

FUSE

MAGAZINE

Vol. XVIII No.1

1287
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South Asian Art in the West

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Hair of the Dog?

Perspectives on Artists of South Asian

Descent in Britain by Sonali Fernando



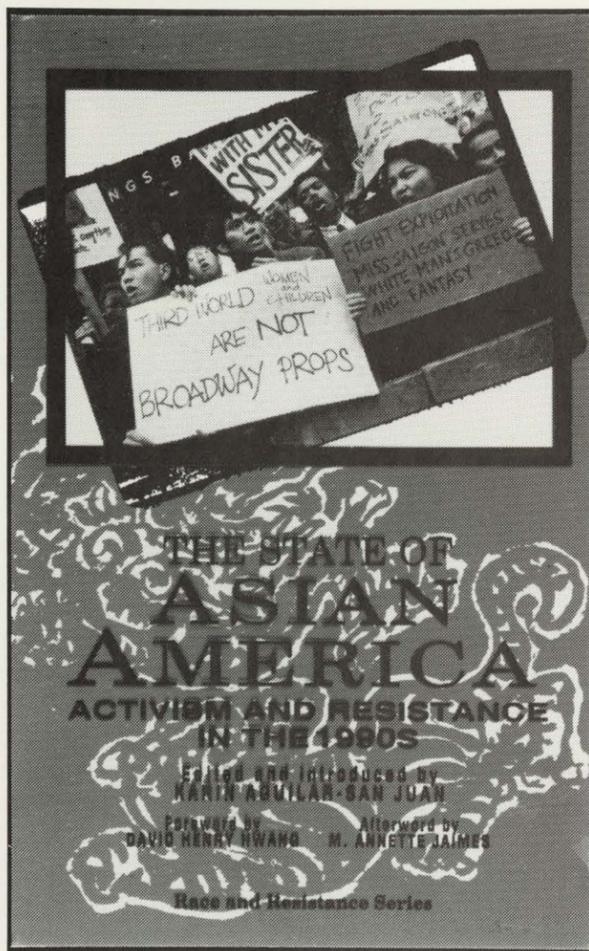
Race, Power, and Protest

The State of Asian America Activism and Resistance in the 1990s

Edited by Karin Aguilar-San Juan

Foreword by David Henry Hwang

Afterword by M. Annette Jaimes



This groundbreaking collection of essays gives voice to contemporary Asian American activism, offering thoughtful, radical analyses on a range of pressing issues, including: the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, the protest against the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*, anti-Asian and domestic violence, feminism, neo-conservatism, art and politics, the social construction of race, and the politics of Asian American Studies.

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—Karin Aguilar-San Juan,
from the Introduction

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—Utne Reader

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In Memoriam

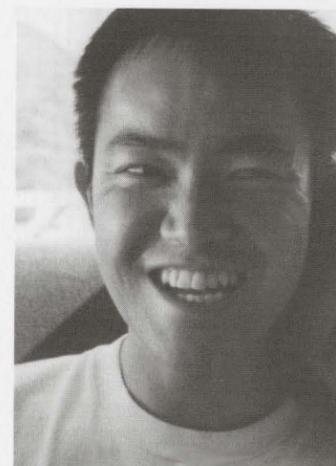
Lloyd Wong

Lloyd Wong died of AIDS-related complications on September 18. Over the past few years, Lloyd played a significant role in virtually every aspect of *Fuse*, as a writer, editor, administrator and, ultimately, a member of the Board of Directors.

Our survival and growth owes much to Lloyd, who, in taking over the vacated administrator's position on short notice in 1991, rescued the magazine from financial disaster. He oversaw our most successful direct-mail campaign (his fashion and marketing savvy also led to the *Fuse* black T designed by Victoria Scott). In 1992, with Darien Taylor, he co-edited one of our most timely and incisive issues, "Living with HIV." Lloyd had been against doing an "AIDS" issue as many publications had done, preferring to focus on those, like himself, who were living with the virus, active in their work and communities, and committed to fighting government indifference and media stereotypes. The issue was controversial even before it appeared: our printer refused to reproduce an artists' project that included an image of anal sex. Lloyd cancelled our contract and from then on kept a copy of the image tacked above his desk as a sort of litmus test for incoming writers and staff.

I first met Lloyd in 1990 when we were both hosting CKLN's "Frameline" and persuaded him to come to an editorial meeting. He began coming to meetings on a regular basis but steadfastly maintained that he was "too busy" to join the board. Soon, though (aren't artist-run organizations like that?), he was on the masthead and involved up to his ears. But this was perhaps typical: over the years Lloyd worked and volunteered with an incredible number of organizations in Toronto, among them *The Body Politic*, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers (LIFT), the Euclid Theatre, the Toronto Board of Education, YYZ Artists Outlet, the Cross Cultural Communications Centre and the Gay Asian AIDS Project. In 1992, as his health declined, he left his position with *Fuse* (although he continued to write and edit) and began personal projects in film, video and performance. He performed at A Space last fall and, after years of garnering grants for others, he received one of his own to complete a video. One can only speculate what other great things were to come: Lloyd was only twenty-nine when he passed away. His energy, vitality and sense of humour will be sorely missed.

—Susan Kealey



FUSE

M A G A Z I N E

VOL. XVIII NO. 1

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November 16 - December 17

Heather Nicol

installation
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Naked State

A selected view
of Toronto art

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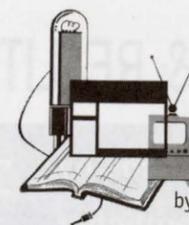
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by Karen Tisch

Film and Video News

Great Scott!

Jay Scott was arguably Canada's finest film critic. His premature death in 1993 (due to AIDS-related causes) was greatly felt among filmmakers and filmgoers alike. Known for his sharp wit and intelligence—and his sometimes acerbic tongue—Scott took arts journalism to new heights, leaving behind a rare body of film writing. With the recent publication of *Great Scott!* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 125 of Scott's most memorable reviews are now available in one volume. Written during his fifteen-year tenure as film critic for *The Globe and Mail* (and selected by his editor, Karen York), the reviews trace some of the high (*Marianne and Juliane, Jesus of Montreal*) and low (*Fatal Attraction, Basic Instinct*) points of mainstream and alternative film production from the years 1978 to 1993. Proceeds from the sale of the book will go to CANFAR (Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research) in memory of Jay Scott.

Aboriginal Visions

The voices and struggles of Aboriginal peoples are honoured in two powerful new Canadian documentaries. *Hands of History*, directed by veteran Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd, weaves together the art and lives of four First Nations women

artists: carver Doreen Jensen, weaver Rena Bolton and mixed-media artists Jane Ash Poitras and Joanne Cardinal-Schubert. Beautifully crafted, the film celebrates a legacy of art practice that has survived through the ages yet never been properly recognized in this nation's history books. *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, a first feature by Ali Kazimi, takes us to central India where the construction of a dam threatens to displace countless tribal peoples from their ancestral lands. The film dramatically documents a 200-kilometre march that united 6,000 activists in a nonviolent struggle to force the Indian government and the World Bank to reassess the human and environmental ramifications of their misguided mega-project. Both films were premiered in the Perspective Canada series at the Toronto International Film Festival and are now available from their respective distributors, the National Film Board and Full Frame Distribution.

Film Knight

A message for all those hard-working but seemingly underappreciated Canadian film/video programmers: there is hope for recognition yet. In a recent Toronto reception, James Quandt, the director of programming for Cinematheque Ontario, was honoured with a rare distinction:

he was knighted and made a chevalier of the French Order of Arts and Letters. Quandt, one of two Anglo-Canadians to receive this honour in 1994 (the other was Margaret Atwood), was recognized for his work in promoting and exhibiting French cinema in Canada. Congratulations James Quandt, Canada's first film knight.

Ship Off Your Shameless Shorts

Lifestyle Television, one of Canada's new specialty cable channels, is devoted to quality programming for, by and about women. The channel is currently seeking short films and videos by Canadian and international directors for their "Shameless Shorts" series, which will begin airing in January 1995. Broadcast three nights a week with programs repeated on the weekend, "Shameless Shorts" will "showcase work created by women or work which portrays women's perspectives, stories or interests." All genres are eligible, including drama, animation, documentary and experimental, with a preference for works under fifteen minutes. In light of the limited distribution avenues for short films and videos in this country, independent film and video artists are urged to take advantage of this rare exhibi-

tion possibility and send their preview tapes to:

Laura Micalchysyn,
Programming Coordinator
Lifestyle Television
P.O. Box 158
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3H 0Z5

The Fruit Machine

This fall, the Cinematheque Ontario will celebrate queer cinema in style with *The Fruit Machine: A Retrospective of Film and Video by Canadian Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals (1957-1994)*. Guest curated by writer/Concordia film professor Thomas Waugh, the series brings together the "insider visions" of over 80 Queer film and video producers. What's on the programme? Definitely not "homogeneity." Avoiding predictable programming strategies and undue categorizations, Waugh combines "naughty and spontaneous video" with "expensive and deliberate film," works by men and women, the old and the new, to create fourteen dynamic programmes illustrating why Canadian Queer cinema is "among the most imaginative, impassioned and envied in the world." The series runs from November 25 to December 8 at the Art Gallery of Ontario's Jackman Hall, and because individual titles and artists are too numerous to mention here, interested parties should contact the Cinematheque at (416) 923-FILM for complete programme listings.

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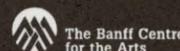
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Frederick Case, Principal of New College, U of T

Rights of Passage

Struggles for Lesbian & Gay Legal Equality

by Didi Herman / \$19.95 paper, \$55.00 cloth

'**Didi Herman's book** highlights a crucial dilemma for minority groups in general, and lesbians and gay men in particular: how to move from the exhilaration of group affirmation and identity into the mainstream of citizenship claims and rights. Her careful and meticulous but passionate study commemorates a vital moment in the discourse of rights – but also illuminates an important 'rite of passage' for the lesbian and gay community: a movement from the periphery to the centre of contemporary moral politics.

Jeffrey Weeks, author of *Sexuality and Its Discontents and Against Nature*

University
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Press

Rites of Privacy A Christopher Lefler Update

Saskatoon—It was a simple spring wedding. The invitation was discreet: pink photocopy paper with traditional Gothic lettering. Like a bill from a one-person play, it read "The University of Saskatchewan in conjunction with Christopher Lefler presents *the Wedding: Closet*, a community play about public rituals of sexual orientation discretion in the name of the Father ecstasy of the heterosexual invisible violence of the Closet refusal of entry and the thresholds of marginalization." Inside the mock invitation, the parody continues as Lefler writes, "we are gathered here today in the hallowed halls of the College of Agriculture to witness the union of Christopher Andrew Earle Lefler of Positively Queer, Saskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan in unholy patrimony."

The "closet drama" of artist/activist Christopher Lefler, first presented in *Fuse* last spring, has seen its cast of characters grow substantially since the early days of November 1993 when Lefler's small black binder was removed from a University of Saskatchewan student art exhibition for its allegedly libelous content. The binder contained an impassioned Valentine's Day letter from Lefler to Saskatchewan's Lieutenant-Governor, Sylvia Fedoruk, asking her why she had been silent on homophobia in the Saskatchewan government when she herself, he declared, is a lesbian and constitutional head of state. The binder also contained Fedoruk's terse and predictably evasive

response, critical of Lefler's "misguided comments," while claiming that as Lieutenant-Governor, she was "probably more constrained than any other citizen of Saskatchewan." According to Lefler, everyone, including those who benefit directly from positions of power and are closeted, must take responsibility for official and societal homophobia.

The cruel irony is that Lefler has been protesting through his art against a silence that has passively and actively sanctioned both inaction with respect to AIDS and the persecution of gays and lesbians in a province that once encouraged grassroots activism—the birthplace of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The "constraint" Fedoruk allegedly experiences is perhaps better phrased as a double-bind; Fedoruk, a financially supporting member of the province's Progressive Conservative Party, watched and did nothing as Grant Devine's right-wing government willfully ignored the alarm sounded in the early '80s in what is now being revealed by the Krever Commission into HIV-infected blood as just the sort of scandal Lefler is critiquing.

The links between players and contexts in this "community play" have become ever more complex the longer Lefler refuses to maintain the expected polite silence. Fedoruk, for instance, is also a benefactor of the University of Saskatchewan and thus has obvious stakes in her public image as well as

that of the university. Lefler alleges that Fedoruk values her "right to privacy" more than his right to an open and equitable grievance procedure, by remaining silent while he is publicly reviled by university academics, open-line hosts, news reporters, and more conservative lesbians and gays who don't realize Lefler is calling the bluff on a virulent charade that is killing people. All too often, the defence of Sylvia Fedoruk has been motivated by a tacit public refusal to acknowledge what is considered a "properly" private matter—a matter that many feel is in contradiction to what constitutes an "outstanding citizen." Almost without exception, Lefler has been characterized as a thoughtless terrorist, and an attention-seeking prankster out to destroy the lives of "decent ladies" like the Lieutenant-Governor. "Decency," of course, is an antonym for "lesbian."

And so, after having been barred from the university grounds and denied his scholarship, Lefler languished for months while a disciplinary hearing was set, delayed and finally rescheduled for May 1994 to deal with what had become a public relations nightmare for the University of Saskatchewan.

During this time, Lefler formulated his piece *The Wedding: Closet* as a response to the ongoing and paradoxical series of events he had been forced to engage with. Lefler locates his art practice at crisis points that are site and event specific. Shunning the reified art object, Lefler creates work that is a hybrid of performance art, installation and story-telling, intending to irritate points of crisis and reveal how power is deployed between groups and individuals. In the case of *The Wedding: Closet*, art does not merely imitate life; it is life, since this piece was staged imme-

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Wearing only a Silence=Death t-shirt, white briefs and pink platform Fluevogs, Lefler marched slowly down the corridor to the hearing room, dragging a "closet" on wheels that he had equipped with small speakers, out of which blared Mendelsohn's Wedding March.

diately before and after his actual closed-door hearing.

Wearing only a Silence=Death t-shirt, white briefs and pink platform Fluevogs, Lefler marched slowly down the corridor to the hearing room, dragging a "closet" on wheels that he had equipped with small speakers, out of which blared Mendelsohn's Wedding March. Bystanders became bit players in a drama that Lefler claims is owned by everyone because it affects everyone. The "security guards," doubling as bridesmaids, carried his long train with one hand, walkie-talkies with the other. Flanked by CBC and CTV camera crews filling in as wedding photographers, Lefler made his way into the hearing room for the three-hour session that resulted, finally, in his formal expulsion from the University of Saskatchewan and the termination of his scholarship.

