

# MOMENTA BIENNALE

## Balado / Podcast

Episode 3 - Verbatim

## Michèle Pearson Clarke

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# Michèle Pearson Clarke x Jamie Ross

Episode 3 (26 min)

Michèle met Jamie at 401 Richmond, an emblematic gathering place in the Toronto cultural scene. She talked about her connection to sports, which enabled her to explore her relationship with masculinity and to foster deep ties with individuals in her community. The work *Quantum Choir*, resulting from a collaboration with several of them, exposed their sense of vulnerability and fragility. Together they overcame and celebrated these feelings.

“The project is an invitation to think about what source of shame are you living with that you can possibly lean into, lean through and emerge from?”

Michèle et Jamie se rencontrent au 401 Richmond, un lieu emblématique et rassembleur de la scène culturelle torontoise. Elle se confie sur sa relation avec le sport, qui lui permet d'explorer son rapport à la masculinité et de nourrir des liens riches avec les personnes de sa communauté. L'œuvre *Chœur quantique*, qui résulte d'une collaboration avec certaines d'entre elles, expose leur vulnérabilité et leurs fragilités. Ensemble, celles-ci sont surmontées et célébrées.

« Le projet est une invitation à réfléchir aux sources de honte avec lesquelles nous vivons : comment s'y pencher pour pouvoir potentiellement les transcender ? »

**Jamie:** You're listening to a podcast about images and the artists who make them brought to you by the 2023 edition of MOMENTA Biennale de l'image, curated by Ji-Yoon Han. Entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis, the 18th edition of MOMENTA Biennale de l'image presents 23 artists whose projects activate processes of transformation, mimicry and mutation. Its goal is to shed light on the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, defining the relationships between self and other, between humans and our environment.

I'm your host. Montreal artist and filmmaker, Jamie Ross and I'm meeting up with the artists showing work at this edition of MOMENTA for generous moments of conversation. Je suis votre animateur, artiste et vidéaste Jamie Ross. Je rencontre des artistes faisant partie de cette édition de MOMENTA pour des conversations enrichissantes. Les entretiens seront en français ainsi qu'en anglais.

I love artists. I love having the opportunity to sit with other artists about the work we make and to look at it with rigor, with curiosity and with delight. I'm interested in the messiness and the irregularity of communication, and I believe in the singular energy that is engendered by the places that inspire artwork. Not just our studios, galleries or the museums where they're shown. I'm interested in the resonance of a site and the objects that accompany each artist in their practice.

For this series, I joined MOMENTA artists for an encounter at a site of their choice to hear about their process and to think about the questions their work asks. And I'm also fascinated by the paradox that these artists working with images, sharing their work in a decidedly non visual medium, that of a conversation, a podcast.

Michèle Pearson Clarke invited me to the iconic 401 Richmond building to record

this episode.

Housing some of Toronto's most beloved arts organizations and artists studios, the creaky former industrial building is where the seeds of her practice are planted, she said. The same can be said for me, actually too. It's here where I began making video art as a teenager. And the crush of downtown noise play the city symphony outside the big windows that we spoke. Enjoy.

At the sound of the bell, we begin the spell. (ding).

**Jamie:** All right. Welcome to the MOMENTA podcast, Michèle.

**Michèle:** Thank you.

**Jamie:** Michèle Pearson Clarke. So tell us, let's paint the picture for our listeners where we are today in the City of Toronto, unceded Mississauga territory.

**Michèle:** Uh, we're sitting in a studio in the 401 Richmond building. It's a building that has supported a lot of artists for a really long time. And it's the place where I think, for me, the seeds of my artistic. Maybe not so much my artistic practice, but me being an artist. When I first came out, I started volunteering for the Inside Out LGBT Film and Video Festival. It just seemed like a cool way to meet some new queer folks. And that I think the first thing I did is like rip tickets for a party at the door. And that turned into almost a two decade relationship with the Festival in which I became, you know, not just a volunteer, but a staff member and eventually exhibiting filmmaker. So inside was my film school.

