

"The beauty of rupture: Artists of Asian descent and Canadian identity," *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 24 (1999), pp. 66-73

The norms of what have been considered Canadian cultural identity were governed for more than four centuries by the colonial heritage of the English and French. Their influence even veiled the presence of aboriginal cultures, the First Nation peoples who have inhabited this country from time immemorial. In the past two decades, however, Canadian cultural identity has been transformed. First Nations peoples are in the process of recouping the sovereignty of their cultural and political identity – one that is distinct from the rest of Canada – and the largest immigrant population now originates from Asia.¹

While the majority of recent Asian immigration is from Hong Kong and India, there are also significant numbers from Thailand, Fiji, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Along with immigrant populations from other parts of the world who are making Canada their home, they have dramatically reshaped the demography and are reconfiguring the social, cultural and economic landscape. Toronto, for example, is recognised as the most culturally diverse city in North America. This shift is influencing the way Canadians identify themselves as a nation, and the way Canadians identify themselves as individuals within a nation. It is making us aware that, in our case at least, national identity is not fixed, but is constantly evolving with little promise of resolution. Many would even argue that until First Nations disputes are redressed, we are, in theory, all immigrants. The lack of a defined national identity is a source of both anxiety and exhilaration: anxiety that we do not possess cultural traditions that extend back into deep history (aside from First Nations traditions); exhilaration that we are liberated from the very burdens such traditions can impose.

On an institutional level, the cultural diversity that now exists in Canada is promoted by the state as a 'mosaic', a multicultural reality where many nationalities exist within one geographical and constitutional space. The idea of multiculturalism was implemented as government policy in 1988 and is now considered a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society. In principle this is embraced by a large segment of the population; the idea of a coexistence of difference is appealing. At the same time, however, it has led to hyphenated identities, among them Asian-Canadians, Indo-Canadians, French-Canadians, and so on.²

Coinciding with this demographic shift is the emergence of a vital and influential community of artists of Asian descent living and working in Canada. Some are native born, others have emigrated to Canada. Within the immigrant population there are those who came to Canada at a young age and those who arrived as adults. The ensuing complexity of language, culture and experience frustrates the tendency to neatly categorise Asian-Canadians as a singular entity. Focusing on race and ethnicity, it conceptually perpetuates the idea of segregation and has become a problematic designation for many artists. Identifying oneself as Asian-Canadian can, of course, be viewed as a challenge to the idea of a dominant culture, as a sign of resistance, as a need to acknowledge difference. Such identification ruptures the notion of a homogeneous 'Canadian' culture, but there exists a delicate balance between claiming one's difference and participating fully and equally in society.

During the 1950s and 1960s artists of Asian descent, among them Kazuo Nakamura, Takao Tanabe and Roy Kiyooka, gained considerable critical acclaim within the Canadian art establishment. Yet thirty years ago, if one was not producing work that subscribed to the aesthetic presentation or content of European and American influenced art, the opportunity for acknowledgment was severely limited. In fact, in the early 1970s, when Kiyooka veered away from the hard-edge abstraction for which he was celebrated, towards a less marketable and less easily consumable photo-based practice that at times explored his Japanese roots, national attention waned.³

Many Canadian artists of Asian descent – indeed any artist whose background is not Euro-American – have felt alienated, and often still do, from the kind of art and ideas that exist in what is considered western mainstream practices. Many younger artists, unable to find an outlet for the expression of their specific cultural sensibility or aesthetic, experienced such alienation. It led to an outpouring of art during the past decade concerned with issues of locating and affirming one's identity, an identity often inherently different from that of an English or French heritage. Groundbreaking exhibitions such as 'Yellow Peril Reconsidered' (1991) and 'Self Nor Whole' (1991) were ambitious undertakings organised by artists of Asian descent.⁴ In these shows, artists were represented in the context of their own community, in a supportive environment where the work could be discussed on its own terms. Exhibitions such as these served to challenge the dominant canons by which artists presumably had to abide. They brought forth issues pertaining to the hangover of history's inequities and erasures, the effects of migration, and the breakdown of long-held beliefs about race, gender and sexuality, and opened up a discussion about how we read our cultural icons and act out our social habits. The goal was not so much an attempt to become the mainstream, as to contest the idea of a mainstream and advance new ways of constructing one's identity. Such artwork has been the catalyst

for one of the most profound shifts within the exhibition and collection practices of Canadian art institutions, and has questioned assumptions of what constitutes Canadian art. And while the system has yet to achieve the desired change, there is no turning back.

