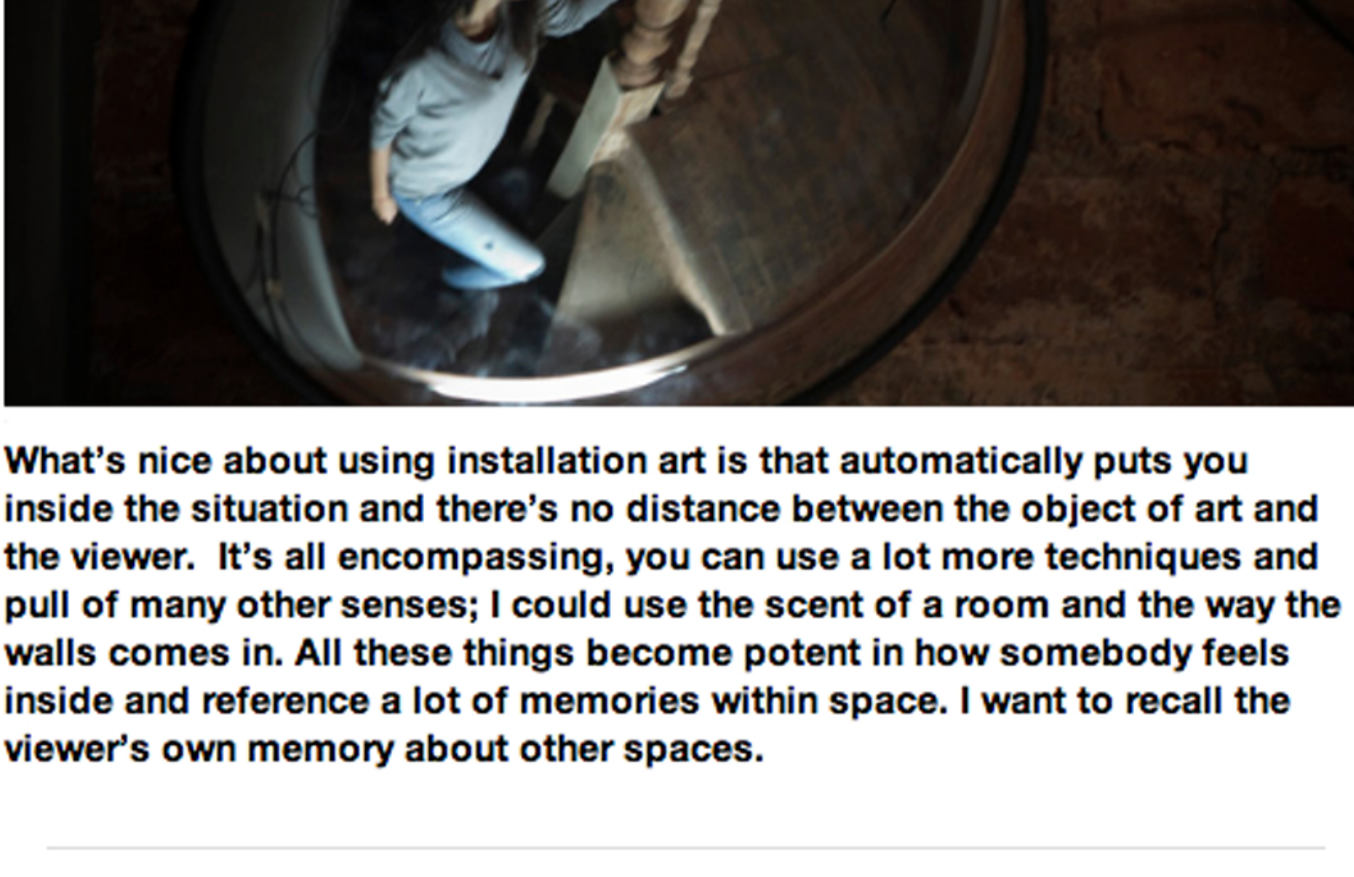


The Compass: a conversation with Virginia Colwell

By Felipe Zuniga



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Virginia Colwell is a North American artist born in Nebraska and spent her childhood in Puerto Rico. Colwell did her undergraduate studies in fine art at Virginia Commonwealth University before moving to Barcelona, Spain to work with the **Metropolis Masters Program in Architecture and Urban Studies**.