With no honeymoon and his MFA at the University of Saskatchewan squelched, Lefler was left once again to a hand-to-mouth existence on the dole, as he pursued other avenues that would enable him to finish his Master's work. Lefler eventually submitted a proposal to the Saskatchewan Arts Board in the hopes of securing a grant to complete his project. The board, which is comprised of members representative of several disciplines, approved his ap-

proximately \$10,000 grant to complete his activist work on the concepts and practices of "outing" and homophobia.

But no such luck. Sylvia Fedoruk's cohorts in the PC opposition got wind of the award and raised the issue in the Legislature on May 17, calling on minister of culture, Carol Carson, to formally intervene in the autonomy of the arts board by forcing the withdrawal of the \$10,000 grant. When questioned in the legislature by the PC opposition leader Rick Swenson, Carson defended the autonomy of the board, citing that in its fifty-year history, no government had ever interfered in its peer adjudication process. Only two days later, however, Carson completely reversed her position and, in an unprecedented move, demanded that the Board "reconsider" Lefler's application. Art censorship held sway, and Lefler's award was revoked.

As former Saskatchewan Arts Board member George Glen said in the letter of resignation he made as a result of Carson's PC-prompted interference into the operations of the Board: "[Carson] will be perceived...as having overstepped [her] responsibility, thus calling into question the arm's-length relationship between the government and the Board." Verne Clemence, arts writer for the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix*, seconded Glen's concerns in an article

published only days later. He asked, "What if it was a grant for a book mean-mouthing the NDP? What if it was a sculpture of a CCF hero that someone in the party found distasteful? Is public support only for things defined as politically correct by the governing party?"

Curious thing, Clemence concluded, that the only right many people want to extend gays and lesbians is the right to privacy. And this, of course, is the fault line on which Lefler situates his artistic practice, in the contentious, anxious space of that liberal humanist construct called "privacy." Doubly curious, of course, that heterosexual celebrities who violate official monogamy are not accorded this same "right to privacy" by a public and press intent on perpetuating unexamined double standards. Curious thing, furthermore, that the Krever Commission is given official power to point fingers at provincial governments like those of Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, while Christopher Lefler, working in a different medium, is subjected to a greater public accountability than are governments, and is prevented from doing the same.

While the drama continues, with or without his instigation, Lefler's ring-bound collection of secrets is growing—binders that tell a story of deceit, of fear, of homophobia. He hopes that these letters, news articles, memoranda and video footage will soon be displayed in an installation that recounts a story in which anyone within earshot plays a role. But such an exposure of complex lines of power, privilege and culpability make these simple printed

words subject to the same censorship Lefler encountered almost a year ago, when the little black binder at a small university gallery created a breach effects the effects of which no one, including Lefler himself, could have predicted.

—Bryan K. Young and Brett Grubusic

Bryan Young has dedicated his recently finished MA thesis on Herman Melville to Christopher Lefler and Sylvia Fedoruk.

SAW

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Dear reader
... a reminder

Don't forget to fill out last
issue's reader survey.
We'd really appreciate it!

Fuse's next
Writer's Reserve
deadline
is January 13, 1995

Beyond Destination, Beyond Identity

Atif Ghani interviews curator and
writer Ian Rashid

As a video exhibition featuring work by South Asian artists, "Beyond Destination" is a bold and imaginative contribution to on-going debates about the meaning of the term "South Asian." Commissioned by the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, the exhibition is touring internationally, most recently exhibiting at Toronto's YZ Artist's Space in conjunction with the Desh Pardesh Festival, and Victoria's X-Changes Gallery with the support of Open Space and the Mind Cultures Conference. A single channel video package has also become available for screenings. Atif Ghani recently spoke with the exhibition curator Ian Iqbal Rashid.

AG: One of the ways I read the exhibition was with a sense of extended contradiction and tension. The desire to settle or fix the notion of a South Asian identity was being actively challenged—we had twelve different pieces that were travelling on twelve different formal trajectories. Was this a conscious strategy?

IR: No, the scheme evolved sort of organically. The exhibition was commissioned by the Ikon Gallery as part of a large South Asian visual arts in the West Midlands. The idea of a South Asian identity was being offered as an undisputed, settled category. The Ikon, and in particular the exhibition orga-

nizer there at the time, Angela Kingston, was interested in putting on an exhibition that tried to problematize that assumption, or at least complicate it somehow. We put out a call for submissions, both for existing work and for proposals towards two new commissions. What turned up was a very rich range of work adopting different formal strategies, from artists of very different backgrounds. A lot of the submissions were concerned with journeying and that became the loose thematic behind the exhibition. But on another level the pieces, which ranged from discursive, documentary projects to abstract ambient pieces, to short narrative videos, also served to dis-

prove the notion of a homogenous South Asian aesthetic or identity or art practice. So rejecting the idea of arrival as being the most important aspect of journey married quite well with disputing the notion of an identity of a kind of essentialist, "goal-oriented" cultural project.

AG: It's interesting, because South Asian-ness then becomes a question of perspective that requires context. In each of the pieces in "Beyond Destination," what really stood for me, along with the formal film and video strategies were the representational strategies—the ways in which identity was being represented and playing with viewer expectations. And seeing it within the context of an institution like the Ikon—an "important" gallery space further complicated my experience. The notion of a museum or gallery institution of this kind, and the way that notion fixes or petrifies meaning—seemed to further the challenge that the layered, and sometimes conflicting representations of "Asian-ness."

IR: In terms of the gallery space, that did actually pose a lot of problems for us. We wanted to bring new audiences in—South Asian people, certainly. And to walk into the Ikon, which is a rather imposing institution, a temple of high seriousness... I am being facetious but you know what I mean. In spite of the valuable work that goes on inside, that really addresses the way people live their lives, the public face of a contemporary gallery can be rather threatening for the very people that the work inside often seems to want to reach. So we came up with lots of different promotional strategies. We invited popular bhangra DJs to the gallery to do a workshop. Some of the more visually

splashy videos were played on monitors in local shop windows. The Ikon created paper lunch bags with gallery information printed on it that were given to local take-away restaurants. People were eating their chicken tikka sandwiches and vegetable samosas out of Beyond Destination publicity. It's hard to feel threatened by an institution which is kindly absorbing the grease from your samosa.

And we wanted to use the appeal of video to entice people to the exhibition as much as we could. For lots of Asian communities in Birmingham, "South Asian" culture means going along to their local corner shop for their most recent Bollywood Indian film, or a pop promos from a local Bhangra band. We wanted to exploit that familiarity and create a space within the gallery where people could select and watch the videos of their choice. Gallery visitors were given information about the individual videos and had access to a number of monitors with headphones to view the work. Other than the installations which were "on" continuously, the controls of the exhibitions—what was screened—was in the hands of the viewer. There's always a problem with showing single-channel video work in galleries. It fills the space in a rather awkward way and people are struck with whatever video piece is on the monitor when they arrive. This way of presenting the work seemed friendlier. Hopefully, it transformed the institution to meet that needs of the audience we were targeting for this exhibition. As a result, the Ikon had a lot of first-time visitors.

I was visiting the gallery while the exhibition was on, I had the chance to talk to visitors as they were writing in the comments book. Just to the ones

making nice comments, I should add—I pretended that I was a punter to the others. A lot of people wrote that while they enjoyed the exhibition, it wasn't what they had expected. I think that what was expected was a kind of nostalgia experience of the sub-continent which this exhibition was determined not to prove. We wanted to clearly state that someone in India is Indian, and that South Asian is a term for those of us living in the West who, out of necessity, require another point of reference. Although the work, and other South Asian lives are, I think, modulated by the Indias and Pakistans and so on of our imaginations and memories, we are living somewhere else and on completely different terms. It's those terms that are being addressed and negotiated in the work and in the writings that was published in the exhibition catalogue. Those terms that set the agenda and provide the context that you were talking about.

AG: If you are suggesting that South Asian is a Western construction, the question that then needs to be asked is what is our role as South Asians living in the West, in constructing these representations? Is "Beyond Destination" reflecting a social construction of South Asian-ness that already exists in the West, or is "Beyond Destination" actually attempting to transcend existing Western definitions of South Asian-ness?

IR: I would like to think the exhibition does both things. Out of necessity. One thing that we have to remember is that those definitions of South Asian-ness, the kind of representations offered in "Beyond Destination" haven't been out there all that long. I think



Still from *Monsoon*, Maya Chowdhry, 16 mm/video, 1993.

most of the constructions that do exist are dressed up in a kind of Orientalism or essentialist notion of what is South Asian. A definition of ourselves that deviates from that is a relatively new thing, so I would say that it does both challenge existing definitions as well as establish for the first time plausible, open-ended representations of our lives.

And yes, going back to the first part of the question, I do think that South Asian is most useful in the West, as a way for us to organize, and to build communities—in the same way that "Black" works in Britain or, "person of colour" does in North America. I wouldn't call a Nigerian woman living in Nigeria a woman of colour. She doesn't require that particular reference point in her world, just as a Pakistani or Indian wouldn't. We do require it—if

for no other reason than as an antidote to "Paki."

AG: The collection of work presents a new generation of Canadian, American and British artists grappling with what it means to be Canadian, American and British. And simultaneously, a reflection of the fact that we have moved on, that we can construct new identities of our own in the spaces that we presently occupy. In that way, participate in the Western construction of the idea of South Asian.

IR: It's interesting how the world is collapsing into itself culturally on one hand and becoming so highly ethnically and nationalistic on another. The West has had a cultural presence in Third World countries and now its clearly visible the other way around.

Africa and Asia and other places are signposted all over the West's cultural landscape. Gayatri Gopinath is writing about the influence of bhangra in India. Cultural forms of language are traveling and doubling back on themselves, and being offered back to what might be crudely called their sources. The notion of the diasporic culture opposing a kind of "pure" culture cannot hold true—although it never really could. Where was a culture ever less pure than in India with its history of invasions, languages and religions? One of the problems that immediately becomes apparent to me as a result is the position of diasporic Asians in Said's Occident-Orient equation. Is the offer of consumptions available to a new consumer? Is an Orientalist gaze being appropriated by diasporic South Asian? What kind of power is offered to folks



Still from *Latifah and Himli's Nomadic Uncle*,
Alnoor Dewshi, 16mm, 1992.

like you and me? How does the equation change?

AG: One of the things which resonated with me personally from the exhibition and catalogue essays was the attempt at constructing these imaginary homes that provide us with peace of mind. Not a piece of space, per se, but a "piece" of mind where we can hope that in this imaginary space things work differently. And maybe draw on that for inspiration. But we recognize that our positions and our roles are very much limited to the real spaces we occupy in the here-and-now. For me, "Beyond Destination" clearly signifies a new generation of South Asians within the Western world, one that is grappling with notions of race, ethnicity and identity, but through very different mediums and very different points of references than those of our parents.

IR: I think *Beyond Destination* is offering something else as well. Himani Bannerji writes in her catalogue essay of how life in the West is as real as any other, more real to our generation than our parents' nostalgia in many ways, and there is not much point in saying that one doesn't belong. The problem lies in assuming that with home comes a happy positivity—in spite of knowing the pain that lies for many of us in our familial homes.

And also how in the face of racism which remains immutable, there are a great deal of people of our generation who have never spoken a language other than English, who have never seen India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka...

AG: Who have never set foot out of Birmingham or Toronto...

IR: Exactly, this very generation is clinging to fragments of nostalgia as signifiers of their sense of source—their true selves. They're assembling old photographs and religious rituals and Hindi film songs to create a body of meaning for themselves, and of this sense of difference that they have only experienced as something degrading. What we have as a result is a harking back to tradition that becomes rigid, fundamentally traditional or religious but based only on fragments as Himani wrote, a whole cloth: also imaginary.

AG: A binding thread that really comes across in *Beyond Destination* is twelve attempts at imagining something and somewhere else. An attempt at imagining new spaces. An attempt at imagining new ways of imagining. Where the goal is not to find the truth, the goal is not to find the right place, but to begin the task of constructing new social spaces.

IR: Space and place are the two operative concerns in a lot of the work. One of the things that I found really interesting with this exhibition is this way of looking around and drawing from ones environment to define identity, as opposing to a kind of a historical-archaeological project, diving into the past to find the essential sense. *Latifa And Himli* hang out against the various backdrops that London offers as a means of offering us representations of their identity. In *Fatima's Letter*, the protagonist finds a kind of home in the London Underground that is depicted as a frightening, disorienting landscape of light and shadow. This is an expression of her sense of sense.

AG: On one hand you have this internationalizing of South Asian-ness with

work from Canada, Britain and the United States and on the other you have the specific economies of culture, identity and politics that these artists are grappling with nationally and locally. What do you imagine the response will be like from audiences from other parts of the world?

IR: I don't know. The exhibition is travelling quite a bit. It will be in Australia at the end of the year and perhaps be shown in Japan. I don't have a clue what audiences there will make of it. But in Canada and the States, I think that the work by the Canadians and the Americans will be read in ways that they haven't in Britain and vice versa. I find it interesting that none of the British reviews of Shani Mootoo's *Wild Women In The Woods* have touched on how it has adopted and played with the classic Canadian theme of "survival" in the wilderness. I think that in Canada that would be immediately picked up on. Tanya Syed's *Salamander*, which pays a kind of homage to south London, will have a particular resonance for people who know that part of the city. Indu Krishna's *Knowing Her Place* operated at the level of self examination, as scrutiny in a kind of therapy way which is so identifiably American and very New York. That aspect of the work has made the protagonist in the tape unsympathetic here in a way that didn't happen in the States. It plays very differently here—it becomes, in fact, more interesting. I would love to see all of the work travel through the subcontinent—to see the different responses it might play there.

AG: The other thing that struck me about the exhibition is something I term "multicultural realities"—the realities of this postcolonial Western world

that we as South Asians inhabit. The real grappling with notions of cultural difference, a real grappling with occupying two spaces simultaneously, which you get regularly in all the work. Khaled Hakim's *When I Was Just A Little Girl* recognizes that the audience lives in juxtaposed cultural spaces and offers us those opposing contexts within the one text. What emerges is a recognition that this separation between different "cultures" is very much a false separation, very much an ideological separation that has no natural or primordial claim to truth.