Inside out was the first place I saw a short film. It was the first place I saw an experimental film. I met so many queer and trans filmmakers who were just very DIY. There wasn't that gatekeeping that I think happens in the art world when you're not an artist. There was a sense of if you have something to play with, if you have a story to tell, you just grab a camera and you do it and and I had a lot of emotional and in the end, technical support when I realized, oh, I've fallen in love with this medium. This medium has shown me so much about what it is to live a queer life. And I was drawn to wanting to do that in return.

**Jamie:** That's also where we met first, in the context of the Inside Out Queer video project, which also, just like the Inside Out Festival is based here in 401. For me, I was reflecting on that this week as I was thinking about what this building means to me too. I grew up in Toronto, so I remember, I think, I think I was 17 or 18 when when we would meet and it was a full year cycle. And you met the project not in a capacity as an artist in a former career, right? Yeah. Does that form a career for like something you want to talk about in the context of the of the podcast? Does it relate to the practice that you now engage in?

**Michèle:** Yeah, I talk about it a lot in my artist talks, to be honest, because before I was an artist I worked you know, I have a master's degree in social work,

I have an undergraduate degree in psychology, and I worked in community health services as a health educator, you know, for almost a decade. And so, you know, working with queer folks, working with communities of color, you know, working with underhoused people and trying to, you know, hold space for difficulty, hold

space for, you know, a whole amount of grief and trying to figure out ways to support folks to make different choices for themselves. And that very much shapes and influences the type of work that I make now as an artist, you know, and it took me a long time to even call myself an artist. And when I was deciding whether I should go back to school or not, it at first it seemed like quite a radical career shift. But now, you know, in this first decade of my practice, it's clear that it's not as big of a shift as I first imagined. I just use different tools now to sort of try to do the same work. In some ways.

**Jamie:** Yeah, social work is a place of transformation also. And support through a support of others, transformation through their own practice of life, of living.

**Michèle:** Yeah.

**Jamie:** This building also has such a it's a former industrial building. For those of those of you who don't know, 401 Richmond, it's in downtown Toronto, it's lofts and it's lofts that have been subdivided. There are tons of artist run centres. There are tons of gallery spaces. There's a cafe and it doesn't really lock. So people will be milling around the hallways. Teenagers will be eating pizza and running out of their seminar room to go puke on Saturday mornings if they need to. Like it's a it's a space of artistic community. Truly.

**Michèle:** Yeah.

**Michèle:** And my path here, my path here started with Inside out but continued with Trinity Square video, which is where I made Black Men and Me my first video. I joined the board of Gallery 44. That was a form of photography, community

building and photography education for me, as well as I mean countless hundreds of openings of all types that all the other galleries and museums. So this is a building that you come back to again and again and again. Yeah.

**Michèle:** For this project, in particular the seed for that was planted. My friend Leticia Colbert Miller, she did a short video series for akimbo where she wanted to talk to artists about their practice through a secondary passion of theirs, and she said she wanted to talk to me through the frame of football. And I said, you know, there's there's no connections between football and my practice. And she's like, I think there are. And she came and she interviewed me like at the football field and like filmed me playing. I play, you know, in this recreational women's league at Lamport. And because she, you know, sort of pushed me to kind of reflect and think about those connections. It was really interesting to think about repetition, to think about grief and loss, because football is a sport where for me, you never lost.

**Jamie:** You never lost.

**Michèle:** Well, you lose the game. But even as you're playing so many times what you want to do and what you set out to do and what you attempt to do is not actually what you do as a team, just as an individual. So you're like, oh, I'm going to pass the ball to this person and like, your pass is off, or you're like, oh, I see that player coming. I'm a defender. I'm going to block the ball or she just ran past me and scored a goal. So it is just loss after loss after loss in that sport. You know, at the end you may have lost the game itself. But there's also communication. There's relationship building, there's kinship and collectivity.

All of these things are aspects of my practice. And so that was something that just kind of planted a seed to think about. Maybe at some point there'll be a way that football makes its way actually into, you know, an artwork.