Colwell works in a range of media including drawings, video, sculpture, sound art, and multimedia installations. Her work has been exhibited in the United States, Spain, Mexico, and Germany. She has been the recipient of numerous awards including the **Leopold Schepp Foundation Scholarship** for her studies in Spain, the **Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship**, and the **University Fellowship at The Ohio State University**. She is currently living and working in Mexico City.

The Compass is an installation work that occupied an early 1900s row house in Zona Rosa, located just west of the historic center of Mexico City. An audio narrative guides the viewer through the house. Beginning in the basement and ascending to the third floor the story unfolds from the perspective of a housing contractor. He comes back to the house after a month-long pause to find the place has been used for mysterious purposes that never come fully into view.



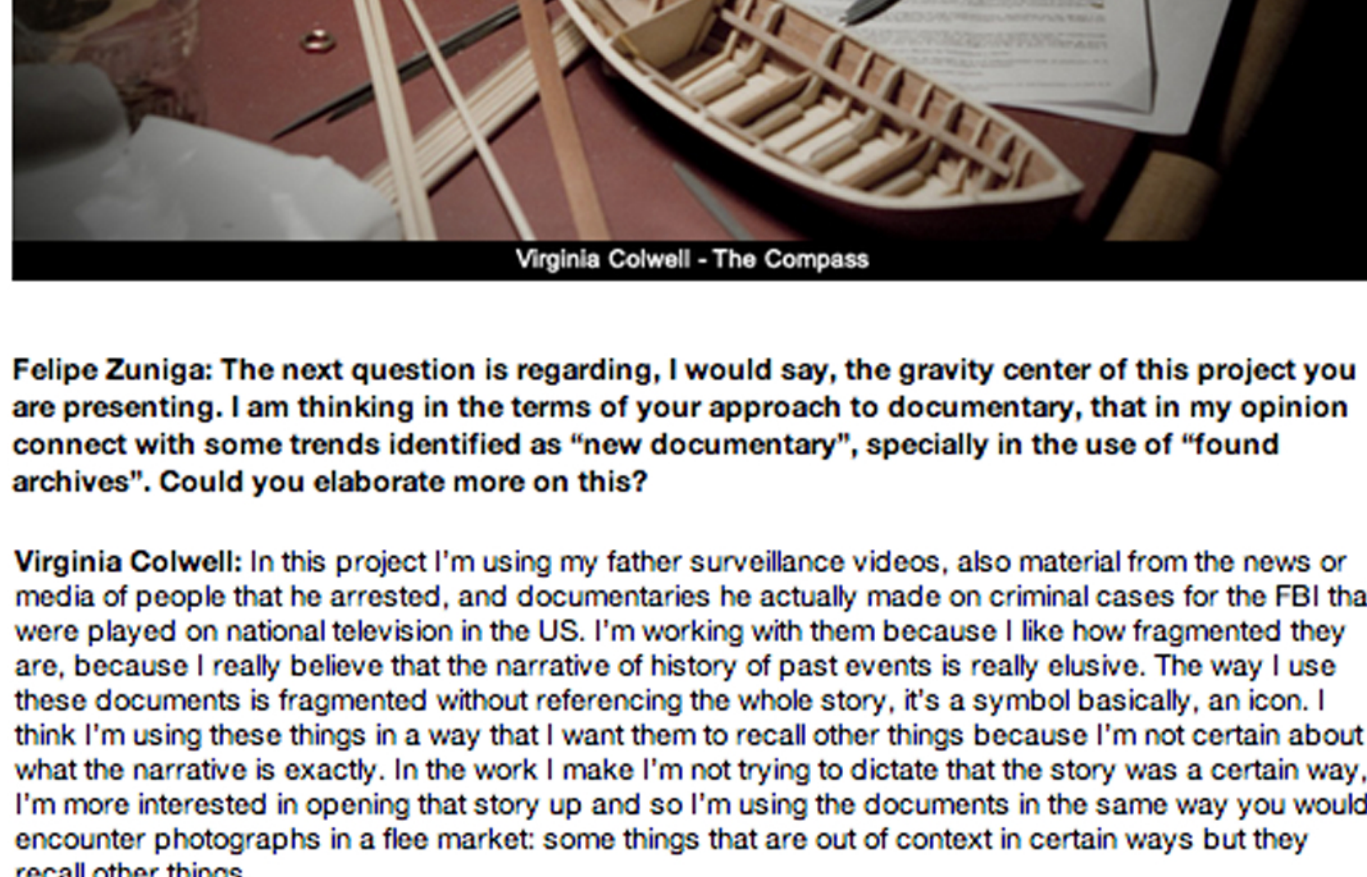
Virginia Colwell - The Compass

This conversation took place at the time the installation was up last November in 2011.

Felipe Zuniga: Can you talk about your training as an artist and the importance of the use of media?

Virginia Colwell: I went to a college in History and Anthropology, I was really interested in studying these things but I realized that I didn't want to be reading and writing anthropology and history and academic history texts for the rest of my life! On the other hand, I always lived surrounded by art my whole life and realized midway through college that the things that you make art about can also be things that you research. That's one of the wonderful things about art, nobody tells me the books I need to read or what footnotes I need to put in! I basically follow my own interest and from there, generate art.

A lot of the work that I do is based in research, looking back at historical events and certain cases of my father. There is a narrative in the documents and through the visual material. In that sense, it would be easier for me in many ways just to be an historian or to write a book about these things, or to write articles or essays but instead I'm a visual artist so I have to turn these things visually in some way. So I use video and audio as a way of storytelling that departs from the physicalness of objects. Although I don't think that I use video or audio in a traditional way. I never take video of my own I'm always appropriating other sources; in that sense, I'm using video as a document. The same thing goes to audio, I don't know about music or the world of audio in general but what I really like about it is that it allows me to have a conversation with the viewer without mine having to be there.