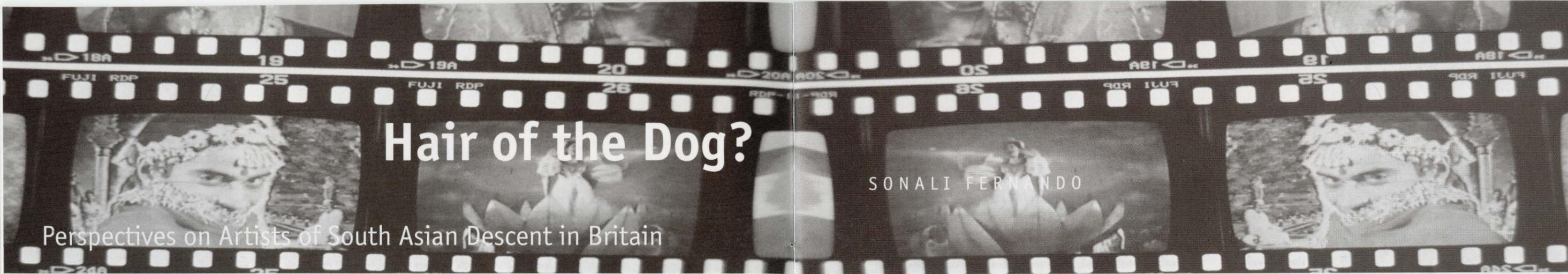
Yet the key practical political problem with all of this is the question of responsibility. In opening up, and allowing us to be free of any settled space, we can somehow slip out of the role of being responsible to someone. Good or bad, that has always been the burden of representation that has been placed fairly or unfairly on the shoulders of Black and Asian artists. It required that we/they grapple directly with questions of responsibility. When we free up cultural works from their specific contexts and particular points of reference, their ability to speak for, or to feed into that context becomes in a way weakened.

IR: Or assume that a context doesn't change—I think that's what becomes really dangerous. Culture changes, identity is constantly changing—like everything else they are historical constructs. But I do have a stance in terms of this notion of responsibility. Yes, the burden of representation does become tedious, particularly when tied to some essentialist notion of identity, which is what I think you were in part saying. But on the other hand what is the purpose of an exhibition like "Beyond Destination" or an event like *Desh*

Pardesh or [West Midlands] South Asian Visual Arts festival? Or of a category like "South Asian" if it isn't used as a means of organizing? While I stand by my beliefs that the category has no use as a criteria to evaluate, say, the aesthetic merits of a work, I do think that there are political use for South Asian cultural work: as a way to organize and to mobilize. Identity projects seem to serve no real purpose except as a momentary affirmation. Although this is useful, it eventually becomes kind of a dead end when it isn't housed within a larger political framework. On those terms I think that artists are required to be accountable just like any one else. "Beyond Destination" opened in Birmingham on the same day the [Neo-fascist] British National Party won their [first ever municipal] seat in the Isle of Dogs [in South London on an anti-Asian platform]. If an exhibition like "Beyond Destination," which when modified by the label South Asian and appearing in the Britain of 1993, doesn't in some way challenge that victory then I think, on a very fundamental level, it is a failure as an exhibition.

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Hair of the Dog?

Perspectives on Artists of South Asian Descent in Britain

SONALI FERNANDO

Above: film strip segments from work by Symrath Patti

SO, POSTMODERNISM HAS BEEN AND GONE, AND WITH IT other cultural movements and trends of the '80s and '90s. Good-bye identity politics, farewell second wave feminism and ciao Black Arts Movement: In artistic and intellectual milieux, these once indispensable ideologies are now considered old hat....

If a sense of interregnum exists among Black cultural producers now, it may not be entirely because these ideas have outlived themselves.¹ In a culture of metropolises enchained to the New, cratered with waste, functioning in that state of instant amnesia intrinsic to late twentieth-century capitalism, there is a tendency, even within emancipatory politics, to conform to the market's relentless braying for novelty. In the process, radical ideas are rendered obsolete before they are fully stretched or nuanced; or, they are politically lobotomized as they themselves become market commodities.

Many Black artists in Britain, who decry their continued exclusion from mainstream cultural spaces and funding while simultaneously supporting the ongoing critique of essentialism, are concerned about the hurried eclipsing of "identity politics," explorations of "ethnicity" and Black cultural alignments by a glibly conceived "New Internationalism"—which appears to have been incorporated into the arts funding structures by a simple gentlemen's agreement.² The short answer to slogans of the "socialism is dead" variety is that emancipatory movements cannot be redundant as long as the dire social need that engendered them still exists. The longer answer is itself a question, about the sleight-of-hand being wrought on popular memory by contemporary mass culture; about the commandeering of the rhetoric of the Left for the policies of the Right (as for example in the issuing of public utility shares under the slogan "power to the people," or reducing "free choice" to a spending option);³ about the workings of postmodernism itself, not as an ideological craze, but as an ambivalent sensibility that continues to haunt contemporary life.

Postmodernism, as the philosophical attack on Enlightenment certainties and the "grand narratives" that

underwrote the political, social and economic supremacy of Western "Man," held great emancipatory promise, as even postmodernism's stoutest critics agree: "the period after the modern is when the others of modernity talk back."⁴ But, in practice, to take the British example, the radical reversal/substitution morphology of postmodernism is most evident in the manoeuvres of the Right. Thus the political party that qualifies more than any other for the epithet "radical" (denoting its attack at the "roots" of British society, its destabilizing of British verities such as the post-war tradition of welfare state capitalism and the "uprooting" of the notion of society itself), is also the party that is purveying a "new" Britain pickled in heritage aspic—John Major's Britain of "invincible green suburbs," "fresh bread," "warm beer" and "spinsters cycling to church."⁵ This Tory simulation, itself quoted from a text written by George Orwell in the 1940s, lives today as a concatenation of buzz phrases from TV commercials, promising an eternal Britain of teas with the Vicar on Mr. Kipling's cakes, oven-warm Hovis and jaunts round Epping in a Vauxhall Nova.... The pre-existence of layer on layer of Little England images in the national culture ensured that this speech, and others like it, were not merely shots into the ether.⁶

The market responses of late capitalism, the flipside of postmodernism as the logic of the reconfigured Right, the orchestration of "the real" as "not only that which can be reproduced but that which is already reproduced, the hyperreal which is entirely simulation": These factors provide some of the political, cultural and semiotic coordinates for the geography in which the artists considered in this essay are working.⁷ This geography, and their cartographic ingenuity, unite them more than a straightforward common "Asianness." Alistair Raphael, Symrath Patti, Anita Kaushik and Said Adrus use entirely different source material, ranging from the medical imagery of AIDS to simulations of womanhood in cinema, from the cult of the Barbie doll to icons of nation. But one vector is constant, a desire to intervene in the proliferation of images that take no responsibility for themselves: images eviscerated from con-

text (the first pre-requisite of neo-colonial appropriation) and images that refer only to each other and not to referents in the world. Underpinning this set of concerns is a common focus on the mechanisms of power that authorize mass representation. No image is innocent, for enunciation is always produced within a specific code and a specific history, and always entails a process of selection and discarding. The appetite of these artists is therefore not only for "the world itself" but for the structures, paradigms, languages and devices through which the world is produced.

One of the tactics that they all use is that of stealing public signifiers and redeploying them—taking the public images that impact, invade, imprison and hurt, and reinforcing them, giving them even more space, so that eventually they seem, deliriously, to lash back against themselves.... But is all the borrowing and rearranging of existing material not perhaps the ploy of the victim: of the desperado, the dependent, that of she who cannot leave it, cannot create except in relation to it? Like taking alcohol to cure a hangover, is this work the hair of the dog that bit?

This essay argues rather that the artists considered here are important precisely because they push against this postmodern affliction of dependency, the kind of obsessive intertextuality denoted by Baudrillard's description of the simulacral. Their work is committed to context, in continuum with the emancipatory art created by Black artists since the '70s and before, it demands recognition of the *actual* conditions in which people live, and of the repercussions of symbols and signs on *real* people. In this sense it is part of the ongoing, counterhegemonic project of recovering the experience of oppressed groups from unrepresentability. But what distinguishes it from earlier Black work is the refusal to represent an affirmative, essential Self in response to mainstream negations. In doing this these artists have avoided one of the dangers posed by postmodern praxis—the danger that its endlessly sliding discursive mode will merely further erode identities that have always been denied anything even *approaching* full subjecthood in

Western discourse. Their works aim to destabilise all meaning, to leave open propositions within installations that invite the viewer, as *participant*, to engage in the process of reconstruction. For artists such as Alistair Raphael and Anita Kaushik, speaking fluently in the registers of postmodernism and the vocabularies of contemporary mass culture is an essential part of the recovery of agency. But theirs is a *resistant* postmodernism, one that aims to provide usable knowledge about the world by setting in dialectical motion the formal and logical inconsistencies of the materials they use, and by implicating the viewer in the production of both meaning and power. Through these artists' work the body of the participant becomes the locus of transformation, the place in which other bodies repressed by public discourse—specifically female, or Asian or gay bodies—are reincarnated and transfigured.

Unlike the generations preceding them, these artists did not come to Britain to be *Artists*. As the work and biographical details of male artists such as F.N. Souza and Avinash Chandra testify, some men were able to, and indeed came to Europe in order to, enact the fantasy of the male artist super-saturating his sexual, cultural and social impulses in new territory. This generation, however, came when young or was born here and, consequently, has grown up with—been *intimate* with—the stimuli and emphases of an age dominated by information and mass communication, cheap air travel and increased cultural colonization by the United States and Japan. For these people the notions "British culture" and "South Asian culture" both undergo major transformations. They also share a belief, deriving from their own interrogations of the role of the artist, in the importance of coupling their deconstructive art practices with reconstructive community-based work. Alongside a robust theoretical acumen and an astringent sense of artistic and political history goes an unflinching commitment to exposing the many-headed, hegemonic



late capitalist beast—a commitment which precludes any retreat into the folksy, primordial or pure.

Just as the identities of those who are ethnically South Asian and resident in Britain

are usually described according to a crude dualistic model, (in which the term "British Asian" can readily be broken down into its constituent parts), so too is the notion of "hybrid" creative output often reduced to a facile cultural equation $A+B=C$, within which images from "two different cultures" merely *agglomerate*, rather than *interact* through the syncretism of the codes from which they derive. A strategically useful and potentially subversive idea has in the process become static and politically neutralized—something of a free-ride concept, far removed from Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity as "the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity" which "makes possible the emergence of an "interstitial" agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism."⁸ It now becomes clear that hybridity is often anything but radical. The severing of image from context (meaning the signifying system that gave rise to it as much as the people who created it) the better to buy or sell it, is one of the conditions of a free market capitalism which happily pick'n'mixes cultural artifacts and ideas in ever more hybrid permutations for sale to ever more consumers, in the indefatigable battle for new markets.⁹

Meaning is enunciated within particular codes, which have their own histories of cultural use, and so for these artists commitment to "context" means semantic as well as social context. For the children of migrants however, knowledge of their parents' cultural codes is usually partial or derivative. Their skill is then in moving *laterally* from one cultural code to another; they produce meaning synchronically (by simultaneous association) as much as diachronically (by history or code). This is an associative practice, a way of working dynamically and honestly with partial cultural memory and diverse contemporary experience, rather than a linear practice that seeks to excavate or reinforce "tradition": It requires a different kind of intu-

ition. What happens is a kind of "doubling" of vision, though not one that entails dualism. One analogy is that of looking at an optical illusion: a process that involves a moment when perception suddenly reverses on itself and is radically transformed. One moves from a perception of an image to another perfectly logical, competing perception—which exists in *precisely the same format*. Between the two perceptions is that place where paradoxes are poised, or clenched, in equilibrium, where both views are simultaneously possible: This is the doubling of perception experienced by biculturals. It is in this doubled way that Anita Kaushik reconceives the Barbie doll as an Indian bride, or Symrath Patti interprets the mango, a symbol of femininity in India that, in Britain, becomes an exotic commodity.

This perceptual doubling is evident in Said Adrus' treatment of the canvas, that Holy of Holies of Western art. Just as Andy Warhol sent up Western art conventions, parodying what had become stereotypic while gleefully and hypocritically stealing their power, so Adrus pushes the boundaries of "painting" while strategically preserving elements. Look, no hands! His images are high-technology computer paintings sprayed onto canvas by gargantuan computers that he has programmed. He never stretches or frames his canvases, deliberately debunking High Art orthodoxies about form and enjoying the "practicality" of being able to roll up his paintings like scrolls to carry in his rucksack. In his early work this portability was integral to his sense of didactic urgency (as for instance in his painting based on a poem about five people who were burnt to death in a racist arson attack). In *Transition of Riches* he traces the principles of canvas (its weft, strength and response to paint) back through to hessian, sisal and jute (materials made in Africa and Asia), and returns these raw materials to their working form as sacks, stapled and dumped on the floor. In this form, the fabric becomes richly suggestive of histories and memories far removed from the European art world: of physical labour, agriculture, export, boxes covered in stitched calico at shipyards in India and Africa, swag bags, trade parcels, migrants' luggage. Elsewhere hessian is used to "frame" a canvas painting made by computer; visually the prints and the weave of the hessian coincide, the pixels of the computer images echoing the texture of the weft. Adrus' use of these materials signals, in part, the technophile's nostalgia for the raw, a romantic desire to counterpoise the complexity of his new technology with the simplicity of these old materials. But it also reflects a larger ambition shared by other artists: to

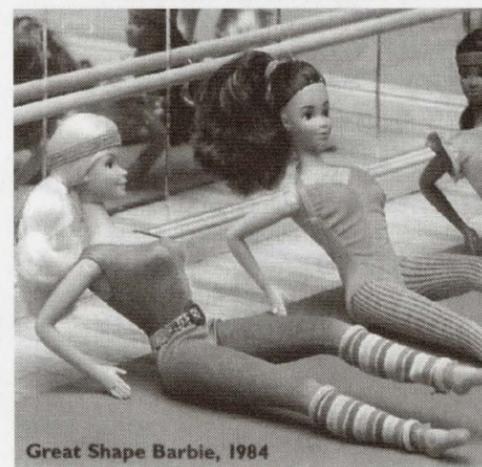
find a place for dissident migrant histories within a restructured European art.