**Jamie:** After the interview?

**Michèle:** Yeah. Through that whole process, through that whole conversation with her and reflecting on those connections. And when I was working on Quantum Choir, I had been through several exhibitions where, you know, my work is about grief and loss, and most video in the gallery is sort of projected on a wall. People come in, they sit on a bench and there's, I don't want to say passive, but, you know, there's a kind of passive consumption of what is being presented. And in my work, I'm asking my communities to be vulnerable. I'm asking my communities to be difficult, to do difficult things and personally difficult things. And it just wasn't sitting right with me, watching the relationship between the viewer and what was being presented on screen. And I just started to think about how can I build an installation that asks the viewer, invites the viewer into a more active relationship with what is being presented on screen. And so with Quantum Choir, I knew that I wanted to design the installation with a measure of, shall we say, refusal. So the four screens surround you. So we are all accessible to you, but you can't ever look at all four of us at the same time. You have to make your choice as the viewer as to who you're looking at, who you're listening to, for how long and when to shift your gaze. And then the soccer balls surround the four screens, because I knew that I wanted to build some sort of system that would ask for a little bit of. A little bit of vulnerability from the viewer themselves. So it's not a complicated grid, it's not a maze, but there's rules in the contemporary art gallery, you know, and viewers come in and they



see the balls.

**Michèle:** Some people walk right through, some people wonder, can I walk through? Is this so? Just that process of having to negotiate and navigate your way into the installation? It's not a huge amount of an ask, but it's a small ask to say, you know, please join us in the center. We're going to be doing this hard thing that we're willing to share with you, but we're just asking you to meet us in that space. Having engaged with the space on your way in. And so when I thought about what could I do, soccer balls felt like. A symbol or a way to think about both interrupting the viewer in a very mild form, but also, as we are in the middle of the room doing this difficult thing, I wanted us to feel surrounded by support and as queer, masculine, you know, female bodied people, most of us, all of us. In fact, sports is the place where throughout our life, our masculinity has been not always easy. But there's been space for our masculinity to be supported, to be recognized, to be even celebrated. And for three of the four of us, that sport is football.

**Jamie:** In the choir?

**Michèle:** Three of the four participants in the choir, that sport is football. And two of the participants I met because of playing football. So they that grid of balls performs this dual function of sort of surrounding us and holding the space for us in a way that feels supportive to us, while also simultaneously. As I said, nudging or inviting the viewer into active relation with us.

**Jamie:** Would you talk about scale a little bit too? Because it feels like a very distinctly human matched scale to the guest who enters the the the suite of four videos? It was that

a was that a nod to that sort of implication, too, of the viewer?

**Michèle:** It's an invitation, you know. You know, for a lot of people, this work is about the four of us overcoming what is really a serious source of shame for all four of us. I think there are a lot of people when I was working on this project, like for some people they're like, so what, you go to karaoke, you sing terribly, who cares, you know? But shame is not an objective emotion, right? Shame is a very subjective emotion. And for all four of us, this was an extremely difficult thing to do. I mean, two people almost dropped out halfway through, you know, like this is a level of difficulty for us to sing publicly for the first time. And in terms of inviting the viewer into relation with us, I mean, obviously it screens, we're not actually there. But I'm thinking about I was thinking about what strategies are available to me for you to feel as close as you could, that you're there in the room with us. You know, we're there in the room with you.

**Jamie:** Would it be a Michele Pearson Clarke piece if it hadn't been difficult for the participants?

**Michèle:** Well, I'm mostly teasing. I mean, I don't I don't set out to cause difficulty for people, you know, I.

**Jamie:** But there'd be a challenge for.

**Michèle:** For me, it's about vulnerability. Right. And I've come to learn this about myself. For whatever reason. I am very comfortable with vulnerability. I don't know where that comes from. That is a lifelong thing. And it's only through my practice that I've come to

understand that I am not a good judge of what other people will be willing to do, because everything I've ever asked community to do is something that I would do. But then as several projects fell apart, or several projects had to be changed, I realized, oh, what you are willing to do is not like you're at the high end of some spectrum, and most people are like too much different, too much different. And so in reflecting on what does it mean to make this repeated artistic gesture of asking for too much from my community, that's part of the threat of quantum choir as well, because I as I thought about, how do I begin to introduce more opacity and refusal into my work so that I continue to make the work that I feel drawn to make, but also allow people to participate in ways that are more comfortable and suited to them.