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Felipe Zuniga: The next question is regarding, I would say, the gravity center of this project you are presenting. I am thinking in the terms of your approach to documentary, that in my opinion connect with some trends identified as "new documentary", specially in the use of "found archives". Could you elaborate more on this?

Virginia Colwell: In this project I'm using my father surveillance videos, also material from the news or media of people that he arrested, and documentaries he actually made on criminal cases for the FBI that were played on national television in the US. I'm working with them because I like how fragmented they are, because I really believe that the narrative of history of past events is really elusive. The way I use these documents is fragmented without referencing the whole story, it's a symbol basically, an icon. I think I'm using these things in a way that I want them to recall other things because I'm not certain about what the narrative is exactly. In the work I make I'm not trying to dictate that the story was a certain way, I'm more interested in opening that story up and so I'm using the documents in the same way you would encounter photographs in a flea market: some things that are out of context in certain ways but they recall other things.

My work has this back and forward and in between very specific things, when I go to the archives and I have these dates and the names, for example, in Puerto Rico during research I pulled of all these scans and what struck me the most was that I left the archive with this uncertainty of the past, that sort of the blankness, the not knowing. I really have a hard time saying who was in the right and who was in the wrong, which side did much atrocious things to the other. Sometimes it's really obvious and sometimes it's really not, specially when you're reading documents that come only from one side it's really hard to know and I guess I'm always quiet skeptical of my own perception of the events.