The eruption of raw human anger manifest in graffiti has long excited Adrus, leading him to experiment with its confrontational power. But now graffiti is no longer written in his work; instead, it is spoken by voices that emerge eerily from the sacks that have been emblazoned with an image of the British crown taken from the national passport. Are these the property of the State, of transiting nationals, or have they been sequestered at Customs? A looped fragment of human voice, speaking rhythmically and slowly like a 45 rpm rap played at 33 rpm, insistently asks: "Seeing, is it believing?" The slight twist to the cliché coming to mean both "Can you ever safely trust what your eyes tell you?" and "Will you ever believe, even if it's staring you in the face?" On the wall a computer generated image of a Devil TV and a skull-headed soldier poses the same query, but now the awkward relationship it posits between humanity, commerce, migration and truth is further complicated by televisual representation.

Adrus transforms cultural icons through technology. The tabla (a British metonymy of "Indianness," being to the letter T what Saris, Samosas and Sitaras are to the letter S) in his soundtracks change from live instrument to sampled sound, digitized, communicable with other digital information: synchronic practice at an electronic level. Humorous freehand drawings of tablas produced on computers are reproduced in a variety of bright colours, their colour and lop-sidedness instantly deflating the solemnity of the instrument within Classical Indian music. The horizontal connections are what are important, Adrus contends. The tabla is relevant for many young people in Britain not through classical music but through bhangra, players such as Talvin Singh who work with reggae, rock and jazz

artists, and bands like Fun>da>Mental who deliver hard-hitting political lyrics, and combine traditional acoustic instruments with technologically sampled sounds.

Polylingual and polycultural



Great Shape Barbie, 1984

(counting German, French, Hindi, Gujerati and English among his languages), Adrus both accepts and keeps a quizzical distance from all identities: He looks, listens and muses, and regurgitates with ironic disbelief the proverbs and platitudes of Identity in his work, refusing to stabilize any identity yet creating the space in which submerged identities must be recognized. The viewer, who is also a listener, is situated between belief and mistrust, between arrival and departure, at that place, which is also a non-place, of migration and cultural change.

Synchronic entry into different codes is a feature of Anita Kaushik's raw, confrontational and edgily humorous "Barbie" series. In one installation, a life-sized Barbie doll is suspended in the middle of a room. The room is lined with "fun fur" in sharp fluorescent colours. Barbie is garlanded and bedizened like an Indian bride, while at her feet lie real flowers that have been—in a bizarre reversal of most simulations—painted and covered with glitter to look fake, and arranged in the shape of a swastika. This symbol may be a Hindu token of peace, but to Asians in Europe—and increasingly to those Indians who oppose the extremist right-wing party, Bharata Janata Parishad—the fascistic connotations of the symbol always intervene, the reading is always double. The doll is, of course, pale-skinned and blonde-haired, the ideal image of female beauty that dominates the world; but here she becomes a satire of the brutal pigmentocracy that exist in South Asian cultures, where brides are touted according to their colour, and women are exhorted to apply mercuric skin lightening creams to their faces and bodies.

Kaushik leaves a small message reading: "Please remove your shoes" outside the room. Viewers are thus enjoined to enter the space clean, in a worshipful way, as they would a temple or other hallowed site. The bride is there to be worshipped as a goddess, but she is also there to be violated and confined. Shoeless, one experiences better the crass sensuality of the room as one's feet slide on the fur's silky, anaesthetizing softness. The room is a her-



metic zone: Everything in it is synthetic, every surface is "clad." Kaushik deconstructs the structures and processes of social manipulation and control through layering: she makes heightened, absurd simulations of the means by which misogyny is normalized. Her strategies are those of excess, corrosive humour and an unsparing eye on the day-to-dayness—the *banality*—of sexual and racial contempt. The room takes on the aspect of a neurotic seduction chamber. Lined with man-made pubic hair ("fur"), it becomes a cavity of simulation, the exteriorization of "her" own sexuality as artifice and suffocation. On the walls the words CUNT and PAKI are cut in chunks of hairy graffiti, the everyday abuse with which the Indian woman, who is weirdly troped by Barbie, yet not fully present, must apparently learn to "put up or shut up."

Kaushik is awed by the ludicrous strength of emotion which this doll, this plastic incarnation of the American Dream teenager, can arouse in people.

Placed head to toe, the 60 million Barbie dolls sold by 1990 would circle the earth 3.5 times.

A Barbie doll is sold every two seconds.

More than 75 million yards of fabric have gone into making Barbie fashions.

Barbie doll is sold in Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰

By using Barbie as an image, Kaushik both acknowledges the colossal power of this contemporary icon (the word doll derives from the Greek "Eidolon", meaning "idol"), and queries who has the right to authorize the meaning of something so powerful. For her, Barbie is a signifier not of glamour but oppression, not a harmless plaything but an implement of propaganda, not a safe role model for little girls but an adult blueprint for sexualized teenhood (yet, without genitals, simultaneously de-sexed and controlled). In her inertness she is both a metaphor of, and a means of effecting, female impotence in the world, loss of speech and of freedom. When enlarged to human size, Barbie's resemblance to an inflatable doll is unmistakable.

Insisting on making work that is widely communicable, and especially interested in interaction outside the gallery, Kaushik took her six-foot doll with her to shopping malls in Peckham and Woverhampton and interviewed people for their responses. These interviews, unexpurgated (they included everything from men saying "Give me her phone number," and little girls saying "I want one,"



Painting by Anita Kaushik

to mothers raging about the degrading nature of the doll), form the soundtrack in her Woverhampton installation. The mall event was advertised by means of phone-booth cards of the kind used to advertise prostitutes' services, which were left in booths around the city. These calling cards—signs of the sexual trade in women—double as templates for a series of large (6" x 4") Barbie paintings. The connections are many: prostitutes' cards and paintings are both quadrants, both employ framing, both involve viewers and sales, both are in some sense advertisements to participate in a fantasy world. Kaushik hints that she is merely exposing a parallel that was already there, that of the art world's steady brokerage of women's bodies in its role as grand Pimp of the Simulacral. The cards, of course, are throwaway, their temporariness a product of their functionality. In translating a piece of punter's ephemera into a painting, she destabilizes precisely this valuation of Art's permanence. With a savage sense of parody, Kaushik puns in Sunday Sport mode on the word "cheeky" as the bare plastic buttocks of Barbie, lie across the frame with a male figure on the verge of spanking her. His pose makes the picture sinister, his arm stiffly raised as though in a fascist salute, an impression reinforced by the shiny leather-like texture of his body in Kaushik's painting. Barbie's face reflects consternation; it is more humanized and dark than her body, which is realized as flat planes of colour. Kaushik's work experiments with the traditions by which volume is represented in painting, playing between two- and three-dimensionality, creating the illusion of volume and simultaneously belying it with the block of flat colour underneath. This technique oscillates between the illusion of reality and the admission of artifice, highlighting paint-

ing's own status as simulation, and exposing the innate fantasy of realism.

The work links sexuality with that twentieth century social subject, the teenager, as well as to the argument that what is deemed consensual may actually be child abuse.... Its humour is belied by the menace of the subtext, which is suggestive of male violence against women (epistemic, domestic and other), and of the degradation licensed by a prevailing moral order in which "Needs firm hand" makes the assaulting of women not merely a possibility—but an imperative.

In Alistair Raphael's photographic installations, the participant is assailed by tropes of invasion, scrutiny and surveillance in their sustained exegesis of the vocabulary and imagery surrounding AIDS. Mapping biology onto buildings to revise age-old metaphysics—ideas of the infinite reproduction of the human body in macrocosm and microcosm, of skin and institutions as barriers or means of access—he asks us to take full stock of an old puzzle: Where does my skin end and yours begin?

In *Invasive Procedures* the walls of a narrow corridor are lined with row upon row of microscope slides printed with words like "Innocent," "Family," "General Population" and "Risk Group." The slides seem to refer to an objective process of observation: to "scientific investigation," the most highly prized modern discourse of truth and one that has the privilege of concealing its origins. Here the viewer is invited to blast away that illusion of anonymous objectivity by scrutinizing the words as surrogate scientist. And, through a caustic volte face, Raphael makes the use of such a vocabulary, in itself, a "high-risk" practice. The slides protrude from the walls close to the participant, like flat blades of glass, poised scalpels, they instantly sensitize the viewer to the body's vulnerability by alerting the skin to the risk of grazing and dehiscence.

In *No Entry*, Raphael plays a game of savagely ironic association, lampooning the degradation of gay male sexuality in that collection of prejudices and presumptions known as "general knowledge." A photograph of a man-hole cover is crossed with a superimposed strip image of HIV, turning the metal disc into a No Entry sign: man-hole, the point of entry to an underground system of pipes, to the sewers, entry prohibited. The man-hole becomes the point of refusal of all the specular invasions with endoscopic cameras (the "HIV" is after all a photograph) of the gay male body by the medical establishment

and of the glossy magazines that traffic in massively enlarged pictures of the virus divorced from context.

Hidden in Raphael's visual vocabulary of boundary and invasion, barrier and flooding, are the metaphors of deluge and swamping used in mass imagery to structure perceptions of both immigration ("they're flooding the country/ rivers of blood") and AIDS (the "gay plague"). The impact of Raphael's work lies in its ability to revoke such imagery by revealing other relations of power concealed in this ideological double-dealing. Images pivot on themselves: the body is invaded by the institution, and specifically the "outsider's" body (the gay man's) is invaded by the "insiders."

Though an artist working with photographs, he actually takes very few photographs himself. Most of his images are borrowed from medical journals, textbooks, anatomy books, hospitals. These are now household images, reinforced by their presence in different media: semes in the authorized language of the body. He charges himself to be utterly passionless in his use of these images—not in denial of his humanity, but because it is in this seamless, objective style that public imagery is delivered, hiding the signs of its making.

Raphael's mode is investigative. He cleaves apart culture's living structures, and, more than "deconstructions," his works are elegant biopsies of power. In the installation *Strike Gently Away From Body*, a huge 25" x 12" photopositive is laid over the slanting glass roof of a studio. The image reveals vastly magnified lungs from an anatomy book, dotted with numbers labelling the different parts. The "key" to the numbers, however, is withheld, denying the viewer access to the information she or he is obviously trying to collect. These numbers appear again at ground level, burnt into the floorboards. Sunlight plunges the shadows of the numbers down through the glass, symbolically charring the participant's skin with their forms and asserting a continuum between person and room. This linkage is also stressed by other rhymes. Surfaces are pared away to reveal inner structures: the floor with its "skin" of twenty years of paint sheared away and its grid-shaped circuitry scooped out and lined with tubing suggests the capillaries, aortas and membranes of the building, while the lungs are exfoliated down to the muscle tissue, and lit from behind as though in an X-ray box. Viewers are ineluctably involved in the process of looking at what comes to represent them. They examine themselves as the already-examined.

seen to be committed *on a man* by another man), or, as images, flogged by a movie director to a man in drag.

Patti's multivalent work enlarges a series of questions arising from observations of the gender dynamics in her own family into an iconic staging of the domain of the South Asian working woman...a domain in which, even in her own sitting-room, she is present only as a sign or a trace. Patti idiosyncratically combines different languages—cinematic, gestural, social—with a kind of bitter melancholy. She wants us to ask where in this dance of light, sound and electricity, where in the ricochet of image and meaning, where among this shabby furniture and these emblems of colonial, sexual and industrial oppression, is the real woman? While we may well try and "cherchez la femme": Great indeed is her task of producing herself, from riches so poor.

One of the hazards for Black people of the postmodern critique of the rational subject is that the endless dissolution of the self that it predicates denies agency and, as a result, vitiates the counterhegemonic project of rebuilding the identities of oppressed peoples. The repression of the real body is catastrophic; but, paradoxically, the unproblematic assertion of the repressed body is as well...for it too soon becomes a trap. These artists swing in the loop of this paradox, refusing the paralysis it might imply by creating the conditions necessary for speaking about repressed subjectivities without necessarily defining what they are. They thus create a double helix of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction, demonstrating that the two processes need not—and for marginalized people must not—be sequential.

These artists do not need to learn postmodernism as a theory; it is there in the deep structure of their lives as people who experience internal and external "othering" and marginalization within British society. As Helio Oiticica puts it: "Contrary to popular belief, the outskirts are not where the world ends—they are precisely where it unravels." They see meaning being produced not by an hallucinatory dance of the signifier to be ecstatically yielded to and celebrated (stopping short of Derridean "free play"), but by strictly *curtailed* play, limited by institutions in *real* contexts for *specific* reasons. Yet there is an optimism here, precisely because so long as play at the level of signification exists, new (emancipatory) meanings can also be authorized.

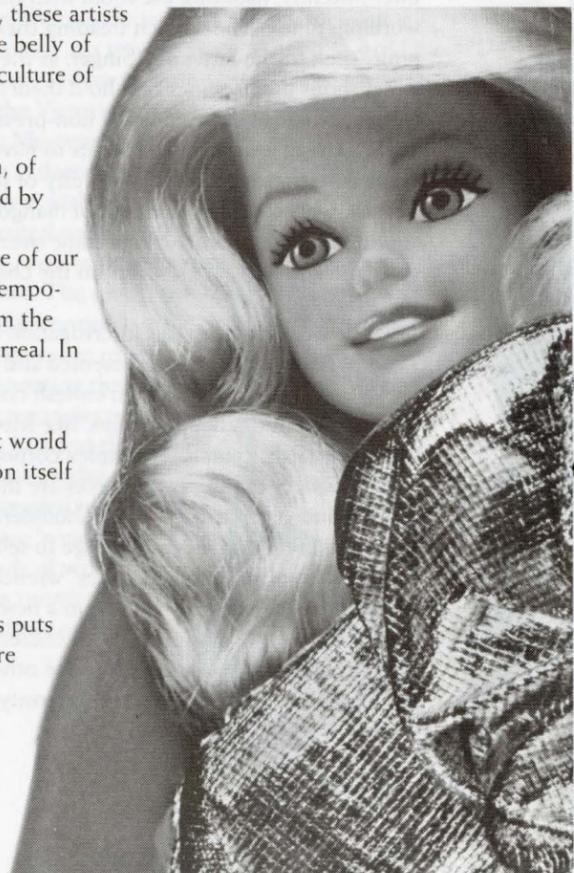
Far from the depressive, dependent, defensive practices of much postmodern art, which trips on the "narcis-

sistic melancholy" of the loss of the Self, this work allows viewers to access the possibility of social and cultural transformation.¹⁰ With their ability to move horizontally into different cultures, to function equally well in entirely different world views, these artists may pastiche, quote and recondition already existing images: but this is a culture that wastes many things—ideas, people, products, raw materials—a culture marked by premature and compulsory redundancy: in such a culture, recycling, renovation and rehabilitation may be emancipatory strategies.

