

"Private Thoughts / Public Moments"

NEENA ARORA, ASMA ARSHAD MAHMOOD, RACHEL KALPANA JAMES,
MEERA SETHI, GUEST-CURATED BY SUTAPA BISWAS

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 13 September–10 December 2000

Review by Germaine Koh

There is by now a well-established category of museum exhibitions premised on inviting living artists to intervene in permanent collections galleries or the collections themselves. We know we are to understand such exhibitions as signals from these institutions that they have opened themselves to alternative histories and underrepresented communities, and such exhibitions almost always feature artists who are members of such groups. The Art Gallery of Ontario's group exhibition "Private Thoughts / Public Moments" conforms to this model, featuring interventions into the historical galleries by four emerging artists of South Asian heritage. Developed from workshops led at the museum by London-based artist/curator Sutapa Biswas, the exhibition avoided being overtly polemical while issuing from a culturally specific mentoring process.

The works in the exhibition sought to locate personal identity within established public narratives. Invited to respond to any of the museum's collections, all the artists chose to work in relation to the *Group of Seven*—dominated Canadian historical galleries. Significantly, each piece also incorporated elements of the museum's highly visible educational material, acknowledging the influence this has on perceptions of the artworks in the galleries.

Meera Sethi intervened upon the albums of didactic material housed in prominent kiosks throughout the Canadian galleries. The existing laminated pages present photographs and documents not only of traditional historiographical subjects such as leaders, decisive battles, political events and narratives of development and techno-

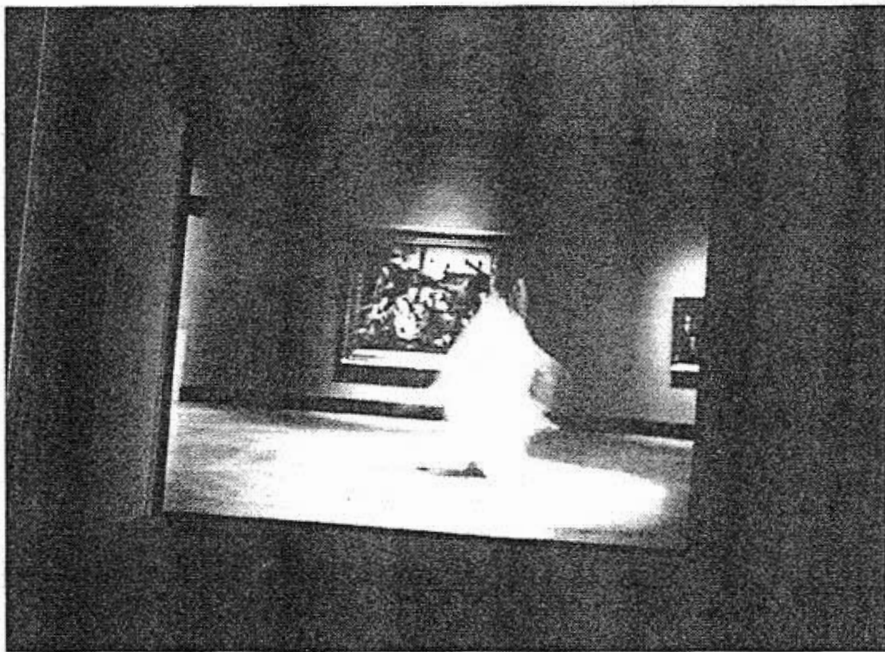


Detail of *Crossing Histories*, Meera Sethi, 2000, laminated pages in existing albums. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Ontario.

logical advancement, but also of tendencies in popular culture, everyday life and entertainment. Inserted amongst these, Sethi's pages for *Crossing Histories* (2000) bore quotations from Canadian statutes, which marked policy changes in the treatment of marginalized peoples, such as the Chinese exclusion act of 1927, revisions to the Indian Act, and a 1793 Upper Canada statute limiting slavery. Presented as long tracts of text drawn from legal statutes, the dryness of Sethi's insertions signaled a certain historical seriousness distinct from the lightness of the existing image-based pages, and had the effect of complicating them. It was appropriately ironic that she borrowed certain trappings of academic historiography (unembellished primary texts) to recall the non-dominant narratives often excluded from established histories. However, this gesture of remembrance

might have had even more impact did the albums not already tacitly acknowledge the contentiousness of presenting a uniformly heroic historical account, including as they do some documentation of more infamous moments, such as the operations of slavery and the existence of the Ku Klux Klan in Canada.

