

I was just thinking about you

Emmie McLuskey on the work of Matthew Arthur Williams

In 2023 Matthew Arthur Williams was awarded two three-week Emerging Visual Artist Residencies at Cove Park, held over two years and made possible with support from The Bridge Awards. The residencies followed the artist's first solo show '*Soon Come*'¹ at Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA), an exhibition that expressed a language of experience far beyond that of an emerging artist. In 2025 Matthew presented exhibitions at Primary Nottingham², Stills Edinburgh³, and The Hunterian Glasgow⁴. Amid such an intense period of activity, the 'breath' for reflection and exploration provided by the residencies was timely and essential for the creation of Matthew's intricate lexicon of research and references that weave their way through his carefully considered work.

This text accompanies the launch of a new limited edition print by Matthew, commissioned by Cove Park and testament to a shared belief in remaining close and committed to a process-led practice that is analogue, takes its time, and is in direct opposition to the political landscape it finds itself in. The print, *77°F*, was made in the summer of 2025 in collaboration with DCA Print Studio. It depicts a landscape which has been formative in the development of Matthew's work, and employs in combination, for the first time by the artist, photographic, hand dyeing, and screen-printing processes. I am a close friend and collaborator of both Matthew and Cove Park, and in this text, I explore some of the references and themes within a practice that is so strongly rooted in and committed to image making.

There is so much to say about Matthew's work it's hard to know where to start. Much like his work, it thrives on the lack of beginnings and endings. Matthew is a polymath: an artist, a photographer, a DJ, a researcher, and an educator. Whether in the darkroom, out walking, in an archive, in conversation, or in a club, he is tuned sonically and visually to his surroundings, listening, collecting, configuring, adjusting, and giving space to others. It's through these sensory understandings of the visual and sonic that I, and many others, have always known and related to Matthew. Image and sound are key to entering his work, a practice steeped in an extensive understanding of and appreciation for pace, timing, and material rendering, and it's this combination that hits the viewer with such conviction it feels familiar.

Matthew's role as a collector means that the different elements of his work across a range of media - paper, fabric, tape, sound files, and film (both photo chemical analogue and digital) - operate as if an open sketchbook, an evolving archive akin to a kind of obsessive searching. For me, all of his work, laced with both joy and sorrow simultaneously, is about life and the feelings that come with living a full and meaningful one, grounded in family, friends, community, and the landscape. As someone constantly moving and inhabiting many different communities and spaces, one thing that steadies and brings together the different people and places he encounters, is that of his *frame*.

Matthew explained to me that the landscape depicted in *77°F* was made in High Green, Northumberland. It was taken when he was travelling to photograph the English photographer Dr. Ingrid Pollard. This meeting was a key moment for Matthew, reigniting a fascination with the postindustrial landscapes of Northern England. His portraits of Pollard⁵ (also a significant inspiration for Matthew), express a great reverence and recognition of what a meeting like this might mean: on

¹ M A Williams, *Soon Come*, DCA, Dundee, 10 December 2022 - 26 March 2023, exhibition.

² M A Williams, *Small Mercies*, Primary, Nottingham, 7 June – 14 August 2025, exhibition.

³ M A Williams, *In Consideration of Our Times*, Stills, Edinburgh, 12 September - 18 October 2025, exhibition.

⁴ M A Williams, *Digging in Another Time: Derek Jarman's Modern Nature*, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow, 2 November 2024 – 4 May 2025, exhibition.

⁵ M A Williams, Ashish Ghadiali, '*People want me to say I'm alienated*': Ingrid Pollard on the myths of art, race and landscape', The Observer, 20 March 2022.

one level we see a photographer witnessing another photographer at work, both understanding the mechanics at play; on another level, we witness a shared love and reassurance of being in this English landscape in all its complexity.

The photograph of Pollard, shown in *The Observer* ahead of her major solo presentation at MK Gallery⁶, weaves together two enduring themes that dominate both practices and represent key elements of traditional photography: portraiture and landscape. Both artists, through these foundations, capture Black and queer lives in Britain by engaging (over different time periods) in the vital construction of an archive of images (and conversations) that addresses a long and persistent omission in the British art historical canon. Matthew's portraits of Pollard raise questions of what has changed since Pollard's early work in the eighties, and do the same notions of 'Englishness' prevail? These are questions that Matthew characterises differently, but nonetheless responds to, in his film *Soon Come* (2022), a two-screen installation that details his familial connection to the post-industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent. In the film Matthew presents aspects of his maternal family's journey from Jamaica to the UK, and the monumental contribution that his and other families who migrated at this time made and continue to make to industry and services in the UK. This deeply affective piece, embedded in oral account, makes visible the invisible; it makes a promise, much like the title, that it will hold in film the work and culture of the family, their experiences in negotiating this landscape, and their stake in it. Matthew's film says this with great reassurance, but at the same time resists a straightforward, one-dimensional reading.