There is certainly a need to recoup Black political and cultural coalitions in a creative and dynamic way from the premature obsolescence being wrought on them by the market forces—hungry for novelty and short on concentration—that operate in the art world as in other spheres of contemporary life. The process of decolonization is also still relevant, but decolonization in a Foucauldian sense, especially when the capacity of omnivorous discourses such as advertising, the mass media and politics to swallow "oppositional" discourses and regurgitate them against or despite themselves is bottomless.

The materials that these artists use are never "innocent"; neither, therefore, are their praxes. All contemporary visual languages have their own dangerous complicities.

Like many others, these artists are working in the belly of the beast. In this culture of irony worn too lightly, of gratuitous simulation, of images untenanted by meaning, their work rescues some of our most potent contemporary signifiers from the abyss of the hyperreal. In words that summarize the hopes that the art world will not close in on itself before it has met the huge challenges it has now been posed, Said Adrus puts it like this: "We are producing an



epic film together. We have not even begun to edit it: with all the work that has already been done, we are only just beginning to see the rushes."

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NOTES

¹Black is used here in one of its common British senses: As an inclusive political term embracing people of the South and their descendants primarily those of African and Asian descent, as these are the largest Southern "ethnic minorities" in Britain, rather than as an exclusive "ethnic" term. While the liberal mainstream frequently makes a distinction between "black" (meaning African descent) and "Asian" (meaning South Asian, many radical cultural practitioners question the basis of such a polarity, preferring the word "Black" (capital "B") as the sign of a vital, strategic negotiation of unity and solidarity between non-white peoples that encourages rather than proscribes differences.

²New Internationalism refers to an incipient cultural movement (if indeed it can be called that) motivated by a desire to take the exploration of cultural difference beyond the boundaries of nation-state and, in doing so, to transcend some of the illogicality, insularity, and limitation implicit in constructions like "Black British." But the justifications for New Internationalism proffered so far are inadequately theorized. If the accusation of essentialism is being levelled at local Black partnerships, there is no guarantee that so-called "international" alignments will be any less essentialist: It is not hard to see that "internationalism" courts precisely the same perils as multiculturalism (in which people are required to parade discrete and immobile identities under a supervising and controlling Caucasian Eye), only on a larger scale. Internationalism—except in Marx' aspiration—has always been the preserve of the elite in practice, and there is no guarantee that it will not simply pander to artists from a global elite (whether First or Third World) and of course, in the process, throw local ideas such as "equal opportunities" into disrepute.

One of the problems with the concept is that it posits art movements as stages along an epochal road and New Internationalism as the last stage that has exposed the fatal naiveté of the others. Another is that it has disenfranchised the process of defining itself: At £250 a head, very few practitioners were actually able to attend this year's two-day conference on New Internationalism, at which its own premises were supposedly to be debated. The democratic urges and demands implicit in Black arts movements in the 1980s seem to have been reduced to contentment with coterie art.

³Phrases from Conservative Party advertising.

⁴Kobena Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Postmodern Politics" in *Identity*.

⁵John Major, speech to the House of Commons, 1993.

⁶Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

⁷Jean Baudrillard *Simulations*.

⁸Homi Bhabha, *Critical Reflections*, 1993.

⁹The idea of "hybridity" is not without its problems: Apart from its ugliness as a model (connoting deliberate genetic manipulation, unnaturalness, things pickled in formaldehyde) its main shortcoming is that it suggests invention in opposition to a norm that remains constant, non-hybrid. It thus misses the opportunity of locating current syncretic practices within the vast, international history of cultural syncretism and leaves such an enormous field free to maintain its claim to pristineness. Such claims are often suspect; this is particularly the case with Britain and the Indian subcontinent and Africa. For these parts of non-Europe has been hybridizing European culture since before Cristobal Colón set sail "for India" in 1492, through the interactions of traders and other travellers, yet we are marking the postwar present as a distinct phase. It is logically impossible to describe what Britain is without reference to Asia, Africa and the Caribbean; it is equally inconceivable to evoke them without reference to Britain, such is their history of intimacy, so profoundly are they implicated in each other.

¹⁰"Barbie Fun Facts," press release issued by Mattel quoted in *Sindyrella Complex*, unpublished thesis by Anita Kaushik.

¹¹It is impossible to do justice to the theological niceties of the distinction between "renunciation" and "sacrifice" in this space. Suffice it to say that renunciation, a key concept of Buddhism and Hinduism, is figured as the natural shedding of desire, without purpose, without an end in sight (whether of self-mortification or apotheosis): Having understood the true nature of the universe by transcending all dualities and appreciating the interconnectedness of all beings and matter, one's cravings for success, for people, for things, will appear mistaken and inevitably fall away. In the Christian tradition, and in vulgarizations of the Eastern tradition, "sacrifice" is considered virtuous and ennobling in itself: it is conceived as a deliberate act of self-privation in order to be Good—thus it may mean truncating desires that are still present. South Asian cultural edicts about women's virtue collude with precisely this notion of "sacrifice," and by no mere coincidence: for, as in many other cultures, women in South Asia are relied upon to represent the conscience of the race, the pure axis through which culture is transmitted through the generations. "Sacrifice" may contain an element of coercion in a way that "renunciation" does not.

On ne peut pas



voir l'image

On ne peut pas voir l'image

She is five,
She is fifteen,
She is forty.
She is a boy child
a girl child
a woman.

Her defiant gaze catches the spectator
with the savvy of the veteran sex worker,
with the anger of the wilful child,
with the hurt of the erased adolescent,
with the power of a woman in control of her pleasure.

She has been abused ?
She has been loved ?
She is desiring.
She is desired.
She is ugly.
She is sexy.
She uses the image?
The image uses her ?

Whatever you say she is, she is not.

Section 163.1 of the Criminal Code defines "child pornography" as any written or visual material that shows a person who is or is depicted as being under the age of eighteen years and is engaged in or is depicted as engaged in explicit sexual activity. Under the Act, any written or visual material that advocates sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen constitutes an offense.

This law restricts everyone's right to self-representation. It prohibits youth from making sexual images. It erases the expression of adults' remembered or reconstructed memories of childhood sexual experiences. It sends people to Jail for making and looking at pictures.

REPEAL THE "YOUTH PORNOGRAPHY" LAW!

XIAOPING LI

The State of Asian America Activism and Resistance in the 1990s

Edited by Karin Aguilar-San Juan

Boston: South End Press, 1994

Forging A New Politics of Ethnic Activism

The State of Asian America is a groundbreaking collection of essays by Asian American artists, scholars and community activists. It presents their views on contemporary Asian American activism, offering thoughtful, radical analysis on a range of pressing issues. Many of its authors transcend commonplace interpretations of historical and contemporary events, bringing fresh perspectives and analyses to them. This attempt to move beyond simple-minded analysis stems from what they see as urgent needs: to forge a Asian American political consciousness in the 1990s, to articulate the particular set of issues affecting Asian American communities, to redefine the battle against racism, and to develop new strategies of resistance and community building. Although the anthology addresses a broad range of issues and concerns, I find the discussions on identity, race and Asian American Studies particularly constructive and illuminating.

Most of the essays are linked in one way or another to the term identity. Some writers explore the meaning of "transplanted identities"; reflecting on the tension of living in the Diaspora, they arrive at a celebration of "cultural schizophrenia" (i.e. cultural hybridity). Poet and performance artist Jessica Hagedorn, in particular, sees this condition as a source of self-enrichment and

one that gives rise to a distinctive aesthetic. For scholar Radhakrishnan, the effects of the Asian diaspora offer an excellent opportunity to think through particularly loaded issues such as solidarity and criticism, belonging and distance, and the politics of representation, rootedness and rootlessness.

At a time when ethnic essentialism seems to prevail, I am not surprised to find its traces in this ground-breaking anthology. The book shifts from the crude identity politics so perniciously played out in places like Toronto, to a critical interrogation of what it means to be "Asian American." Some of the most constructive discussions on identity come from part one and part three of the book, precisely because their authors discuss the issue in broader historical and global contexts and hence offer more sophisticated analysis than is the usual fare. "Asian American identity" is examined in conjunction with race, class, capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. The discussions are both revealing and thought provoking. I have no doubt that they will provoke those Asian Americans (and Asian Canadians) who reduce identity to race and ethnicity while hiding their own class privilege and conservatism.

Indeed, "Asian American identity" is a troubling term which some authors try to demarcate if not abandon altogether. The demarcation starts with demythologizing the image of the "monolithic model minority" constructed by the main-

stream media, which—as Karin Aguilar-San Juan argues—belittles the damage of discrimination to Asian Americans and obscures the complexity of their experiences. These authors believe that we have entered a particular historical moment in which we can no longer talk about collective identities as if they were all-encompassing, homogeneous and unified. Instead, they articulate inner differences and contradictions, the segmentation and fragmentation that are a part of Asian American identity. David Henry Hwang, for example, holds that the very attempt to define Asian America is called into question in the 1990s as boundaries between communities have become blurred. While he points merely to biological and demographic factors, some other authors take into account the class and ideological compositions of communities in their consideration of Asian American identity.

Class is one of the major indicators of the complexity of "Asian American experience." Class cuts through communities. As activist Milyoung Cho points out, "many immigrants are trapped, as a result of exclusion, in the exploitative and undesirable jobs offered by employers often of their own ethnic group or nationality. 'Fellow countrymen' though they may be, their bosses are entrepreneurs and capitalists first in extremely competitive industries. And, as has become apparent, they will stop at nothing to maximize profits even if it means exploiting their 'own people.'" Cho rightfully argues that the personal victories of these self-motivated "ethnic minorities" represent no qualitative resolution to the problems the communities face, but rather, may help perpetuate the prerogatives of domination. Indeed, when a few Asians (or a few Blacks, e.g. Clarence Thomas) successfully climb the social and economic ladder, their accomplishments

only serve as excuses against their own people's demands for change.

Glen Omatsu's critical review of Asian American activism provides another insight into "Asian American identity." He points out that over the past three decades Asian American activism has evolved through different visions and strategies. The populist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s, "power to the people," has been collapsed in the 1990s into key words such as: "advocacy, access, legitimacy, empowerment and assertiveness." This shift not only points to different concerns and values, but also reveals the empowerment of young Asian American professionals in the Reagan Era. With their schooling in Reaganomics and their willingness to defend the current structure of power and privilege in America, these neo-conservatives have altered the political terrain in the community and have claimed the banner of Asian American identity. Karin Aguilar-San Juan's passing statement about this new phenomenon is thought provoking. She says: "the emergence of Asian American neo-conservatives serves as an interesting illustration of how the right wing has co-opted race." Juan also criticizes identity politics for having seduced so many young Asian Americans into putting their race/identity issues at the centre. To define political activism solely in terms of asserting one's identity is, in her view, to eschew the more substantive issues of racism.

Remapping the struggle around race and racism is another major concern of this anthology. Many writers contend that in the United States in the 1990s race continues to play a central role in the political and economic order of the country. However, in addition to its close engagement with the problems that ethnic minorities continue to face today, the anthology aims to widen the parameters

of the discussions on race in the U. S. It seeks to push the discussion beyond a black and white dichotomy, since the conception of race as a black/white issue has rendered Asian Americans invisible. A Fanonian critique of racism and colonial mentality is clearly embodied in the writings, which examine how racism, capitalism and colonialism/imperialism intersect with each other. When tracing the signs of neo-colonial subjugation of Asian bodies and psyches, some writers advocate that Asian American activists undertake the task of de-colonization within communities.

Not surprisingly, the anthology calls for a new theory of race and race relations, one that relocates race in relation to class, capitalism and colonialism. This need for theory necessitates, as some point out, a community re-intervention into the University. Historically it was Asian American activism that forged the establishment of Asian American Studies in universities in the 1960s. The latter in turn played a critical role, defining and uniting Asian American groups. Asian American Studies today, however, represents another example of how radical practices can be contained. If the field once altered the academy by devoting its curriculum and research primarily to community concerns, over the last twenty years the application of traditional scholarly criteria to Asian American Studies has effectively subverted its original critical thrust, ignoring real issues, excluding Asian American perspectives and scholars, and disconnecting itself from the community. Hirabayashi and Alquizola examine this state of academic colonization with a historical review of the emergence and evolution of Asian American Studies as well as its theoretical foundation.

To sum up, I would use two words—redefinition and revitalization—to char-

acterize the main messages of this anthology. Redefining Asian American identity and struggle against racism and revitalizing the solidarity within and between communities. Particularly illuminating are its call to embrace causes that cross racial, cultural, and national boundaries and its critical reflections of a prolonged battle that has recently been taken up by the state (sometimes in bad faith), and has recurrently been misled by self-interest, ethnic/racial absolutism, and dogmatized "political correctness."

I would like to thank Kass Banning for reading this review.

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HONOR FORD-SMITH

Miscegenation Blues Voices of Mixed Race Women

Edited by Carol Camper

Toronto: Sister Vision: Black Women and Women of Colour Press, 1994.

Combo Girls Re-invent Mixed Race Identities

Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women, edited by Carol Camper, is essential reading for all those working to challenge everyday racism in North America. Accessibly written, the collection combines memoir, dialogues, poetry and photo-essay to describe the complex psychosocial geographies that mixed race women must negotiate. The book contributes to a much needed reassessment of mixed raced identities—one which attempts to release them from the old colonial dichotomies of blackness and whiteness.

Camper starts from the premise that "identity, loyalty and belonging are issues which reside at the very heart of our existence." (p. vx) And yet many of the works themselves challenge assumptions underlying notions of identity and belonging, pushing the boundaries of what we understand as identity politics. They reveal the tension between the desire for an authentic, "true" raced identity and the complex shifting terrain we call race—a terrain ever being created and recreated by strategies of resistance and domination. For me, as a mixed race woman, the most inspiring aspect of the book is the validation of the political and cultural struggles of women of colour.

Many accounts bring to the forefront the complex histories of women whose everyday experiences have disappeared

between the cracks in the dominant narratives of race and nation. Naomi Zack's autobiographical "My Racial Self Over Time" illustrates how race, usually understood as a natural biological category, is culturally and socially constructed. Zack describes a childhood and adulthood in the U. S. in which her racial identities shifted from Jewish to Black. With each categorization an element of her history and origin was obscured; falsified in highly complex ways. For example, when she was "Jewish" the identity of her Black father was withheld from her by her Jewish mother. In spite of the fact that her biological self remained the same, she somersaulted through racial categories in ways that had real consequences for her self-esteem and education. To survive the brutal social reality she inhabits, Zack poses an idealistic strategy for confronting racism through the act of writing—an act that allows her the space to re-invent her subjectivity through the creation of new texts.

