Art as a Bridge: Aquil Virani and the Dialogue of Multiculturalism
— *by Tak Pham*

Creating art within a community holds a unique power—an ability to forge connections, transcend boundaries, evoke emotions, and initiate meaningful conversations. For artist Aquil Virani, this practice is not merely a creative pursuit; it's a calling deeply rooted in his multicultural upbringing. Born to an Indian father from Tanzania and a French mother, Virani's journey led him from Surrey, British Columbia, to Toronto, Ontario, immersing him in some of the world's most diverse communities. Drawing on personal experiences, Virani conceives and organizes community art projects that facilitate profound connections with immigrant communities, fostering understanding and empathy.

> **Virani's art seeks to uncover commonalities among individuals sharing a common space, time, and resources, invoking the transformative power of art to bridge gaps and facilitate dialogues within a diverse society.**

Virani's approach to community art is characterized by his intimate connection to the communities he engages with. His multicultural background and upbringing have equipped him with a unique lens through which he views the world, allowing him to connect deeply with diverse communities. This closeness serves as the bedrock for his successful community art projects. At the core of many of Virani's projects is the desire to discover common threads, shared understandings, and mutual sympathies among individuals within a complex society. Virani actively involves community members in the creative process, granting them a sense of ownership and belonging in the artistic journey. This approach activates art's transformative potential, using it as a tool to transcend boundaries and spark meaningful conversations.
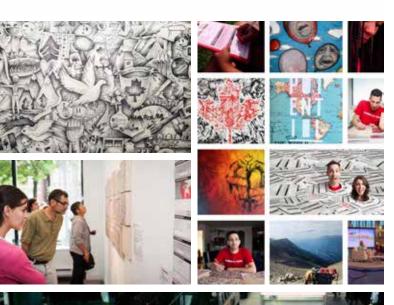
"50 Years of Ismaili Migration," a travelling community storytelling exhibition, created in collaboration with the Aga Khan Council for Canada, which debuted at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Artist Aquil Virani.

One of Virani's notable projects, *Canada's Self Portrait* (2016), illustrates his commitment to creating art that fosters community dialogue and understanding. In this project, Virani engaged over eight hundred participants from Canada's thirteen provinces and territories to create a collective portrait of the country. Beyond depicting a "Canadian face," this initiative intended to showcase the rich tapestry of diverse identities and experiences that constitute Canadian identity. *Canada's Self Portrait* resonated with audiences from various backgrounds, capturing the attention of the press and media.

> **The project's ability to transcend cultural boundaries, evoke emotions, and initiate conversations about multiculturalism, diaspora, and citizenship made it a significant milestone in Virani's artistic journey.**

One can connect his work with other artists who explore similar themes from different perspectives to understand better the impact of Virani's community art projects. Mass Arrival, a collective of migrant women of colour who are artists and professionals – including Farrah Miranda (artist), Graciela Flores-Mendez (legal worker), Tings Chak (artist-architect), Vino Shanmuganathan (immigration lawyer), Nadia Saad (social worker) – offers a compelling viewpoint on multiculturalism. Their eponymous project, *Mass Arrival* (2013), focused on a recent history of Tamil migrants arriving in Canada and sought to revisit questions akin to those explored in Virani's *Canada's Self Portrait* project. The collective employed street theatre, public spectacle, and community organizing to commemorate the third anniversary of freighter ships carrying Tamil immigrants that arrived on the coast of British Columbia in 2009 and 2010.

In their re-enactment, hundreds of white-identified allies gathered outside Toronto's Hudson Bay Company store and barricaded themselves with a satirical canvas replica of the ship MV Sun Sea. The project challenged the dominant narratives associated with "mass arrival," which often evoke images of dark-skinned invaders in rusty freighter ships violating Canadian borders. Their work delved into themes of visibility and invisibility, historical erasure, and assertions of belonging. The project posed a fundamental question: Who has the moral legitimacy to decide who belongs in the settler colonial nation-state? While some arrivals are celebrated as the foundation of national creation stories, others are met with fear, hysteria, and tightened border control. Virani's and Mass Arrival's projects aimed to provide concrete profiles that underscored the complex issues surrounding multiculturalism in Canada. However, while Virani focused on collaborating with specific marginalized groups, Mass Arrival's critical lens sheds light on broader issues from a different perspective.

January 29 (2022), one of Virani's most poignant projects, is a robust response to a tragic event that unfolded on January 29, 2017, when six Muslim men were brutally murdered at the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec in Quebec City. This project, supported by the Silk Road Institute, a Montreal-based Muslim arts organization, along with charitable organization TakingITGlobal and the Government of Canada, features six large-scale portraits of the victims. As a direct commemoration of the horrific event, the project features portraits depicting the men in stoic poses reminiscent of the community.

The stark contrast between the black-and-white portraits and the vibrant geometric backgrounds featuring Islamic mosaic motifs symbolizes the community's resilience in the face of such atrocities.

January 29 serves as a remembrance, a reflection, and a call to action, urging viewers to contemplate the lives lost and the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim-Canadian citizens. The project highlights the gaps in understanding and the apathy between different segments of Canadian society. It exemplifies how art can be a powerful tool for healing and bridging divides within a community.

To further explore the impact of community-based art projects, we can draw parallels with Syrus Marcus Ware's *Activist Portrait Series* (2016—ongoing). Ware, a Canadian artist and activist, creates larger-than-life portrait drawings that honour activists from various communities, including Black, Indigenous, Queer and Trans, and Disability communities. Ware's art calls for a considerable level of appreciation from viewers. His drawings, some as tall as ten feet, command a monumental presence in their exhibited spaces. This presence draws viewers in, inviting them to engage with the subjects and inquire about their stories. Ware's work bridges the historical portraits of aristocrats and social elites often discussed in Western art history classes and the present-day activists who shape our society.