The landscape of the North reappears in *Another Allegory*⁷, a twenty-minute moving image work shot on 16mm film and developed during Matthew's residency, and shown in his current solo exhibition at Primary, Nottingham. It is tough to write about a film that is so rooted in affect. You feel it as if inhabiting a mood. Matthew stated that he is more interested in capturing a feeling rather than defining one, '*My work is saying something very loudly to me, and I like to leave it up to the viewer if those things resonate for them.*'⁸ The film left me with a feeling of heartbreak, and I felt compelled to watch it repeatedly, driven by a kind of obsessive hunger to make sense of the illogical. In the same way you return to a nostalgic song or poem - as if trying to hang a feeling on it, a kind of emotional crutch you can revisit - I found myself returning to the work to run over the details I'd been given. I tried to replay and rework them, misremembering what was being said or done. Second-guessing glances and phrases. I asked myself, isn't the point of feelings that they don't make logical sense? They don't speak this type of language, so trying to read them that way feels futile. Perhaps Matthew's film is less about understanding and more about spending time. Gradually the images and sounds gather and become accumulative, like a dance (with yourself or with another) that emerges in *its* own time and on *its* own terms. This understanding of the power of film's affect reminded me of the words of Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T Minh Ha's seminal work, *Cinema Interval*, in which she writes '*The relation of word to image is an infinite relation. What is released on the film screen is neither given up to sight, nor put safely under the shroud of invisibility. Between love and death, freedom and madness, the widest range of strange sound harmonies can be heard.*'⁹

Another Allegory finds its base in Matthew's discovery of a New York Times article, *A Long-Lost Symphonic Love Story Is Told Again*¹⁰, about the composer Julius Eastman and his lover, the poet R Nemo Hill. The film is structured like a poem, a form that finds meaning when feelings are difficult. As the title suggests, an allegory offers a political or moral slant on a subject that is then interpreted to

⁶ I Pollard, *Carbon Slowly Turning*, MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, 12 March - 29 May 2022, exhibition.

⁷ M A Williams, *Another Allegory*, Small Mercies, Primary Nottingham, 7 June – 14 August 2025, exhibition.

⁸ M A Williams, *In Consideration of Our Times*, Press Release, Stills, Edinburgh, 12 September - 18 October 2025, exhibition.

⁹ Trinh, T. Minh-Ha (Thi Minh- Ha), *Cinema Interval*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p.12.

¹⁰ S Colter Walls, *A Long-Lost Symphonic Love Story Is Told Again*, The New York Times, 16 November 2018, online article.

reveal a hidden meaning. The article details the negotiation of a recent performance of Eastman's work *Second Symphony*¹¹, a piece he had dedicated to Hill, gifting it to him following the breakdown of their relationship. A notoriously challenging and deliberately obscure composition, the piece requires one hundred musicians and an unheard-of orchestra set up with three bassoons, three double bass bassoons, two bass clarinets, three double bass clarinets, three trombones, three tubas and six timpani, an arrangement that echoes the illogical language of feelings in Matthew's film. The article details the discovery of the manuscript by composer Mary Jane Leach, who explained '*the score's longtime absence from critical sight,*' by stating, '*I think it freaked Nemo out so much that it was just rolled up in a trunk.*'¹² The manuscript's grand gesture of love and heartbreak - being forcefully buried and repressed before being given the chance to live - can be seen as a familiar reaction to feelings that can't be placed or dealt with at any particular moment or time, and it is this conundrum of head and heart, rejection and acceptance, that is present throughout *Another Allegory*.

In Matthew's film we don't hear Eastman's music, but we do see his image in a photograph¹³ of Eastman and Nemo together. They are positioned, one behind the other, in front of New York City's skyline. This image - credited to Nemo - has been used by Matthew on two occasions. Staring directly to the camera (also a signature feature of Matthew's portraits) their image cuts into view at various intervals throughout the film, sometimes being obscured by another image or the materiality of the 16mm, sometimes being inverted into negative, and another time coupled with an image of Eastman alone in a field in which he plays his violin. Their image haunts the piece, as if a seemingly unrelated thought that you've tried to bury but won't leave you and persistently keeps entering your mind.

Another Allegory begins with the sound of a ticking clock that grows into a high pitched, continuous drone, the start of a track by Cleyra called *Cross My Mind*¹⁴. The first image we see is of an English field at dawn. The next shot is static. It's from a window and is of a city in motion, a shot inspired by the nineties film *Jason's Lyric*¹⁵. Trains rush past and many of the artist's shots adopt this standpoint, creating a feeling that time is constantly passing by, but you can't move. Witnessing this, to me, feels similar to waking up in winter having slept badly and the daylight, although beautiful, hurts your eyes.