Lisa Suhair Majaj describes negotiating the terrain of Palestinian American identity in the midst of the Middle Eastern wars, and the random violence generated by anti Arab feelings in the U. S. Moving between the U. S. and the Middle East, she describes the ways in which her body, appearance and language became markers of otherness in each society. Orientalized in the West she was occidentalized in the East and expected to play out behaviours that one race had invented

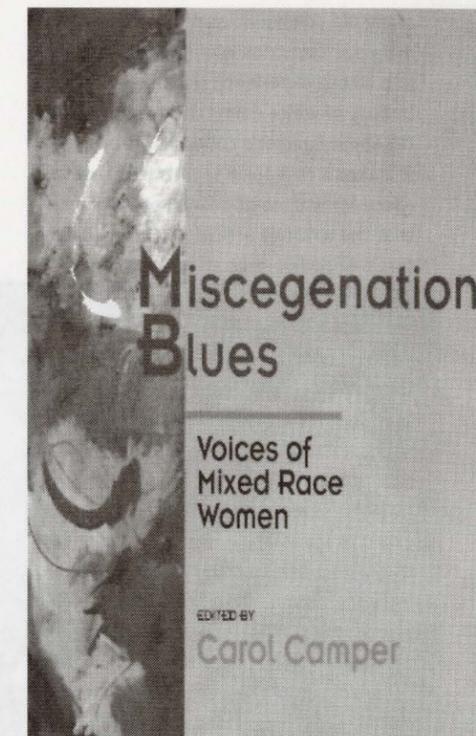
for the other. In the end, Majaj argues that one has to lay claim to both identities: identities that are grounded in history and alienation. Home, she implies, is a place constantly changing and enriched by the complex negotiation of difference.

Gitanjali Saxena's text re-works older images of the female body as a site of myth and as a metaphor for nation. For her irreverent humour and magical subversion are not only ways of de-stabilizing authorities of all kinds, but are also tools for limiting the crippling self-obsession and excessive self-righteousness which arise from identity conflicts. It is one of her characters who laughingly names herself a "combo-girl" in an attempt to silence a male taxi driver with a prurient interest in mixed race. This spontaneous renaming becomes one way to resolve the conflict of identities in her lyrical video poem "Second Generation; Once Removed."

In the face of the complexities described, any notion of homogeneous mixed raced identities shatter. Yet so central is the concept of racial authenticity to notions of the self that those who transgress it experience tremendous loss, disorientation and alienation as a result of being repeatedly positioned as outsider, even in communities undertaking anti-racist action. Camille Ramdwar-Hernandez' "Ms. Edge Innate" describes the pain of being excluded from fixed identity categories and the yearning for the apparent safety that such categorizations provide. Gupta, Huang Kinsley, mosaicneilly and Ijosé are among those who detail the impact of repeated everyday overt and covert acts of racism that position women of colour as outsiders, as the rejected. Huang Kinsley sums it up when she poses the question to herself: "Do I exist?"

Other accounts examine the options for social acceptability offered by the dominant society, and their costs. They confront a parade of mixed race stereotypes reproduced in literature, scholarship and the media—the schizophrenic, the moral and cultural degenerate, the treacherous and the duplicitous. Hernandez points out that appearing assimilated often forces one to scramble for meaning and identity in a mixed bag of distorted images. Many pieces explore the familiar image of the over-sexualized and over-exoticized woman of colour. In her erotic extract describing a sexual encounter between one light skinned woman and her darker lover, Ngahua Te Awekotuku shows how surreptitiously desire roots itself in the racial. Running away from her white fiancé, Tahuri propels herself into the arms of Maka, a Maori woman she meets at a dance. In bed with her lover she experiences herself as white and masculinized—pink, repulsive and hairy as she puts it. Her lover on the other hand is "enhanced, luminous.... Hues of subtle burgundy, folds and texture, fragrant, dark, secret." (p.34)

In "Commingle," Michele Pause confronts both the internalization of racist images and the hierarchies of shade in herself and in communities of colour. She describes how easily colonial stereotypes reassert themselves in efforts to explain the conduct of mixed race women. Colonial notions of contaminated sexual contact lie at the heart of interpretations of mixed race women as potentially traitorous, unstable and morally corrupt, illegitimate in name and nature. She describes her own battle with these masks in an effort to find integrity and raises the important question of how to operate politically when self identification is undermined by material histories of privilege. Coming from an "old" community of mixed race in South Africa, this location



enables Pause to inject a note of caution into debates on mixed identities. She points out that while mixed race women face both similar and different forms of racism from Black women, establishing a homogeneous notion of mixed identity has often resulted in collusion with whites and rewards of privileges for the lighter skinned.

I would add that while many of us may be from non-white racial mixtures, all of us live in a society where whiteness structures blackness. This being the case there can be no single fixed, complacent home for those of mixed race, a feeling perhaps reflected in the tentativeness with which many of the contributors approach the notion of a community. Saxena, for instance, says mixed race women have no shared culture or history, that we are a situational community. Yet there are

many old communities of mixed race in different countries who do share culture and whose experience remains bound by a history of white domination. What is critical about Camper's collection is less that it makes a case for a separate organizing space for women of mixed race and more that the writings articulate the specific forms of racism that affect mixed race women in different contexts.

One aspect of this dynamic focuses on new forms of racism arising in the late twentieth century North American context. At a time when interracial partnerships, child-bearing and adoption are often taken up by white people as solutions to issues of racism, the book explores forms of racism in the family as they affect the development of self and intimacy. Several daughters of white women speak out about racial alienation in their relationships with their mothers. Others examine the ways in which white mothers of children of colour perpetuate racism both directly and indirectly by a failure to talk about and deal with the everyday reality of racism.

In her important essay "Genetic Appropriation: A White Liberal Fad," Carol Camper analyses what takes place when white middle class North American mothers adopt Black children or children of colour. Comparing the adoption of Black children by white women to the ownership of one human being by another, Camper argues that interracial homes, far from being sanctuaries of safety, become sites of rupture and unbelonging, sites for excruciating isolation and potentially immobilizing loneliness. Adoption becomes a form of colonization—a site of reification as an exotic trophy. Yet Camper and other contributors with white mothers resist prescriptive taboos and guidelines on interracial intimacy. They proposed a critical awareness of how racism works in interracial intimacy and an open-

ness to constant re-evaluation of its effects on the family. What emerges is an indictment of liberal advocates of race blindness: that principle which pretends that individual equality is still possible in contexts of collective and historical disempowerment of many groups. The unjust ends of racism are well served by liberal stances which advocate blindness to race in the interests of individual equality. Following a similar argument, Nila Gupta makes the point that silence and "blindness" around the colour issue in the family nurture the dynamics of racism and allow racism to do its damage without censure.

In aiming to be fully representative and to avoid further silencing women of mixed race, the collection is highly inclusive and the argument of the text is not unified. The advantage of this is that the work is thoroughly accessible to different audiences. The disadvantage is that less attention is paid to the frames through which the various experiences are represented. Behind this is an assumption that experience is transparent and easily represented in language—that life experience in a particular body can be reflected in and through words. It remains to be seen how what I understand to be a kind of strategic disorganization in the work will be taken up by individuals, scholars and activists; but more crucially in whose interest.

Throughout the collection, however, a number of themes cry out to be explored in more depth in the future. One such area concerns the question of privilege and the experience of mixed race. While it is mentioned often, few of the pieces examine systematically how class identity intersects with race identity and sexual orientation. The question of how privilege is lived by mixed race women with multiple identities, how it operates for individuals and communities, is a key

issue for mixed race experience. It is a concern that has implications for the ways in which we work together in groups and alliances across different locations and multiple identities. It also has implications for the way we perceive our own oppression and the issues we find it important to fight about.

Honor Ford-Smith is a writer, a teacher and a student at OISE. Presently her work focuses on gender, raced identity and insurgent cultural production.

RAGHU KRISHNAN

India Now! Toronto International Film Festival

September 8–17, 1994, Toronto

This year's Toronto International Film Festival featured twenty-seven films from or about India. In and of itself, the "India Now!" series was an historical event. No previous Festival has screened more than a handful of films from India, and none has had anything even remotely resembling the variety of films on offer this time around.

It is rather fortuitous that this large dose of Indian cinema should hit Toronto screens now. For one thing, India is at a turning point, with vast economic changes and socio-political developments affecting all aspects of life—changes which obviously have not failed to make an impact on the film industry.

Secondly, "India Now!" comes at a time when the Toronto South Asian community is itself "coming of age," forcing its way out of the margins in a variety of ways. Any Toronto South Asian old enough to remember the 1970s in the city (synonymous with Paki-bashing and a collective feeling of insecurity) could not help but have seen this spotlight on India as a kind of gratifying—if somewhat belated—nod of acceptance from at least one segment of the "mainstream," itself undergoing changes.

"India Now!" also comes at a time when there has been a bit of a revival of Indian cinema on the big screen in Toronto, with weekly screenings of Indian box-office hits making a comeback in certain select suburban locations. Unknown to most Torontonians, there were more



Still from *English, August*, Dev Benegal, 35mm.

than a dozen theatres showing Indian movies in the Toronto region during the pre-VCR era.

India has the largest movie industry in the world, yet the Toronto film-going public is largely ignorant of it. As such, the goal of this kind of showcase must be to present a good cross-section of films. This was by and large achieved. Organizers avoided reproducing the contemptuous attitude of many educated Indians toward the popular cinema, while including the "art" and documentary pieces essential to such festivals.

Dev Benegal's film *English, August* is a good point from which to begin a review of the programme's offerings. That it was one of the few films in the series with a really mixed audience of South

Asians and non-South Asians comes as no surprise given the subject matter and, in part, the parochialism of Toronto audiences.

The Upamanyu Chatterjee book on which this film is based captures the feelings of condescension and bewilderment—as well as a glimmer of self-realization or momentary existential crisis—that one almost inevitably experiences in the West when confronted with the "Indian heartland," presumably, as it is portrayed and/or targeted in commercial Indian cinema.

Agastya, the main character, is an urbanized, Westernized product of the Calcutta upper middle class, sent for training as a member of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) to a small

rural town. His initial contemptuous and cynical attitude toward his colleagues and his surroundings are matched only by the joy he derives from regular masturbation, sessions of reading Marcus Aurelius, and listening to jazz and rock music.

By presenting the film's setting from Agastya's irreverent point of view, Benegal achieves genuine comic effect. The presumably "Westernized" viewer (the film being in English) understands what Agastya finds so terribly unpleasant and absurd about being posted to a mosquito-infested "backwater," surrounded by sweating, jaded and dull-witted bureaucrats and their similarly disposed entourage.

One soon tires of this device, however. It is unfortunate that Benegal does little to explore the more complex psychological make-up of someone in Agastya's position. Instead, Agastya, comes off as a kind of Indian "Generation Xer" with a bit of Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* thrown in for good measure. While there is certainly nothing "un-Indian" about Agastya, somewhere in its long two hours the film could have introduced more elements that would have helped Agastya and the spectator who identifies with him, break out of the essentially narrow world-view held by many Indian upper middle class urbanites and their Western counterparts. The book does this to some extent.

This question of perspective leaps forth in another of the films seen by a "mixed audience" and, like *English, August*, was co-produced by Indians and Europeans. *Bandit Queen* was by far the most controversial movie on the "India Now!" roster, attracting the most media attention. The film ostensibly tells the true story of the legendary Phoolan Devi—a low caste Hindu woman who joined a gang of roaming bandits in the early 1980s and who took her revenge for

the rape she endured at the hands of upper-caste Hindus.

The major controversy around the film is that Phoolan Devi herself has disowned it, going so far as to threaten self-immolation if the film is shown publicly in India. But even if the film—supposedly based on Phoolan Devi's autobiography—is "true to life" insofar as nothing shown is factually inaccurate, there is ample room to take director Shekhar Kapur to task for what he has chosen to show, and how he has chosen to show it.

This is not the place to unravel the whole debate around the place of violence in cinema. Suffice it to say, however, that the film dwells unnecessarily and repeatedly on the details of rape and the violent revenge it begets in this case. One might ask how much of this simply invites voyeurism, and how much makes a legitimate attempt to understand the origins of Phoolan's rage and her heroic struggle for the rights of women and the lower castes.

And although one is certainly impressed by the way Phoolan aggressively scolds her father for having sent her away as a child bride, the scene doesn't seem entirely credible. Similarly, it's nice to feel as if one is getting a real "insider's view" of rural India and its people, but there is something both gratuitous and unbelievable about Phoolan's vulgarity—the frequent use of "sisterfucker" springs to mind.

To be fair, in these times of rising Hindu-Muslim tension on the subcontinent, one is grateful for tender mercies, and so there is certainly something to celebrate about the spontaneous alliance forged in the film between low-caste Hindus and poor Muslims to assist Phoolan Devi in her quest for vengeance. In general, however, the film only gives us a vague idea of the caste and class politics

behind the whole affair, and does nothing to illuminate the causes and forms of Phoolan's mass appeal.

In the Festival guide, "India Now!" programmer David Overbey describes the movie as a "rip-snorting action thriller that will please even those who don't give a damn about India's problems." Which begs the question: for whom precisely, or rather, for which "market" is this movie made? And what effect does this have on the film's objectives—and its credibility?

On the subject of markets, Madras-based director Mani Ratnam remarked at his Toronto press conference that he is quite satisfied with the Indian one, and has no plans to try to make it in the West. No surprise in that, since he has been collecting awards and breaking box-office records at an alarming rate. Indeed, for his feats, Festival organizers made him the feature director of the "India Now!" series, screening four of his most successful works.

A good choice, really. Ratnam's movies say a lot about the current state of Indian cinema and about political and social trends in the country. Ratnam has harnessed the traditional aspects of mainstream Indian cinema—the song and dance scenes, the melodrama, the fights, the hero and the romantic happy ending—matching them with a technical mastery of the art, a cosmopolitan outlook and an insight into a variety of social themes. Which makes Ratnam the quintessential populist.

Nayakan, for example, is a Tamil semi-parody of *The Godfather*, with a Tamil migrant worker rising from a Bombay slum to become a don of the Bombay underworld and guardian angel to the city's Tamil slum dwellers. The film seems to hit every progressive button. The hero (Velu, played by superstar Kamal Haasan) is the son of a trade-union leader mur-

dered by Madras police. Once in Bombay, he defends his slum against the abuses of the local police force. His climb up the criminal ladder begins through an association with a kindly and impoverished old Muslim. He marries a teenager who has taken to prostitution in order to finance her studies. And later in life, his independent-minded daughter directly challenges the hypocrisy and immorality of his criminal ways, leaving us with a fittingly ambiguous message about the "hero's" life.