And as part of making that shift in my practice, Quantum choir is a self-reflective, self-reflexive move as well because I thought, okay, what's your too much? You know, what's you as the artist, me as the artist. If another artist was like, Will you be in this thing? What would be my I'm not doing that.

**Jamie:** You don't have to tell our listeners.

**Michèle:** Well... That's that's I immediately went to this lifelong shame about, you know, not not being able to sing or think, seeing myself or hearing myself, I should say as a bad singer, I, you know, it's not like I had never done karaoke. I would never I had lip synced Happy Birthday, like at dinner parties my whole life. Like I'm serious. Like, that is how terribly shamed I felt. Some of it is tied up in a very early memory of not being. I went to an all girls school not being good enough to get into choir, which was a really cool

popular thing to do. So it's tied to this early memory of a failure of girlhood. Some of it has to do with my accent. You know, when I moved to this country, you know, pitch and tone is one thing, but then my accent here is a further layer away from that, that, you know, that standard of what most people would accept or agree with is a good singing voice. And so, you know, as I thought about, okay, what's my line in the sand? What would be the difficult line in the sand for me to cross? It felt like this singing was a way to reflect on the vulnerability of queer female masculinity. But singing was also a way for me to ask myself to, to perform too much for the camera.

**Jamie:** I love the gender dynamics of the installation with the balls around, around which I mean the queer film masculinity is maybe represented by the balls and the fact that there's a game, there's an athletic prowess, which is you're saying came naturally. And then in the in the inner sanctum of the exhibition is this difficult feminine ideal, and you reach it after traversing the, the sport. It's like it's a, it's a very interesting duality or pull or tension in the installation.

**Michèle:** I think for me, in the end, you know, it's a work that I think, you know, when I exhibited at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, I exhibited it with a photographic project which is specifically about aging. But I also think it's not a project about middle age, but all of us in the project are middle aged. And I think it's interesting to think about, you know, when you, if you're lucky enough to, you know, live to a certain point.

**Jamie:** Or unlucky enough.

**Michèle:** Or unlucky enough, you know, you give less F's, right? You're like, okay, you start

to let stuff go. You know, we all get in our own ways. We're all carrying around baggage. The shame that we feel about something that is planted from our early childhood memory. Some people think they can't dance. Some people think they can't play sports. Some people, because very early in their lives, somebody told them, oh, you throw like a girl, or somebody told them, you're off, you're off beat or whatever. All it takes is one comment as a kid to just be like, oh, I'm not good at that. I feel shame.

**Jamie:** Michèle mine was soccer.

**Jamie:** No, I'm serious, says.

**Michèle:** There you go.

**Jamie:** I sucked and it was there was this moment I got a ball to like myself. I got winded and I was like, oh, this is fucked.

**Michèle:** But somebody made a value judgment about your ability at some point.

**Michèle:** And that comment stays with you, you know. And so the project is not saying everybody needs to learn to sing, but it's definitely an invitation to think about what source of what source of. Are you living with that you could possibly lean into, lean through, and emerge from, which was the experience of the four of us. It doesn't mean that we think we're good singers now. It doesn't mean that anybody's rushing for a mic. But I think we all experienced a letting go of, you know, if you think the scariest possible thing is for people to hear my voice, and then it happens and the world keeps turning,

then you're like, all right, okay, this is fine. You know, it's okay. It's okay. And you know what else? What else might I want to tackle from here on in, you know?

**Jamie:** I want to ask you about the song that the choir is singing. How did you come to this song? And tell us a little bit about the song?

