion of history and archaeology and how we understand it now, especially within the sort of sites of ruin that then become like an institution. And yeah. And weaving in your own history or personal history, that seems, in some ways, way more important or pertinent than a lot of histories that we kind of view in a museum context.

Cairo
Yeah, I think they feel sometimes quite like, contained and closed off. But I think there's so much more that can… they are actually quite like generative sites, if you could kind of maybe like, take these things out of the glass or the container or something. So I think there was a little bit of trying to do that with this work as well. And also, I think that's the great thing, I guess, about this invitation from Stella and from Pompeii Commitments, that it initiated a present conversation with a historical site, that I think you would go visit, like as a back end in a certain time period place, and through inviting different artists and writers and stuff to intersect with all of those things for a certain liveness to deal with what that spaces is, i guess.

Giulia
And you visited Pompeii, when you were like a child or a young teenager, and you're kind of reflecting back on those experiences. And at one point you talk about, I'm going to have to read this about how you're experiencing

visiting Pompeii as a sort of mass graveyard, which it is because you can see like physical frozen bodies, frozen in the trauma you call it, which is extremely violent. And you say "would they want to be left this way? Aren't they someone's ancestors" you ask. And you're referencing this idea of visiting a disaster. It's like a weird idea. It made me think about how Pompeii is like this archaeological site where everyday life has been preserved through, you know, the eruption of the volcano. But through your essay, I think about whether it's more about death than about the life of the people in the city. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about this?

Cairo
So yeah, I really remember that experience as a kid. Also it is a very English thing to, like, go in the dead of summer to Pompeii which is like... It actually makes you feel crazy, just that alone. And I just remember, feeling so uncomfortable because of that, but also quite confused about, like, why we were there or like... I had a basic understanding that there was like a volcano, an eruption. I have a clear memory of like, looking through a doorway and literally seeing a figure, in this kind of this, like one or many rooms in a house and there's still a person kind of frozen. And I just found it to be really scary, and quite traumatizing. And I just thought, I'm sure that person's soul went elsewhere. But like, is that?... I don't know… is that like, the lasting image of someone's life. But I think for us that years and years later, yeah, it's so fascinating and interesting and the evidence of a certain period of time is right there but you kind of forget that those people are actual human beings in some way. And that lived and we're not just like a part of an abstract history that we learn about in books or films or whatever. So then I got an anthology of June Jordan poems for a birthday a few years ago. And I remember flicking through and when it came round to working on this project, I remembered seeing some writings about Pompeii. And I was like, ok, let me go back to that and re-read them and it was basically like kind of like poems or notes or journaling thoughts of June's when she was visiting Pompeii with friends, which I found really interesting because she really articulated some of the things that I was feeling as a kid in these writings. So included re-voicing or kind of conversating with June in some of the film. Yeah, so basically that was something yeah that felt really like,

like a present dead feeling. Which also, being in Napoli more, is really interesting. There is this relationship to mortality and stuff that's really specific to this place, that I also really appreciate because I think even... I don't know, it comes up in the strangest places, the image of Vesuvio is so present like everywhere you go not only as like the physical volcano present, but like logos, like it's everywhere. I went for a drink somewhere, and they had a cocktail that was called Vesuvio something but they had this like really amazing, kind of like, quote or thought, "Vesuvio presents itself as a strong sense of omnipresent energy, Vesuvio is a daily reminder of the strength of the Earth, our powerlessness in its inevitability, but also a great source of life, diversity, fertility". And so now living in proximity to it, I don't know, this idea, it just makes you very present in like, your physical humaneness in a way. So yeah, so being here, I kind of understand that very present dead feeling as not just a negative thing. I think there's something else quite interesting about it that talks about life cycles and things. And I think without necessarily realizing it, I was figuring that out through the research, when it gets to the point of like thinking about Pompeii more as a garden, basically, and the site for things to grow out of which, years and years later, if you look at images of it, that kind of has happened as well, like things do grow out of this, literally, physically and conceptually as well. So thinking about more of the life cycles of the place, and perhaps how, spending more time on something you get to again, like unearth it and understand it a little bit more. But I haven't actually been back since I was a kid.

Giulia
Yeah, I wanted to ask that. Because I felt that through the essay. So the work was made through just images that you were receiving and research and stuff in collaboration with the Archaeological Museum?