Nayakan's populism and, ultimately, its fatalism becomes clear when compared to another "India Now!" film, Sudhir Mishra's *Dharavi*. Also set in a Bombay slum, the low-key *Dharavi* (there are no songs and no staged fights) tells the story of a greedy taxi driver (Yadav) and the destructive effects of his greed on family, friends and himself. Yet in *Dharavi*, Mishra has squarely identified the kind of communal and caste-based criminal outfit

run by Velu in *Nayakan* as one of the sources of the slum's ills and, moreover, has given three of his characters—Yadav's wife, her social activist brother, and her ailing, social activist former partner—a more dignified approach to their slum lives. Interestingly enough, the only nod to traditional Indian cinema can be found in Yadav's dream sequences, where a beautiful actress describes the delights that await him as he climbs up the business ladder.

Yadav's wife is played by the impressive Shabana Azmi, who in real life is active in the Bombay slums, in the fight against poverty and religious fundamentalism. At one of *Dharavi's* screenings, she explained that the film has had no distribution and described how, when they tried to show it in Bombay, the semi-fascist Shiv Sena that runs the municipal government, threatened to burn down the theatre, causing the screening to be cancelled. Such is the

tragic lot of what is known as "art" cinema in India.

The most entertaining film of the "India Now!" series had to be Ratnam's *Thiruda Thiruda* ("Thief Thief"), a comedy filled with thrills and spills that tells the story of two small-time thieves who, together with their unwitting female accomplice, come across a king's ransom in stolen bank notes. The ensuing action sees them outsmarting the bad guys who stole the notes initially, temporarily bringing another woman into their ranks (a scorned showgirl and the former bad guys' accomplice). In the end, they inadvertently deliver the money back to the government.

In *Thiruda Thiruda*, Ratnam's mastery of the art shines through: his technical prowess, effective use of song and dance, the way he shifts between the grandiose and the rustic. Here again, social themes are addressed, for example, with the accomplice being brought into the gang

Still from *Roja*, Mani Ratnam, 35mm.



hours away. The school is a known stepping stone to the big basketball universities, heartbeats away from the pros. So the two jump at the opportunity. Isaiah Thomas, the school's claim-to-fame alumnus, appears in the film, talking to the kids while in a basketball uniform and with ball in hand. The image is a bit demeaning and seems to strengthen the Black-man-as-ball-player stereotype. A little later in the film, however, Spike Lee appears in an ever-so-brief yet riveting scene, admonishing the kids to be smart about their futures and warning them not to be taken advantage of by big-school ball.

While at St. Joe's, William grows bigger and stronger and embraces the programme, while Arthur remains small and at odds with the coaching. In a shady turn of events, Arthur is asked to leave the school because of the "financial shortcomings" of his family. From here, this tale of two boys takes on a bizarre, almost surreal sense of duality as William becomes the beneficiary of the financial

favours of a local businesswoman and friend of the schools, while Arthur is forced to enroll in a dilapidated inner-city public school. His mother loses her job and the family has to go on welfare. In an ironic set of scenes, Arthur's family is shown eating dinner in a dark apartment because they can't afford electricity, while William is in a bright, high-tech clinic being inserted into a humming sonographic chamber to check his knees.

Poetically, though, it is Arthur who galvanizes his underdog public-school team, leading them to the big game downstate, while William and his prep-school team fail to even make it to the playoffs. In a sincere, heartfelt moment, Arthur watches William's final losing game, and the camera catches them in an emotional embrace, after the heartbreaking loss and years after the two were discovered on the playground. It's apparent that the film would not have been as effective if it were only about these two lives in and around the court. It works because it shows the anatomy of many

Black lives, up-close and personal. For example, we see Arthur's father become addicted to cocaine, leave the family, rehabilitate, return, and leave again. In William's case we see him become a teenage father intent on raising his family like a man and unlike his own father. The film manages to grasp the often fleeting moments that constitute a dream.

Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation.

—Kahlil Gibran

The other documentary in this year's selection of Black films, Isaac Julien's *Darker Side of Black*, takes a more witty and satirical stance toward its subjects. Julien's film is a close, unblinking look at homophobia in the Black, mainly youthful subcultures of dance hall and hip-hop. With Arthur (*Crooklyn*) Jaffa's distinctive and dreamy lensing, Julien attempts to delve into the collective black psyche as it pertains to homosexuality; the subculture

within a subculture. His camera takes us from macho, posturing interviews with the cultural mega-stars of hip-hop, like Ice Cube, and sincere observations from the Brand Nubians, to intimate foot-in-mouth interviews with Shabba Ranks and Buju Banton.

This main narrative is peppered with Peeping Tom looks into raunchy dance-hall parties and rebuttal rhetoric from the likes of a staunch Jamaican theologian and even a former Jamaican prime minister.

Julien, an openly gay filmmaker, makes a skilful attempt to indict and sometimes even ridicule the attitudes that perpetuate violent homophobic sentiments. However, his intent is sometimes undermined by the very weapons he uses to make his points: the lush, slowed-down clips of hip-hop videos at times prove to be more seductive than disturbing. And the interviews with Banton, in which Julien seems to provide him with just enough rope (read: film time) with which to hang himself, sometimes backfire. Banton is a star, and like most stars he possesses a considerable amount of charisma and charm. The camera captures this, so at times we are taken by him rather than repelled by him.

Overall, though, Julien has produced an insightful, critical vision of a sad rift within the Black community that unfortunately reinforces barriers and separatism rather than cohesion.

Singing, little brown woman, singing strong black woman, singing tall yellow woman...for you all I have many songs to sing...could I but find the words.

—Langston Hughes

Every so often, the subtle pen is able to capture in words a beauty and gentleness of expression that can only be experi-

enced in the actuality of the moment or moments. And even less often, the camera is able to capture an effective visual interpretation of such words. This is the case with Selina Williams' *Saar*.

Saar is an African emotional cleansing ritual. Williams has aptly chosen this word as the title for her film, which poignantly celebrates the coming together of six different African Canadian women, each with differing ideals and sexualities.

The women gather together one night to enjoy food, music, warmth, spirituality and, most importantly, the company of other women. Selina cleverly throws into this mix of positives a constant, nagging negative in the form of broadcasted reports of the death of a young Somali at the hands of Canadian peacekeepers. This illustrates the dichotomy that being Black in a foreign country creates. It also serves to instigate discussion and to emphasize the consciousness of these women.

This short starts out a bit weak, and the acting is uneven, but the narrative and performances soon bloom into an eloquent articulation of the beauty and resilience of the female aspect of the African Canadian experience. The cinematography revels in all the lush hues that their African skin has to offer, and the images that Williams chooses to linger on—a crackling fire, a lock of hair—speaks volumes. The spiciness of the coming together of these positive sisters keeps the pacing edgy and the tone necessarily bitchy.

The short ends, poetically and humorously, with each of the women metaphorically freeing themselves of, among other things, "tired brothers." Amen.

Doctor! Always do the right thing.
—Da Mayor in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

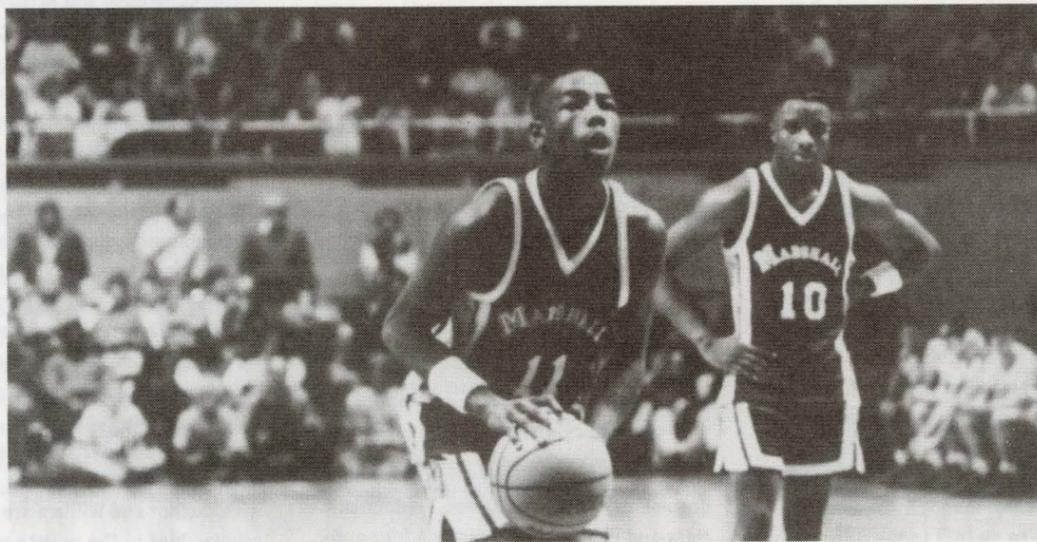
Charles Burnett's morality tale *The Glass Shield* has been called his most traditional film to date. Although this film does follow a more standard story path and has somewhat more stock characters than we usually see from Burnett, is nonetheless infused with the complex moral dramatics that he is well-known for.

The Glass Shield focuses on JJ, a young, idealistic Black police officer fresh out of the academy. His first placement is at an all-white, racist precinct in Edgemar, California. Here JJ does his best to serve and protect and play by the rules. He even adheres to the sticking-together-no-matter-what policy, even when it infringes on truth itself. Later in the story, a young Black man, Ice Cube, is pulled over by JJ's fellow officer for no reason other than the colour of his skin. A gun is found in Ice Cube's car, and although it belongs to his girlfriend's father, the racist police machinery plots to make him the fall guy for the unsolved murder of a white woman.

The trial will not go forward if JJ admits that Ice Cube did not commit the traffic violation his partner claims is the reason he pulled the car over in the first place. JJ chooses to lie for the force. The jaws of the legal machinery are now poised to swallow another innocent young Black man. It is not until JJ's fiancée and local community leaders help him realize the magnitude of what he's done that he breaks down and does the right thing.

At its most basic, Burnett's film is an action thriller about a good cop at a bad precinct. At work within this surface narrative are a host of other complexities. The racist agenda of the crooked precinct as a backdrop to JJ's loyal-Black-cop characterization is a sad metaphor for the situation of a lot of Blacks in the U.S.—is a modern-day Sisyphus. In one scene, an attractive Black woman motorist is harassed by JJ's white partner—JJ had

Still from *Hoop Dreams*, Steve James et al. (directors), U.S.A., 35mm, 1994.



earlier let her off with a warning—which speaks volumes about racism. The woman's blinking eyes, shot as a reflection in her rearview mirror, as she hopelessly looks at her powerless "brother," are absolutely moving although no words are spoken.

The various subplots of community activism, courtroom dramatics, insurance scams, and a dying police detective are handled with a rather pedestrian hand, but Burnett is more concerned with the bigger, deeper issues—and it shows. The darkly ironic plot twist towards the end, which somehow leaves JJ as the sole scapegoat in this rotten web of deceit, brings to mind a line from the hip-hop group Brand Nubians: "Now here's some food for thought/Many fought for the sport/But the Black man still comes up short."

I was now in another world, a world which grew into many worlds and engulfed me, though something of me was always separate and belonged to the beautiful, green hills of my childhood.

—Claude McKay

The last course on our cinematic menu is Arlick Riley's *The Concrete Garden*, a skillfully made short narrated in the form of letters from a young West Indian girl in England to her grandmother back on the Islands. Riley's story of a Black West Indian girl's first experiences in the UK serves as a moving example of the isolation that all young immigrants face to some degree. *The Concrete Garden* manages to be both humorous and noble.

The scenes that follow the young heroine from a farewell gathering in her sunny home to a cold and lonely non-reception at a train station in the UK smartly strike the visual and emotional contrasts through which she travels. At

school she is terrorized by a couple of menacing yet somewhat absurd white girls in a sort of young immigrant's rite of passage. This is followed by a sweet moment where the young girl's younger brother hands her a roll of tissue for her bloody nose. He too knows the new-kid "black and blues."

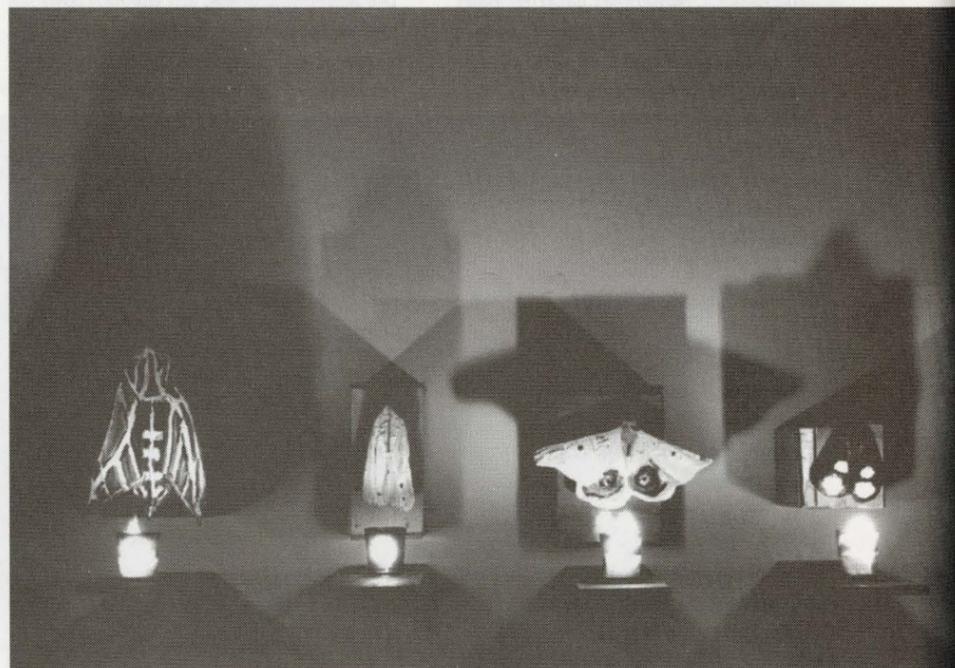
The last scenes, which detail the protagonist's attempts to sneak into a nightclub to see her musical idol perform, are comic but a bit heavy-handed. Despite this, the film is cleverly perceptive and very enjoyable.