In her video installation *Space-Shifter* (2000), Neena Arora adapted an audio track from another didactic station—a conspicuous, chapel-like structure housing headphones and seats for viewing J.E.H. MacDonald's painting *The Beaver Dam*. The original 12-minute educational soundtrack (curiously available in both male and female voices, providing different flavours of expertise?) leads the museum visitor through a series of relaxation and viewing exercises, emphasizing awareness of one's



Still from *Space-Shifter*, Neena Arora, 2000, video installation with accompanying soundtrack. Courtesy: Art Gallery of Ontario

physical and emotional responses in face of the painting. Arora re-recorded the dialogue in her own voice, changing only the object of the discussion from "the painting" to "the person in front of you." This played in another cozy seating nook in an adjoining gallery, as the soundtrack to a small-screen video showing the bare-foot artist, dressed in gown and robe, gliding through the deserted galleries and moving her body in response to the architecture and paintings. To hear the same words used as instructions for viewing both a painting and a person was unsettling, adding a touch of vulnerability to the video-figure's movements, despite — or perhaps because of — the fact that the shared dialogue was worded to encourage the viewer's self-scrutiny as much as understanding of the external object. As with the albums used by Sethi, the original educational soundtrack has moved beyond a strictly authoritarian methodology in that it does acknowledge the importance of subjectivity in viewing — yet it nevertheless produced a discomfort when Arora shifted this painstaking language to the examination of a person and, by extension, to the structures of interpersonal relations. It was through this unease that Arora effectively evoked the complexities of negotiating personal identity.

Also addressing ownership of the gaze, Asma Arshad Mahmood's sound installation *The Peep* (2000) made use of an existing fabric blind protecting a chalk drawing of a female nude by J.W.L. Forster from prolonged exposure to light. The viewer's action of pulling a cord to raise the blind and reveal the drawing triggered the sound, issuing from over one's shoulder, of a man clearing his throat. Somewhere between reprimand and nervous interjection, the cough injected into the viewing situation the conflicting emotions of shame, complicity and humour. Perhaps depending on the identity of the viewer, it functioned to reiterate established viewing conventions (male gaze regarding female object), but at the same time to destabilize these with a sense of embarrassment about what began to appear as pathetically elaborate precautions (the curtain) to preserve this authority. With playful charm this simple intervention exposed and disrupted these unspoken expectations.

For *Tagore and Mrs. E* (2000), Rachel Kalpana James departed from a 1921 portrait by F.H. Varley of one Minnie Ethel Ely. Hung amongst upright society portraits of the early twentieth century, the painting is conspicuous for the informal, bohemian

character of its sitter. The relaxed yoga pose and loose, colourful clothing of the figure of "Mrs. E" hints at stories unacknowledged in adjacent paintings, namely the influence of theosophy and Eastern thought on Varley and others of his circle. Nearby, James filled one of the flat drawers usually used to present *Group of Seven* sketches with simulated memorabilia and fictionalized diaries "written" by Mrs. Ely at the time of the real visit of the Indian mystic poet and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore to British Columbia in 1929. Describing a spiritual excitation related to Tagore's writing, the strikingly-authentic-looking diaries become a second, imagined, portrait of a person finding personal identity through the guidance of another. The work also subtly recalls histories of exclusion: the drawer is lined with a world map tracing the trans-Atlantic routes that both Varley and Mrs. Ely would have followed when immigrating from Britain, and those taken by Tagore in 1916 — when he was denied entry into Canada — and in 1929.

The Art Gallery of Ontario has made an admirable effort in recent years to open its doors to emerging artists, through its contemporary project room and now in this exhibition. We can hope that the subtlety of the works developed for this exhibition will set a precedent for future propositions of this nature. The fact that the permanent-collection intervention is now an almost-hackneyed museological trope does not necessarily dilute the effect of such exhibitions, but only means that they need to be viewed not primarily for the fact of their occurring, but as any other show for their content, and in these terms "Private Thoughts / Public Moments" did judiciously present provocative works under a cohesive theme. Still, without pre-determining the shape of future interventions, it does seem that — given that the AGO has, like museums everywhere, developed an overriding preoccupation with its educational mandate — there is a whole new generation of "user-friendly" interpretive materials proliferating in its exhibition halls, awaiting the critical response of artists.

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