With the ascendancy of identity issues in visual art, there has, ironically, been a reversal of what transpired thirty years ago. Now, if one is of Asian descent, there exists an expectation to reflect one's 'Asianness' in the artwork. Many critics and curators look for it; many state promoters of multiculturalism fund it. Some artists now refuse to participate in segregated, even self-segregated exhibitions, citing the potential of creating cultural ghettos. This is not a denial of one's heritage, but a refusal to be included in exhibitions on the basis of race or ethnic background.

Still, identity remains one of the most crucial issues within an aggressively promoted concept of globalisation, where countries, communities and individuals face wholesale transformation fed by transnational corporate interests. We are encouraged to dress in the same clothes, eat the same food, listen to the same music, watch the same television broadcasts and, ultimately, to participate in the same economic system. Yet there exist rumblings about how the subject of identity, and ideas centred on difference, are becoming overworked and predictable. In spite of the art system's desire for something new, and perhaps less

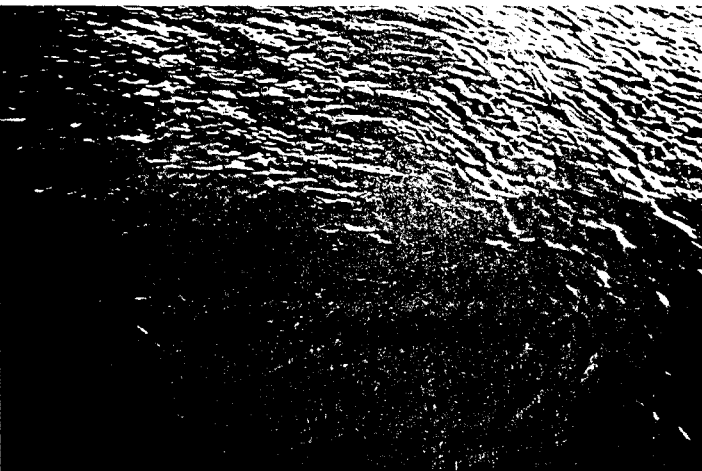
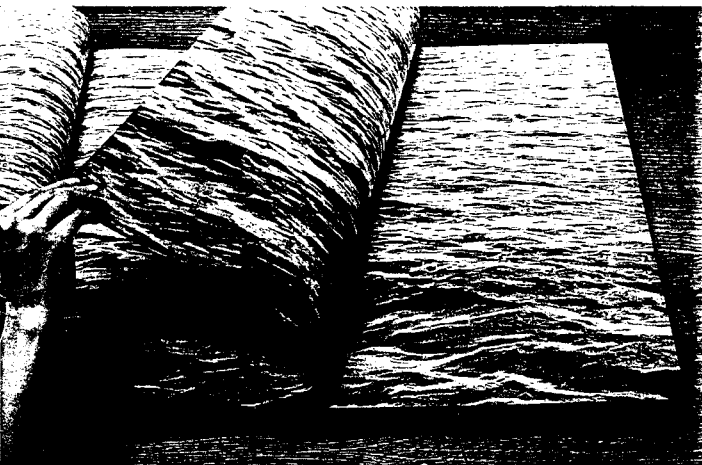
political, some of the most engaging artwork still grapples with identity. But it is manifested in ways that address contemporary subjectivity in all its complexities and contradictions.

The artists discussed in this article are among many of Asian descent living in Canada. And while they address, among other things, various aspects of identity, their Asian descent does not necessarily comprise the subject matter, although it may in some way inform their perceptions. Nor does the work exhibit an identifiable 'Asian' aesthetic. Rather, by embracing the local and the global, the specific and the universal, these artists explore identity as an expression of the individual within the hybridity of the larger social psyche.

Ken Lum is a native Vancouverite whose work is infrequently discussed in terms of his Chinese ancestry. As an artist who has contributed to Vancouver's international reputation for photography, his work is more often framed within Conceptual strategies, and Minimalist or Pop aesthetics. Yet his projects have always comprised a wide representation of both race and class, a natural reflection of growing up in a culturally mixed neighbourhood, and of being an acute observer of the ways individuals function in an often antagonistic world. By focusing on both the commonalities and idiosyncrasies of subjectivity that reside within our daily lives, Lum destabilises what one might assume to be the norm.