> **Virani's and Ware's projects demand attention and respect for subjects who often go unnoticed or underappreciated in mainstream discourse. They create art that becomes a part of the history of the present, capturing the essence of contemporary struggles and activism.**

Virani's project *January 29* also includes a documentary by filmmaker Adrijan Assoufi, providing insights into Virani's creative process. In the film, the artist is seen visiting culturally and politically significant places in Quebec City; the artist unrolls the portraits and proudly exhibits the men

in locations that could have been hostile to them. This strategy aligns with Mass Arrival's demonstration of human bodies *en masse* to create an intervention in public space. Both projects attempt to disrupt the status quo, challenging how Western society moves through and past news about marginalized communities.
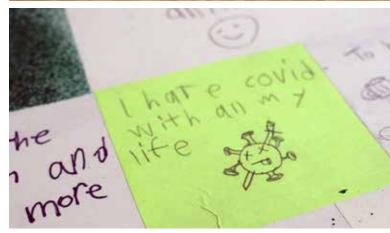
The community art projects from Virani exemplify the transformative power of art within communities. His multicultural background, personal experiences, and intentional engagement with communities allow him to create art that forges intimate connections, transcends boundaries, evokes emotions, and initiates meaningful conversations.

> **Virani's projects go beyond mere artistic expression; they inspire change, empower community values, and provide transformative experiences for individuals.**

By placing Virani's work in context with other artists' practices, such as Mass Arrival and Syrus Marcus Ware, we gain a deeper appreciation for how community art challenges conventional perceptions of multiculturalism and fosters empathy and understanding among Canada's diverse communities. Virani, Mass Arrival, and Ware are all catalysts for change, using their art to bridge gaps and create a sense of belonging among marginalized communities. Virani's commitment to creating art that connects, inspires, and transforms is a testament to art's enduring and transformative power within communities.
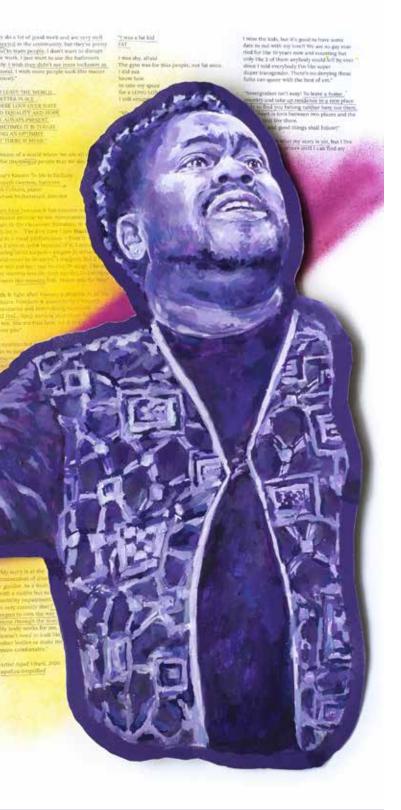
> **Through his work, he not only celebrates the vibrant tapestry of multiculturalism, but also confronts the complex issues that arise within this diversity.**

"Things will get better" in collaboration with the ROM (formerly Royal Ontario Museum) where attendees of #MyPandemicStory exhibit completed sticky notes about early pandemic anxieties. Artist Aquil Virani.

"What stories are worth amplifying? (Kenneth Overton: We Belong)" in collaboration with Toronto-based Amplified Opera. Artist Aquil Virani.

Tak Pham (he/him) is a Vietnamese contemporary art curator and writer. He is currently curator of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at the Alberta University of the Arts in Calgary, Alberta, Treaty 7 territory. He was formerly associate curator at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory.

Pham holds an M.F.A in Criticism and Curatorial Practice from OCAD University and a B.A. Hons. from Carleton University. He has curated exhibitions and organized curatorial projects for the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Contemporary Calgary, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Varley Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, and Nuit Blanche Toronto, among others. His writings and reviews have appeared in Canadian Art, C Magazine, ESPACE art actuel, esse arts + opinions, GalleriesWest, Studio Magazine, ArtAsiaPacific and Hyperallergic.

In 2023, Pham was awarded the Hnatyshyn Foundation-Fogo Island Arts Young Curator Residency. Pham's curatorial projects have been featured on Canadian Art, Akimbo, Artoronto.ca, Blouin Artinfo, CBC Arts, Cultre Magazine, Leader Post Regina, The Prairie Dog and NOW Toronto. **Learn more at takpham.com.**
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Aquil Virani (he/him) is an award-winning visual artist, graphic designer and filmmaker who often integrates public participation into his community-engaged art projects.

Honoured as the "Artist for Peace" in 2018 by the Quebec-based artist collective "Les artistes pour la paix," Virani is grateful for financial support received from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada, the Ontario Arts Council, the Toronto Arts Council, the City of Ottawa, the Silk Road Institute, and the Michaelle Jean Foundation among others. Newly based in Tkaronto (Toronto), his creative projects have been exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, Peel Art Gallery and Museum Archives, the Aga Khan Museum, OCAD U, Stewart Hall Art Gallery, the Toronto Reference Library, the Musée des beaux-arts de Mont-Saint-Hilaire and numerous other public places and community spaces throughout Canada and North America.

Learn more at **aquil.ca**