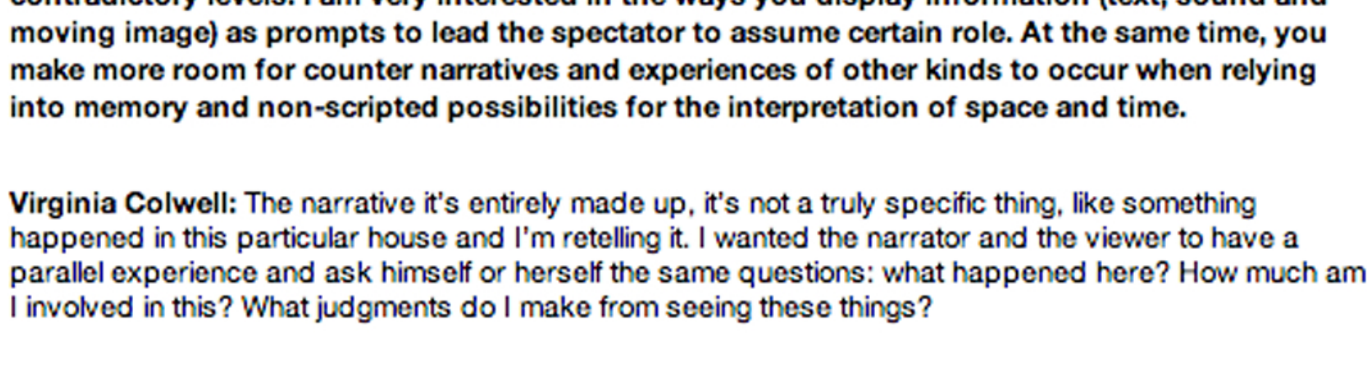
Felipe Zuniga: I find very interesting how you take these products of bureaucracy (documents, files, images and mug shots) and merge them with tactile components such as parchment or felt. Also the way you set and display all these elements to construct a spatial experience for the viewer.

Virginia Colwell: I'm usually pushing documents up against others materials—like the materials of illuminated manuscripts—and in that space in-between unusual connections are made and new stories are created that emphasize my own uncertainty of them. I'm trying to find something behind the document that isn't necessarily the story but this sense of loss and uncertainty.

Bureaucratic documents are incredible boring usually, but what always attract me is that they're potentially really life changing at least for the person I'm usually reading about: the arresting of somebody or somebody got shot. These are pretty traumatic events but they're all distilled into a kind of a formula that fits into an archive, a letter that fits into a folder that has a certain formal way of speaking, but the important stuff behind that, for me, isn't so much the sort of the documentation of an object but try to tease back out the human tragedy behind all that.

I think there's a reason these documents are so boring, the bureaucracy built this distance in between authority and the suspect or between the perpetrator and the victim; trying to uncomplicated many very complicated situations. What interest me is trying to pull back out that subjectiveness, to perceive not just the violence, but also our own relationship to it, either as spectators or supporters of the authority or siding with the victims.