Lum's oeuvre spans several disciplines, including painting, photography and sculpture. The portrait, and its relationship to identity, has played an important role throughout. In the 1980s Lum paired large





above: LANI MAESTRO, *dream of the other*, 1998, slide-dissolve installation, audio, courtesy the artist, top: *a book thick of ocean*, 1993, hand-bound book, offset printing, silver stamping on linen cover, left: *Jeopardy Painting*, 1998–99, acrylic on raw canvas, each: 165.7 x 141.3 cm, courtesy Catharina Serrhini Gallery, Vancouver. Photograph: Chris Gergley

opposite page: RON TERADA, *Jeopardy Painting*, 1998–99, acrylic on raw canvas, each: 165.7 x 141.3 cm, courtesy Catharina Serrhini Gallery, Vancouver. Photograph: Chris Gergley

photographic studio portraits with corporate-like logos that imitated the sitter's name, a wry comment about the individual consumer culture. A later series of 1994 combined highly staged and depicting individuals engaged in a range of everyday moments with phrases expressing what is occupying their minds. In one piece, a woman, clearly self-absorbed, faces herself in a dressing-room mirror and asks, 'What am I doing here?'. The sheer directness and scale of the words intensifies our engagement with those preoccupations that seem utterly banal, but that are all too recognisable. Indeed, the situations Lum presents are at times so uneventful that they verge on the prosaic. This uneasy relationship between the banal and the meaningful, between image and empathy, image and text, heightens our experience of the work.

A more recent project is *Photo-Mirrors*, 1997–98. The format is more fundamental: wood-framed mirrors of various dimensions and snapshots slipped into the crack where mirror meets frame. The snapshots represent people, buildings or landscapes and, depending on exhibition context, may consist of found images, images contributed by the viewers, or those taken by the artist. The mirror functions as a stage photograph by re-presenting an image, in this case the viewer fills the reflective space with a self-portrait. In these mirrors the self-conscious presence of the viewer as an element in the artwork is juxtaposed with the levels of subjectivity one discerns in the snapshots, which are most often personal mementos representing some past event. It is the disparity between the real and the constructed, between the viewer and the artwork, that Lum opens up a space for deliberation about identity.

In contrast to Lum's edgy representations are the ethereal, contemplative installations of Lani Maestro. Having emigrated from the Philippines in 1982, she now lives and works in Montreal, but her projects often deal with subject matter specific to political associations with her mother country and with her familial background. One finds in her installations the suggestion of memory as a means of connection between two spaces – between here and there, between now and then. While the content is personal to Maestro, we, as viewers, are not necessarily drawn to the specifics. She purposely pares down visual information and renders it ambiguous, evocative and poetic rather than illustrative. This is carried out in a spirit of generosity that enables the artist to project her own subjective experiences while offering a vehicle for viewers simultaneously to explore theirs.

a book thick of ocean, 1993, for example, exists as an oblique mourning for the death of Maestro's Nany, her heart mother. It is a five-hundred page, hand-bound book placed on an oak table. Each page opens to an identical photograph of the ocean. The image is taken from an angle that renders the ocean boundless yet close enough to comfortably slip into. This is a highly meditative work that involves the physical interaction of the viewer to carefully turn each page and mentally accept the accumulation of each image. Although the idea and presentation appear uncomplicated, the impact is remarkably powerful. The repetition of the same image counters our knowledge of it, and instead creates a sense of unknowing, an endless drifting, and opens up a vast space for our subjective engagement.

**GENERAL RICHARD
MONTGOMERY
WAS KILLED
DECEMBER 31 1775
LEADING A
HOPELESS
ATTACK ON THIS
CANADIAN CITY**

**IN OCTOBER 1996
THIS HOCKEY
PLAYER BECAME
THE FIRST
REAL PERSON
PICTURED
ON A CAMPBELL'S
SOUP LABEL**

Imagery of the ocean is also employed in *dream of the other*, 1998. Using a slide dissolve projection and digital manipulation, two children floating on the surface of the ocean disappear and reappear in a slow-motion cinematic simulation. As in *a book thick of ocean*, the image of the ocean is the same with or without the children, and the slide dissolve creates an unsettling rhythmic and spatial experience. In an adjacent room, empty of images but full of sound, is an audio of waves. Again, Maestro invokes a meditative ambience that alludes to memory, the ephemeral, and the passage of time. In Maestro's work memory functions as a form of retaining identity that is both personal and collective, but it also implies that nothing stays the same, and that part of our existence comprises loss.

Ron Terada was born in Vancouver and makes paintings that combine references to the monochrome with those of Conceptual art. He employs a systematic methodology: a painted ground paired with an appropriated text. With the formal decision-making process in place, that is, the problem of what to paint already determined, he then takes his cues from artists such as On Kawara in the use of repetition and formula, and Lawrence Weiner in the use of text as visual expression. Yet the physical presence of his paintings as highly aestheticised objects is evidence of a commitment to the sensual properties of paint. They are the product of dozens of layers of precisely applied pigment that result in surfaces so

meticulous, so consistent, they seem to defy the fact that they are hand-crafted.