Cairo
Yeah. Because it was during lockdown, and I wasn’t able to go. And being here, I still haven't been there. But, I really want to. I'm really interested.... I think, obviously, I will have such a different relationship to it now. Because

as a kid, I don't know, I didn't fully appreciate, you know, things that I think I would be really interested in now. But I'm Yeah, I'm just curious to see

Giulia
How interesting you say that. I visited Pompeii for the first time when I was probably about like, nine or something, also in heat. And I remember being there with my cousins and my sister and like the whole family sort of thing. And we were just like, this is awful. I'm so hot, and also being quite frightened. But I do still remember those frozen bodies, and then I visited it again a couple of times more in the last 10 years, I think, and had a completely different experience. But interesting that you're talking about, like living in Naples now. And literally living in the shadow of Vesuvio. Yeah, it is a very present thing in the culture of Napoli and also this very powerful thing of like… I feel like a lot of people talk about how you live in the shadow of the Vesuvio and it can erupt any second. And even though that's, you know, not that literal, but yes, it could be. But also like the strength of people to not have any fear to live in that shadow of the Vesuvio. I think it's really, yeah, beautiful. And it really says a lot about.... you can see that in the culture, right? In the people? And I was wondering if you feel differently now, because when you made this you weren't living here...? If you have a different relationship to ideas of belonging, since moving here and being in a new place that you also like did some research in some sort of way about, for this work and how that relates to the idea of belonging and embedding and projecting your histories in a place?

Cairo
Well, yeah, it was really just like a life move to be here. But I think obviously like there's always this kind of feeling of leaving a place you feel really rooted in, even in a very I don't know, complex way. Like London I feel rooted in it but it doesn't really care for you very much. I always felt really cared for in Napoli. Just through how you navigate space with other people and through... I don't know, being able to taste things that have flavor and engage with people in a different way and a different pace. Time moves

really differently here. But at the same time, I think there were definitely parts of me that were like, really worried.. Am I going to be able to get like certain spices? Like these things I think I really hold close to my identity and I feel a sense of belonging to the cultures that I'm from a lot through food. Because I haven't been to Jamaica, I haven't been to India. And of course, I intend to, but I just have never had the money. My family never had the money to kind of make the trips back and forth. So through my family food has been super, super important. So I think I was like, What if I can't get the foods that I want to make stuff and then because I've been spending a lot of time here, getting to see a lot more like other cultures that are also very rooted in Napoli, like Sri Lankan communities and West African communities as well. It just was really about being here and being in the city more to be like, oh, yeah, I can get these things here. And everything kind of tastes better because the garlic is like grown here, the ginger is grown here. I remember calling my uncle and being like, my curry tastes way better in Napoli than it does in London. He was like, of course, because everything grows there. So that was really interesting. And I think yeah, I think I felt this really strange feeling of, would I be losing a sense of belonging from leaving London. But I actually, I think there's a lot of similarities between Italian or people from Napoli and Indian families as well in terms of hospitality. So actually, in a way, like certain things feel a lot easier, and I feel a lot more comfortable then I have like growing up in England, actually. And then I also found out that perhaps there is a connection between this place and my family because I found out that all my family from India, they traveled on a ship that was Italian, which I knew, but they also stopped in Naples before they got to London, which I didn't know before I made the film. And I was talking to my uncle once, my great uncle just about like, I'm going to Napoli, but like, trying to explain where it was, he was like, oh, no, I know. I've been and I was like, what? When? And he said, that's where the boat stopped. The boat stopped there. Before we went… it had been to Messina or something or Messina and then Napoli and then they had to get a train. He was like, Yeah, we were in Naples for like two days. And they had all of these really funny stories. And that was like in the 60s. Yeah, I think 1962.

Giulia
Wow, that's amazing. Napoli heyday that

Cairo
Yeah, I really want to try and find some photos if there are any of them here. So yeah, these strange links came about.

Alex
I've been thinking a lot about family albums. In the film, there's a part where you're going through your grandfather's house, with all these pictures up on the wall that look like pictures of family or holidays. But then I was actually thinking about the process of how you made the film. Of like these folders on your laptop because that's where all my family albums… like all these pictures that I went on holiday with my family, they're stored in these files that I never look through on my laptop. And I really enjoyed the process of you going in and out and pulling and then this layering happened. And I was wondering why you chose that way of doing it?