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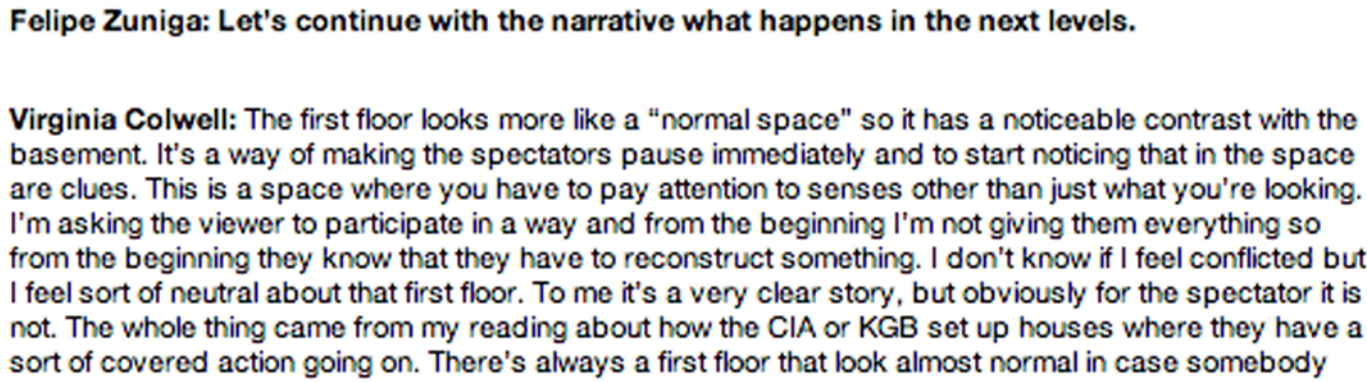
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Felipe Zuniga: I think that when you do this you make even more complex the layering of these fragmented narratives because you're opening the space to performativity in many different and contradictory levels. I am very interested in the ways you display information (text, sound and moving image) as prompts to lead the spectator to assume certain role. At the same time, you make more room for counter narratives and experiences of other kinds to occur when relying into memory and non-scripted possibilities for the interpretation of space and time.

Virginia Colwell: The narrative it's entirely made up, it's not a truly specific thing, like something happened in this particular house and I'm retelling it. I wanted the narrator and the viewer to have a parallel experience and ask himself or herself the same questions: what happened here? How much am I involved in this? What judgments do I make from seeing these things?

The construction of the narrator, a contractor, is this sort of person that wasn't in charge of the place and because of that, he can't give you the facts but can deliver you a sentiment of suspicion about these events. This is the way I constructed each space leaves enough behind for other interpretations. I know that people aren't going to listen to the story necessarily they're going see things in a very different way. The whole thing came from my reading about how the CIA or KGB set up houses where they have a sort of covered action going on. There's always a first floor that look almost normal in case somebody comes to the door, and usually they have people living there that either work for the agency, and the rest of the house is dedicated to whatever they have.

I wanted the space to feel uncomfortable to start the whole thing with uncertainty like one of the most important tone of the work. This uncertainty of what happened would affect the spectator to walk in and realize there's something quiet different between the outside world and what's happening here, for that reason it's important to start in the basement 'cause basements have all these connotations that are pretty powerful. I wanted the first space you encounter to reference an interrogation space, where somebody could be kidnapped. I know this is a little extreme but I wanted that echo of something that we read about often but that we never really come close to other than in movies and through newspapers. I didn't want to make an interrogation room exactly, and I don't know if the viewers got really that but for me was really important that it wasn't too obvious and I wanted it to be only a kind of hint of that.