Cleyra's track is a slowed-down electronic cover of R&B singer Jill Scott's *Cross My Mind* (2004)¹⁶. The original track unravels as a kind of sexy fantasy of physical love with an ex. There's a neat resolution to it; Scott concludes that relations could, and should, never happen again, and I believe her. By contrast, in Matthew's film we are invited to watch a mirage of figures (close collaborators including classical violinist Blaize Henry and artists Akash Sharma and PJ Harper), whose images he places alongside the craggy, dry stone walled fields of Northern England. We are unsure who is talking to who, the exchange isn't easy to reconcile. His coupling of Cleyra's track with 16mm landscape and portrait footage makes you mistrust Scott's manipulated voice; the line between reality and fantasy starts to blur. In its distortion, the track appears to carry more than one voice, and you start to read Scott's lyrics as being said by the multiple figures. In this way Matthew inserts you into a conversation, like being in the middle of a love triangle, but you're not sure who is in love with who, or whether this love and (or) heartbreak is really about something else entirely.

The second piece of music in this piece is a composition composed by Matthew and Blaize and recorded at Cove Park. The pair share an affinity for overlooked and marginalised classical and

¹¹ J Eastman, *Symphony No 2, The Faithful Friend: The Lover Friend's Love for the Beloved*, 1983, composition.

¹² S Colter Walls, *A Long-Lost Symphonic Love Story Is Told Again*, The New York Times, 16 November 2018, online article.

¹³ R. Nemo Hill, *A Long-Lost Symphonic Love Story Is Told Again*, The New York Times, 16 November 2018, photograph.

¹⁴ Cleyra, *Cross My Mind*, Tendrils (i), released 3 July 2023, music track.

¹⁵ Doug McHenry, *Jason's Lyric*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Gramercy Pictures, 7 July 1995, film.

¹⁶ J Scott, *Cross My Mind, Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds Vol 2*, released 2004, music track.

electronic music. We see this through the mirroring of Eastman's image with that of Henry, as well as their musical homage to pioneer of electronic music Ryuichi Sakamoto, whose piece *El Mat Mediterrani*¹⁷ is covered by the artists. Matthew's mix of this track underlines his understanding of the power of sound and image to communicate a complexity that can only exist in the space of the screen. His use of directional panning is like people whispering into your ear, and the build of meticulous practice evident in Blaize's violin has a sense of things escalating as we reach the crescendo of the film. We see Eastman's approach to the *Second Symphony* reflected in Blaize's performance, an effort both to soothe and to contend with a composition that remains elusive and resistant to being fully realised. This musical tribute is layered over imagery of a slow pan across a landscape marked by the stumps of hundreds of felled trees, a recurring image in Matthew's photographic studies. The grief held in this pan is palpable. The depiction of the severed roots is clearly connected to the Black and queer communities Matthew is a part of, networks of care and interdependence that, though forcibly destroyed by violent histories and repeatedly oppressive infrastructures, continue to exist, thrive, and provide lifelines underground.

In much of Matthew's work, the weather and the earth's elements feature heavily. The culmination of this film is marked by a thunderstorm followed by rain. Like a kind of visual pathetic fallacy, the rain acts as a break - an honesty, a truth, and a relief, like when tears finally come. Matthew is not afraid to draw this out, it takes its time, and you can feel this in your body. Matthew's work enacts rather than describes. In the rain you '*can't hide*'¹⁸, your senses are heightened, the sound is spatial and if you give into it, there's a kind of momentary comfort.

A recurring feature of Matthew's visual language is his attunement to light and its relationship to time. He prioritises the rhythms of light as it rises and falls throughout the day, capturing a natural musicality. I've spent time with Matthew watching sunsets, often wondering about the phenomenon described as a green flash, an optical experience that is rare but can happen if the sky is clear and you can see the entirety of the horizon, usually over water. If the conditions are right, a small spot of green light will briefly appear above the sun as it disappears.

Similarly, when watching thunderstorms over water, lightning can appear to have a range of colours, presenting as blue, purple, and sometimes a reddish pink. These colours are determined by the density of the water, other particles absorbing or scattering the light, and temperature. 77°F, the only text on Matthew's limited-edition print, refers to temperature. The paper is stained purple from a hibiscus flower tea, a migrated plant that is found throughout different regions in the Caribbean and in Africa. In the English-speaking Caribbean it is called sorrel and is brewed and served as a welcome drink in the home. The black and white image in 77°F, printed on top of the sorrel, is of trees in the Northern English hills, and brings me back to *Soon Come* and Matthew's family's stories of a new home in this landscape. There is an undeniable tension between such a sweet, warm, healing greeting and the harsh industrial labour and landscapes of the North.

The different materials and references in Matthew's work act as a network of elements themselves. Much like the kind of spontaneity, or order, of the sunset and lightning, this collection of parts comes together to create a rare combination, a light. These configurations, both fleeting and miraculous, mirror the practice of analogue photography and momentarily suspend time allowing beauty to reveal itself fully before dissolving again. A state of flow, however short, that creates the conditions for a coming together in harmony and in rupture, where everything for a brief moment is given its due.

My sincere thanks to my dear friend Matthew, Alexia at Cove Park, Richy Carey, Matt and Alex at Govan Project Space and Helen Charman.

¹⁷ Ryuichi Sakamoto *El Mat Mediterrani*, Opening Music for the Barcelona Olympics, 1992, music track.

¹⁸ M A Williams, *Another Allegory*, Small Mercies, Primary Nottingham, 7 June – 14 August 2025, exhibition.