Cairo
I think, really, I chose the way of doing it for practical reasons because I split up my research into chapters. And then… initially it was like a total mess and I was just like pulling things. And then to think about the flow of the actual piece, it helped to basically just put them in folders and then know, when roughly I was going to open up images. So it was quite practical in that sense. But actually, then I think it also made a nice kind of demonstration of this layering that was happening as well over the different… not only the different images, but the different thoughts and the different periods of time. And yeah, I think for me, my family's houses are kind of like these first sites of what you call like a gallery, in like a family sense, you know, like, anything can be on the walls in my granddad's house, like literally anything, I'll find things when i'll be there or it will be family photos, or you know. When my grandma passed away, we had loads of photos from her photo album at the wake. And my uncle just kind of inherited those and now he just has them all over the walls. So it's also

really nice, I think, because whenever I go around, I take photos of them on my phone, but then I don't interact with them in that way. So they're really present in his house. And I get to engage with those images in a way that I still have this impulse to take the picture to have it but it doesn't feel the same as I'm looking at it and my family's house. Yeah,

Giulia
The idea of house or home is super pertinent, right? Because you have like the home of your grandfather in London, the idea of trying to make a home for immigrant communities and gaining a sense of locality, like with the lovely the story of your grandfather looking for dhal but also the idea of garden, how, you know, we grow foods to feel a sense of locality to like, our motherland, and then also the very literal frozen home in Pompeii that becomes like, a museum. Yeah. It's not really a question. It just feels like the idea of belonging and home, of course, are very much related. But yeah, I like how they kind of compare and contrast throughout the work but not in this sort of contrived way. It's just like…visceral, maybe?

Cairo
Yeah, maybe those are things that have been handed down or I've absorbed without necessarily thinking about. Because the same like with my family, on my Jamaican side, it has always been about like, growing vegetables in the garden that like you would get back in Jamaica that you couldn't, in the 60s get here, here as in London, but time is changing, but still kind of like creating these spaces of belonging and home that exist for you. And I remember, whilst I was doing this project, I was reading Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden* and she talks about, in the beginning of the book, like her garden being this really messy, confusing place. There's plants here, there's flowers there. And her friend being quite confused about there being no kind of design or structure to it. And she kind of was like, when she came to this realization that maybe the garden that I'm making is like, the shape of the Caribbean, these little spaces that joined and disjointed. And that really resonated with maybe these intergenerational methods or inherited kind of approaches that we have. How we like, visualize, who… or how we tell a story as well, I think different cultures tell stories in different

ways. You know. It's a very Western narrative to have like beginning, middle and stop, you know, middle and finish. And I think some cultures start with the crazy thing that happened first, and then you wind back round to where it began. So yeah, it's been a really interesting project for kind of like, thinking about different temporalities of knowledge as well.

Giulia
And that quite literally relates to archaeology.

Cairo
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Alex
I love the relationship between the way that you layered the images and the thoughts with this kind of archaeological matter that talks about that. Especially with the kind of histories of food or ingredients that are like…. I feel like I have this conversation with Giulia and her family a lot. It's about like for instance, where does baccala come from? And then it's like well everyone salts fish and preserves it if there's fish and there's salt. So I guess trying to find origins of foods, or trying to find that start of something where maybe it doesn't exist like that, because it's just entangled. I find it a really interesting way to think about ways of telling these stories.

Cairo
Yeah, definitely.

Giulia
Less hierarchical as well.

Cairo
Yeah.

Alex
And also such an everyday thing, that anyone can kind of grasp, like that relationship to a taste or feelings, or memory.

Cairo
Yeah. I think also, like, even using baccala as an example. I remember, because I had eaten it a lot before, but never kind of just seen it in the markets. So now being here and just kind of seeing it. I'm like, Oh my God, wait, I can make ackee and saltfish.

Giulia
Yeah, It's just saltfish

Cairo
Yeah. I think sometimes food…
That's why culturally, there are the similarities that food becomes like this really big talking points of memory and sharing. And if you grow up in any kind of family, or you create for yourself, like an environment where food or hospitality is this place of sharing and talking and like storytelling, it's so like, so fruitful. So much comes from different points of relationality in different parts of the world, different geographies, different languages, which I find really interesting. And I always find that really funny like reflecting on growing up and like going to friends houses after school and being told that you have to go home before they have dinner or people not wanting to eat too much. So it is kind of like that space for like, I don't know that space that I think also, if you are from like, I don't know, immigrant background or something like that, those are those moments where you can kind of get together. People are working different jobs at different times. And gathering around like food has been, yeah, just a very, like easy, relaxed way to just like, talk about where you come from and different points and how you've met at that point in time. Which I find really interesting. Yeah.

Alex

Well, thank you very much for your time. It's really amazing to see the film and to be able to talk to you about it. And it will be shown on the screening room for the whole month. And thank you very much.

Cairo
Thank you. You know, it's been very nice to chat and to revisit and rethink it and a new location

Giulia
So nice. Thanks. In very sweaty Napoli.

Cairo
Yeah, very sticky.

Giulia
The sun's coming down.

Cairo
Just slowly

Alex
And it's time to eat some food. Yeah.

Giulia
Aperitivo time