**Michèle:** Yeah. Queen of Denmark by John Grant. It's just that album. It comes from the same. The album itself is titled Queen of Denmark, and I don't know, I can't remember where I first heard about him as an artist, but I bought that album when it first came out, and it's just consistently stayed one of my most played albums, you know, on an annual basis. And I thought when I was thinking about what song we would sing, what song would we learn to sing, I wanted something that would feel, that would allow us to really let, like something that would have a swell something that would allow us to, like, let go. I knew I wanted something, I didn't want something that was melancholy, but I wanted something that was felt serious, that there was a gravitas to it, to reflect how serious and weighty this experience was for all of us. What I love about that song, when John Grant talks about it, he says when he's performing it, that sometimes he is singing to an ex-lover, and sometimes when he performs it, he is singing to himself. And that duality is very much how I feel like us being on those screens. It's like we're communicating to ourselves and we're communicating to the viewer, and it's a song that very clearly is addressing somebody, and I wanted the viewers to feel, not that they were watching a performance of us singing a song, but that we are communicating throughout, like all of those sounds that we're making, you know? My work tends to be full of language or absent of language, but my work is very much about communication, you know, communicating experiences of grief and loss.

**Jamie:** I remember seeing Parade of Champions and thinking it was so brilliant and that it wasn't necessarily just a representational gesture. It felt like like I was observing something that wasn't for me necessarily, but was deeply cathartic for those who were involved in the process. And I felt like I was watching a document about maybe another document internal, and it felt like, I don't know, I really kudos to you for that project because it was like that for me is it lives in my head. It's like one of the ways in which someone can work socially and relationally within their own construction, and then show a guest to that what they need to see.

**Michèle:** Well, I mean, I feel what I've mostly experienced, I love being in the gallery when I can and talking to folks because I'm trying to communicate something, and I love talking to viewers and answering questions or just hearing from people what, what they experience, because it also informs my strategies moving forward from that. And for me, I feel like, you know, there's not a lot of things that are truly universal, but grief and loss truly are. And, you know, my hope always is we live in a culture where we receive messages from almost every corner that you keep your grief private. You know, you stay home until you are. Quote unquote, through it and better before you come into public space. And so for me, the gallery is a public space, is a space to bring grief from the private and to the public. And that even if the grief is a queer grief, even if the grief is a black grief, that that space of of of holding space for grief could also hold space for other forms of grief, you know, and that's why I think about grief as a form of, of, you know, political engagement and social connection around, you know, solidarity, around healing and repair around movement, because it's not just focusing on grief to stay in that place, but to think about. Because one thing I've learned is you do not heal by yourself, right? You have to heal with other people. Need you have to heal through

relation. You have to heal through community. And so the gallery is this community, public space that I hope can do that for some folks who, you know, experience my works.

**Jamie:** That's really well said. Thank you.

**Jamie:** Okay, so I've taken some words from the song in your piece which is Queen of Denmark by John Grant.

**Michèle:** John Grant.

**Jamie:** And I'd like you to choose. I'll give you a pair of words. You choose one word. Which one? It feels like the word that most calls to you. Sure. And we'll see what word wins. Let's do it. First one is, the first ones are world and underwear.

**Michèle:** World.

**Jamie:** World and haircut.

**Michèle:** Haircut

**Jamie:** Haircut or crowbar?

**Michèle:** Haircut.

**Jamie:** Haircut or embarrassed.



**Michèle:** Embarrassed.

**Jamie:** Embarrassed or pathetic?

**Michèle:** Embarrassed.

**Jamie:** Embarrassed or mustard.

**Michèle:** Embarrassed.

**Jamie:** Embarrassed or weepy? Weepy or weepy? Yeah. This. This song's lyrics are. Yeah. Pretty rich. Weepy or queen or weepy queen. Maybe a third option.

**Michèle:** Weepy.

**Jamie:** Weepy or Denmark?

**Michèle:** Weepy? Weepy.

**Michèle:** Yeah. I'm a crier. Yeah.

**Jamie:** Michèle Pearson Clarke, thank you so much.

**Michèle:** Thank you for having me.

**Jamie:** Thanks for listening to this podcast presented by MOMENTA Biennale de l'image. The present edition guest curated by Ji-Yoon Han, is entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis. Join me Montreal artist and filmmaker Jamie Ross for more episodes released weekly throughout the run of the Biennale. We have some really cool artists this year. This podcast was produced by Virage Sonore and the Biennale runs in galleries and museums in Tiotià:ke / Mooniyang / Montreal. From the 7th of September to October 22nd, 2023, on Kanien'kehà:ka Unceded territory. Thanks for listening.