The textual components in Terada's paintings have in recent years incorporated 'voices'. In the *Grey Paintings*, executed during 1996 and 1997, each painting is finished in a different tone of grey and the texts are derived from his high-school graduation yearbook. The voices are named – Trung Pham, Tom Taylor, Jatinder Dhaliwal – and exemplify a broad ethnic representation. This is not a gesture of inclusion, but indicative of a generation where such a mix is the norm. As voices that are represented by words, they function like portraits. But one becomes painfully aware of how individuals at the threshold of entry into adulthood choose to project themselves. The earnest and ingenuous truisms proffered by these voices collide with the sophisticated history that inhabits the language of the monochrome, a history that has attempted to offer the ultimate truth of what constitutes a painting.

The naive wisdom of teenagers has been replaced by a more acidic relationship in the *Jeopardy Paintings*, 1998–99. Here, Terada pits the crass reality of a television game-show quiz against the aloof idealism and transcendence of the painted monochrome. In these paintings, two kinds of knowledge meet head-on: a kind of 'trivial pursuit' that daily captivates huge populations who are gratified by quick knowledge gained through facts; and an intellectual discourse of painting that exists within

right: YOKO
TAKASHIMA, *Brushism*,
1994, video, audio,
courtesy Contemporary
Art Gallery, Vancouver.
below: *Islands Burning*,
1998, video, audio,
courtesy the artist.



the hermetic purity of art. As heroic paintings they have been spoiled by references to the everyday, and the convergence of idea and technique, of abstraction and narrative, lend these seemingly restrained works of art their tension.

Yoko Takashima, a native of Japan, moved to Canada in 1988 and now lives in Victoria. Devising video installations that range from the modest to the monumental, she focuses on some of the most mundane aspects of our existence. The initial encounter with Takashima's work, however, is extremely disorienting. Daily routines and simple actions are transformed into hypnotic, compelling rituals through repetition, close cropping, and distorted scale. In *Brushism*, 1994, something as ordinary as brushing one's teeth is turned into a strange and alien spectacle. The inability immediately to ascertain what one is seeing plays into the imagination and the deepest subliminal recesses. When recognition of the image does occur, one detects a wit that has led us into psychologically unsettling territory.

In the installation *As If*, 1996, a small oval screen is embedded directly into the wall and exhibits a slow repetitious action alluding to something that borders on the libidinous. The difficulty of identifying this action is exacerbated by the accompanying audio of giggling girls. The work makes allusions to voyeurism, with the viewer caught peeping at something that perhaps should not be witnessed. But this is a set-up. All is perfectly innocent; the video is simply the artist licking cream cheese from a glass surface, documented from underneath. What at first seemed like an indeterminate rhythm of flesh and viscera declares itself as lips, teeth, and a tongue engaged in simple sensual pleasure.

Another work, *Islands Burning*, 1998, consists of a sound and video installation that focuses on a woman's chest area. Her breasts are being fondled by a pair of hands that morph back and forth between those of a woman and those of a man, while the audio projects the sound of heavy breathing. The way each gender interacts with the breasts is clearly different, a relationship that is awkward at best. And while it is evident that the woman's hands are her own, it is unclear who the man's might belong to, which raises questions about power and submission. As in much of Takashima's work, the idea of gender identity arises as an underlying theme, and within it she manages to take confident possession of her disposition towards sexuality and sensuality. Viewers also come to apprehend this, but not before negotiating their own subjective inclinations.

Germaine Koh was born in Malaysia, moved to Canada as a child, and currently lives in Ottawa. She also explores ordinary daily details, but she enters the space of identity through systems of exchange and processes of circulation. Her work is diverse in materials and scale, ranging from