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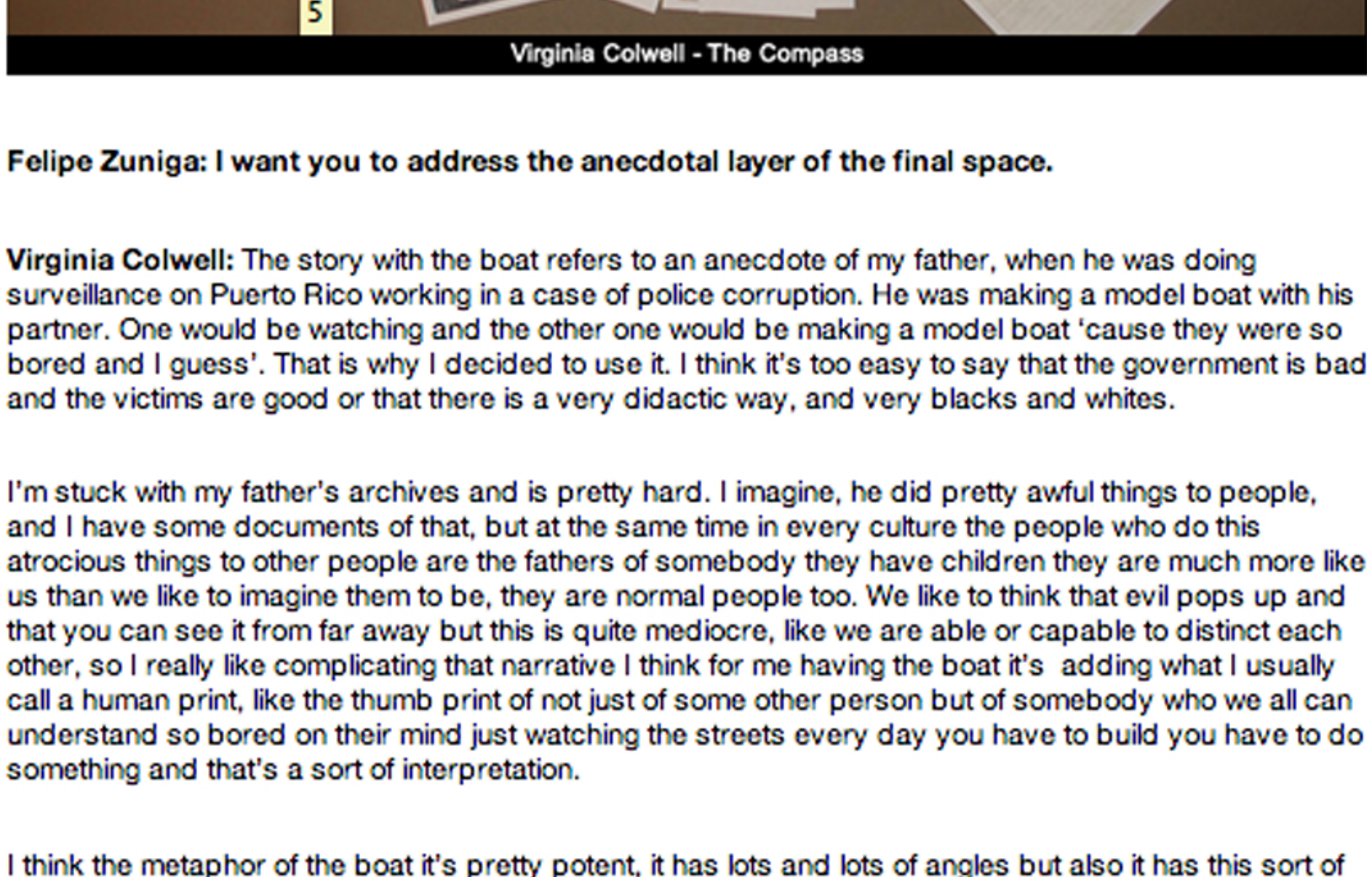
Felipe Zuniga: Let's continue with the narrative what happens in the next levels.

Virginia Colwell: The first floor looks more like a "normal space" so it has a noticeable contrast with the basement. It's a way of making the spectators pause immediately and to start noticing that in the space are clues. This is a space where you have to pay attention to senses other than just what you're looking. I'm asking the viewer to participate in a way and from the beginning I'm not giving them everything so from the beginning they know that they have to reconstruct something. I don't know if I feel conflicted but I feel sort of neutral about that first floor. To me it's a very clear story, but obviously for the spectator it is not. The whole thing came from my reading about how the CIA or KGB set up houses where they have a sort of covered action going on. There's always a first floor that look almost normal in case somebody comes to the door, and usually they have people living there that either work for the agency, and the rest of the house is dedicated to whatever they have.

The second floor match like an office space but like undone, something that's in the process of been taking away, but also referencing research and stuff. The viewer maybe starts to interpret who occupied this space, I think it's important to have things that recall that we're in Mexico City and not in the U.S., actually I don't think there's a single thing in here that says anything about the FBI, which, of course, a lot of my research comes from the FBI stuff but I didn't really want this to be.