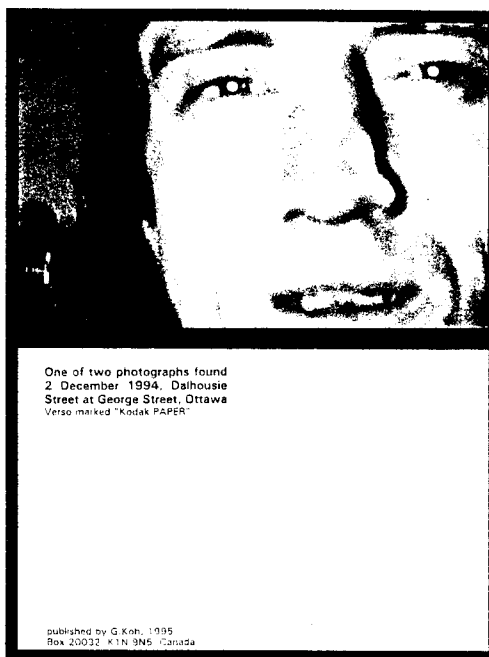


small bronze objects placed temporarily in the possession of other people, to a monumental knitted 'blanket' made from used sweaters that have been unravelled and re-knitted. But each of these projects is linked through Koh's methodology and her interest in the relationship between art and lived experience. She appropriates icons of the personal and the intimate – business cards and found snapshots, for example – and gives them a public life. Aside from the blanket, these projects possess a sense of contingency. Although they exist as art, they can just as easily slip into the context of the real world and conceivably end up where some began, as detritus on the street.

This is evident in *Sightings*, an ongoing project initiated in 1992 consisting of found snapshots that Koh has made into postcards. Most of the images include people, and on the back of each she has placed the date, location, circumstance of find, and her address. Like souvenir postcards, these images are sold in various locations and circulated through the mail system. Yet, in the context of a postcard they are ironic. Postcards purportedly depict memorable places and events, but these images, possibly discarded because of awkward framing or for being off-focus, have been rejected or lost by those who generated them. Similarly, *Momentos*, 1995–96, consisting of found wallet-sized studio portraits reproduced, framed and identified only by a brass plaque noting a date and location, present portraits whose original context is missing. Through Koh's process of rescue and redefinition, these orphans have found new life as amorphous identities that float through the world and whose true circumstances are left open to imaginative interpretation.

Koh's *Personal Messages*, ongoing since 1995, consists of an abbreviated diary of day-to-day activities periodically placed in the personal messages column of a newspaper. Although these notes are personal to Koh, she is not identified, and they are general enough to be read as anyone's life. But they are also different enough from the kinds of messages left in such columns that they read as a distinct identity: they assume a personality. With projects such as these, Koh plays a deft game with both the public realm and the art world. The personals, in particular, are easily unnoticed by the art world unless it is one's habit to seek them out. Paradoxically, however, it is only within the art world that they are publicly discussed.

These five artists are among those who recognise that identity is neither simple, fixed, nor necessarily authentic to a prescribed formula. They produce work that has nothing definitive to tell us, but rather provides an open terrain for consideration of our subjective engagement with the world around us. And while their artwork does not directly reflect any nationalist tendencies, the ideas conveyed are not so distant from those that preoccupy many Canadians: that the boundaries of identity are continually shifting and expanding, and that its irresolution can be productive.



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8 April, Toronto. Ran into A and S, who solved my problem. Had dinner, beer. I like them.

PEOPLE SEARCH

CROFTS, Gary or anyone knowing his whereabouts please contact: Carol Rawson 416-295-1761, Mon-Fri, 9-5 am.

DARAMOLA, Joshua, father of Patricia Daramola, born May 7, 1985 or anyone knowing his

left: GERMAINE KOH, *Sightings*, 1992—detail, offset lithography, 15.2 x 10.1 cm; above: *Personal Messages*, 1995—detail, classified advertisements in newspaper, courtesy the artist

- 1 The presence of Asians in Canada, especially in western Canada, is not new. A significant population of Chinese, recruited as cheap labour, lived in British Columbia during early non-native settlement, although they were segregated from and discriminated against by European settlers. Until the mid-1920s immigration of the Chinese required a hefty tax. Between 1923 and 1947 Chinese immigration was banned altogether.
- 2 The usage of French-Canadian is not popular in the province of Quebec where the majority of the French-speaking population lives. They are also seriously courting the idea of a sovereign nation within Canada and refer to themselves as Québécois.
- 3 John O'Brian, 'White Paint, Hoarfrost, and the Cold Shoulder or Neglect', *Kiyooka*, Vancouver, BC, Artspeak Gallery Or Gallery, 1991, pp. 19–20.
- 4 'Yellow Peril Reconsidered' was curated by Paul Wong and Elsiebeth Sage of the curatorial collective On Edge and toured across Canada. 'Self No. 1 World' was created by Henry Tsang and Lorraine Chan and was presented in the Chinese Cultural Centre, a non-art institution. Paul Wong and Henry Tsang are also recognised for their work as artists.

Keith Wallace is Director and Curator of the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.