Felipe Zuniga: It is quite shocking that the documents and newspapers seem to construct some kind of real narrative. Can you talk a little about that?

Virginia Colwell: I can't take credit for the fact that this exists and this is here, it was pure accident. I can't say that I know how people are interpreting that, although I hope that it bring some closure to thinking about the things that are happening right now in Mexico, it takes me out of the context of me talking about my father. So in that way finding this archive, this police archive, was really lucky but also it wasn't something that I specifically looked for, it's interesting because when we were reading over the archive a couple days ago, and there's something quiet tragic about it that interesting me, but I'm not quiet sure how I feel about them yet.



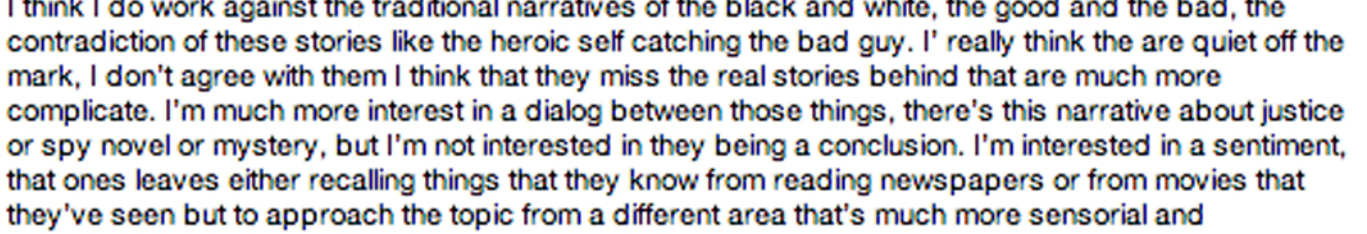
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Felipe Zuniga: I want you to address the anecdotal layer of the final space.

Virginia Colwell: The story with the boat refers to an anecdote of my father, when he was doing surveillance on Puerto Rico working in a case of police corruption. He was making a model boat with his partner. One would be watching and the other one would be making a model boat 'cause they were so bored and I guess'. That is why I decided to use it. I think it's too easy to say that the government is bad and the victims are good or that there is a very didactic way, and very blacks and whites.

I'm stuck with my father's archives and is pretty hard. I imagine, he did pretty awful things to people, and I have some documents of that, but at the same time in every culture the people who do this atrocious things to other people are the fathers of somebody they have children they are much more like us than we like to imagine them to be, they are normal people too. We like to think that evil pops up and that you can see it from far away but this is quite mediocre, like we are able or capable to distinct each other, so I really like complicating that narrative I just for me having the boat it's adding what I usually call a human print, like the thumb print of not just of some other person but of somebody who we all can understand so bored on their mind just watching the streets every day you have to build you have to do something and that's a sort of interpretation.

I think the metaphor of the boat it's pretty potent, it has lots and lots of angles but also it has this sort of romantic notion of taking someone away from the place where they are. That's one of the things, it's not a thing that I can quiet explain precisely, it's something intuitively I knew that's the right place for this to be, in the same way that was important to have a solitary game in the other room, this sort of thing of like are you searching for these people that were here before, you're looking for the trace of this human presence and then you come upstairs and it's so concentrate between these two areas for these two watchers of the surveillance that the trace becomes really specific, it's not just general people. I wanted people to come up here and for to be a portrait of two people and be very specific.



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I think I do work against the traditional narratives of the black and white, the good and the bad, the contradiction of these stories like the heroic self catching the bad guy. I really think the are quiet off the mark, I don't agree with them I think that they miss the real stories behind that are much more complicate. I'm much more interest in a dialog between those things, there's this narrative about justice or spy novel or mystery, but I'm not interested in they being a conclusion. I'm interested in a sentiment, that ones leaves either recalling things that they know from reading newspapers or from movies that they've seen but to approach the topic from a different area that's much more sensorial and complicated. I don't want to tell my viewer what to think.