As an after-dinner sweet, Dewey Thompson's *Back in the Days* is aptly short and almost bittersweet. The three-minute short is a surreal sequence of dream-like scenes about a Black boy who magically "kills" a white businessman in the building across from his own. In a weirdly interesting image, the young boy marches through the tree-lined streets of

the white man's suburban neighbourhood. He drifts through the now fatherless home and finds the man's car keys—"he won't be needing them," the youngster muses. In a fitting yet somewhat disturbing climax, the boy matter-of-factly takes the car and goes to look for his own father.

Vance Chapman is a Toronto-based writer, and an aspiring film director and producer.

Anne-Marie Bénéteau, detail of mixed-media installation *Insomnia*, 1994. Photo: Simon Glass.



Anne-Marie Bénéteau

Insomnia

April 26 – May 14, 1994

Workscene Gallery, Toronto

Environmental preservation, the survival of endangered species and the investigation of environmental concerns are issues that are timely, in the ways that nature is framed by a cultural construction. For Anne-Marie Bénéteau, the viability and continuity of the natural world is both her ongoing passion and the vital essence of her art production. Her most recent exhibition at Workscene Gallery demonstrates this clearly, while it reveals her painstaking methodology and her intensely personal viewpoint.

Bénéteau has constructed a dark, almost claustrophobic enclosure (about twenty feet by twelve feet) in which she has installed (at just above eye level) a series of perhaps fifty wooden moths mounted on boxes projecting from the wall. Under each moth is placed a votive candle on a small shelf, and in the dim flickering light, the moths seem to flutter slightly. The atmosphere is reverent, quiet, slightly ominous. Voices become hushed when viewers enter, and visitors move from image to image around the periphery of the enclosure, gazing up at the mounted moths as if visiting the stations of the cross.

The painted wooden cut-outs depict "real" moths in the adult stage, constructed to scale, but considerably larger than life-size (from three to twelve inches). All obviously similar, but each essentially unique, the moths are meticulously rendered in the greys, browns, and beiges which serve to camouflage them within

SANDRA VIDA

their normal habitat of earth, wood and stone. Usually invisible or obscure, these night creatures both attract and repel, like objects seen in the half light of twilight, or imagined in the state between waking and sleeping.

The boxes on which the moths are mounted are made from cheap plywood, some obviously recycled from commercial boxes. They are roughly varnished and protrude at slightly different distances from the wall. Each moth is pinned to its support with a giant nail.

Evoking both scientific specimen displays and religious icons, the exhibition questions systems of classification or reification which frame and commodify nature. Another reference is the attraction of moths to flames in both observation and popular mythology—along with the suggestion of possible annihilation. This association, which most viewers would bring to the work, reinforces the feeling of ephemerality.

The entry point for Bénéteau's critique is the artist's list of personal names for each moth (corresponding to numbers appearing beside each) invented when first viewed by Bénéteau, and making reference to the location or event which surrounded its sighting. She observed and carefully recorded all these moths in Ontario. Thus, rather than scientific or "common" names, her moths bear names like "Amherstburg Dock Moth" or "Essex County Backyard Moth" or "Fresh Cut Grass Moth." Her renaming becomes an

attempt to subvert the authority of the scientific classification system. The viewer who participates in matching names to insects becomes implicated in this reclaiming ritual.

The current installation builds upon a considerable body of work in which the artist has reproduced, in various media, images mainly of birds and insects. Although not directly stated, of obvious connection to the work are the artist's childhood obsession with insect collecting, her current birding activity, and her Catholic upbringing. In an exhibition earlier this year at A Space called "Les Insectes du Monde," Bénéteau inserted a large number of found feathers into the gallery wall, evenly spaced and filling a wall of about eight feet square. Each feather was labelled with a small white number. To one side was a listing of the numbers and the insect names to which they presumably corresponded. The obvious disjunction of name and object raised questions about entomology as an authoritative reading of nature.

In her artist statement accompanying "Insomnia," Bénéteau further notes that the classifications of entomology are often related to a species' usefulness or harm to economic and business interests such as forestry, agriculture, medicine or industry. In contrast to this obsession with functionality within a commercial system, Bénéteau states:

I find it vital to witness as many living species as possible before they vanish from the environment—my purpose goes well beyond documentation and into reclaiming nature...through personal experience."

She therefore addresses the need to reactivate an alternative relationship to natural phenomena, realizing that our interaction with and knowledge of that world has been disrupted by technological "progress" and economic value systems.

Thus the artist's observations and representations of the natural world become a transgressive activity which reveals the safe and clinical world of science as a distorting illusion which masks the destruction of nature by a commercially motivated capitalistic society. Moving beyond a strictly critical stance, Bénéteau affirms the possibility of generating an oppositional view through personal experience and intervention.

Sandra Vida is a multi-disciplinary artist and art administrator currently working for ANNPAC/RACA: A New Initiative. She has a severe moth phobia.

EARL MILLER

Barry Isenor and Ken Hayes Demo Homes

August 4 - 13, 1994
Exchange Square, Toronto

Conjuring images of perfectly mowed lawns, time-saving appliances, and the latest in *Better Homes and Gardens* decor, the installation's title, "Demo Homes," forewarns viewers of the critical irony employed in the exhibit. Barry Isenor and Ken Hayes, architects and publishers of *Splinter*, a radical architecture zine, have constructed a "demo home"—shown in a temporary commercial space located in a mostly unrented downtown office building—to deconstruct and counter the consumer's lifestyle associated with suburban housing developments. Given the premise of a model home, where the idea is to sell a house through a pre-packaged lifestyle concept, the installation acts as a commentary on the commercial aspects of urban living. Corporate control of domestic space is immediately experienced at the entrance of the exhibition space where one's view is blocked by the back side of a film screen. Although a small physical disruption, it is an obstacle indicative of the often subtle manipulations of architectural spaces by those who develop and design; for example, the sales technique of placing unflattering mirrors along a shopping mall entrance-way to heighten shoppers' concern with their self-image.

In *Deep Sleep*, a see-through mattress with exposed inner springs is placed below the viewing side of the film screen. Representing one of the most "personal" items found in a home, its position points to the illusory division between the

private and public spheres in domestic design. Above the mattress projections of black-and-white Super 8 film flicker images of an egg beater, Fantastik household cleaner sprayed on metallic surfaces, an alarm clock and the GO Train. Even in their sleep homeowners are reminded that they should purchase more goods and work harder to earn them—a kind of advertising through mass hypnosis. The private home becomes public territory, in effect limiting free choice to the scope of a late capitalist field.

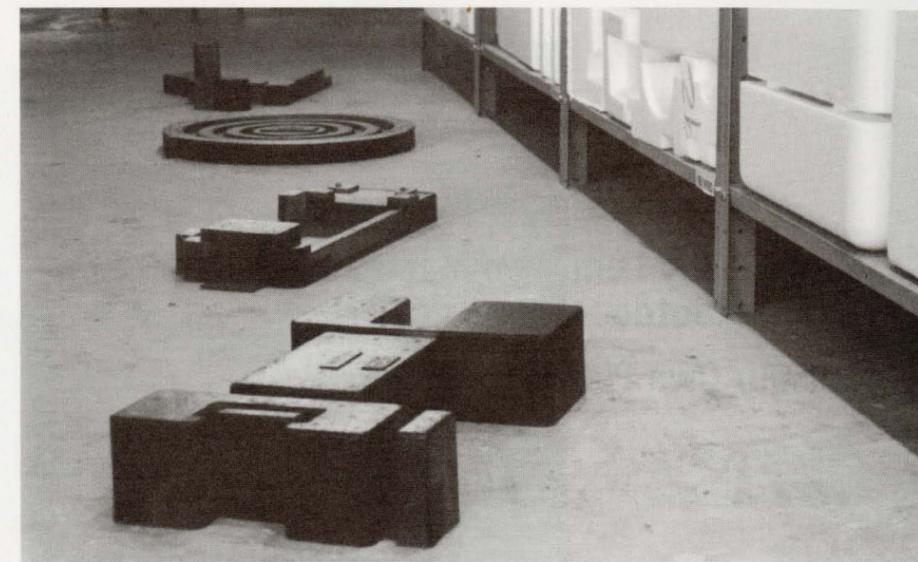
Passing the initial barrier, or media spectacle, one is struck by the sparse industrial sensibility characterizing the whole installation. In *Hot Plate*, a makeshift glass table displays a selection of heating elements, other tools and kitchen gadgetry related to heat. Their implied warmth is the antithesis of the stereotypically cozy domestic kitchen. This collection, like a B-movie chemistry lab, is scientific, cold and rather foreboding. And it is here that "Demo Homes" appears less as a house and more as a factory, a place of production rather than consumption. From a metal warehouse shelf holding Styrofoam packing materials, to the intermittent but ongoing drone of a pair of Hoover floor polishers, it becomes difficult to forget that there is much work to be done.

The technological, industrial aesthetic of Hayes' and Isenor's factory model is particularly male. Although societal norms that still feminize domestic labour

remain largely unemphasized in the exhibit, one is nonetheless reminded that women continue to work within the constraints of man-made space designed by the big boys of industry and real estate. Domestic labour, with its ensuing gender bias and its unpaid production, surfaces amidst the expectations usually conveyed by a model home: a care-free fun-house where work is performed by muscular genies miraculously appearing out of bottles of cleaning solvents.

Also hidden behind the freshly scrubbed facade of material culture is the environmental waste resulting from it, which Hayes and Isenor reveal and then propose to curtail. A series of abstract rubber floor pieces vaguely resembling architectural models are cast from a selection of displayed Styrofoam packing; a cluster of foam block seats with subdued but multi-coloured pebbled surfaces form a mini-lounge centred around a television set; and recycled grocery bags collaged together to form a decorative space divider. Whether found or purchased, this material is all recycled, including the foam blocks, which have been rebonded from factory off-cuts. Rather than avoiding the reality of the excessive waste produced by contemporary society, Isenor and Hayes reuse materials both as a statement pointing to environmental degradation and as a way of recycling materials in their own exhibit. They take society's artificial detritus, its "inevitable plastic" junk heap, temporarily reverse its wastefulness and prevent the further waste of new material. Since what was once potentially harmful is now employed towards responsible design, Isenor's and Hayes' approach can be understood as recuperative architecture.

In conjunction with this active recovery of damaged and damaging goods, Isenor and Hayes comment directly on the need for an everyday awareness of soci-



Detail of "Demo Homes," Isenor and Hayes, mixed-media installation, 1994. Photo courtesy of the artists.

ety's environmental destruction. In *Earthwork #1 (Box of Worms)*, for example, a compost box intended for indoor use is filled with soil, food scraps and worms. By permitting earth and waste to enter a domestic situation one readily sees what is consumed and uprooted by one's own habits. *Colour Study #1*, a massive divider constructed of recycled plastic grocery bags shaped into a grid configuration of colourful rectangles, reiterates their call for an ongoing consciousness of the waste we continuously put into the environment.

Also at play in *Colour Study #1* is a particularly biting critique of modernism that is echoed throughout the installation. Modernist art and architecture, both referenced by the decorating needs of the typical model home, remain happily impervious to any social connections, from environmental waste to the corporate commodification of form. The utopian dream of modernism, that progress would be completed by the arrival of purified formalism, always suggested such autonomy. Like a decoy, *Colour Study #1* initially appears as a fine example of post-painterly abstraction. However, all imagined barriers between the object and the social milieu are brought into sharp relief by the many real-world references implied by, for example, the grocery bags used to feign formalism.

By using "vintage" household and industrial goods—kitchen utensils, refrigerators *et al*—Isenor and Hayes present a model of obsolescence that references the late-industrial age, an era most representative of modernism. In the present post-modern context, objects associated with the modernist era are used in a self-critical nostalgic fashion. Isenor and Hayes have taken the leftover scraps of the late-industrial age, broken their formal and functional shell and loaded them with socio-political connections that always existed but were once covered up or made invisible.

Isenor and Hayes have politicized the arena of domestic modern architecture by exposing the labour, the garbage and the dirt that is usually swept under the carpet by the squeaky clean mythologies of late capitalism. "Demo Homes" is indeed a demonstration: a demonstration against the vacuity of suburban values and an architecture that favour social responsibility over the all too tiresome three-dimensional sales pitch.

Earl Miller is an independent art critic and curator residing in Toronto. He has contributed to C Magazine, Parachute and other publications.

BRYCE KANBARA

Brenda Joy Lem, Kyo Maclear, Shani Mootoo

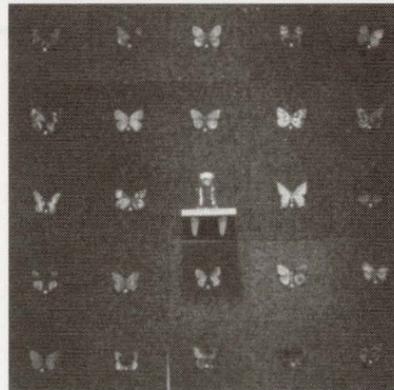
For Our Own Pleasure

May 25—June 25, 1994

YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto

As the title implies, the artists in "For Our Own Pleasure" were enjoined to make works for their own pleasure, not necessarily yours or mine. Curator Marilyn Jung says that she asked the artists to create work "in celebration of their own bodies and sexuality" as a kind of self-liberating antidote to the poisonous subjection of Asian women to the exotic, sexual stereotype. Thus framed, the works seem predisposed to examine and react to racial stereotyping; whatever the represented pleasures of each artist, the show's premise conditions us to look first for evidence of the *oriental*. In the end however, the work springs "pleasure" from the clutch of these limit, (as well as the clutch of those who seek its theoretical bases), and draws it into the personalized zones of individual interpretation. Here, pleasure is not only sensual, it is also aesthetic and intellectual.

The show brings together the work of three women of Asian ancestry—Shani Mootoo, Kyo Maclear and Brenda Joy Lem—all of whom have recently gained recognition as Canadian artists strongly associated with issues pertaining to race and gender. The show is a small and striking reflection of the spreading communal-ity among Asian Canadian artists across the country. Knowing something of their past activist involvement, we can't be faulted for expecting to see some cultural and political advocacy in operation in the exhibition. Yet despite the potential for declarative homogenizing that often over-



Kyo Maclear, *Pinned to the Wall*, mixed media, 1994.

comes such group shows, each artist is able to stake out her own territory in a way that is surprisingly disarming. The diversity of approaches, and the manner in which each has expressed her pleasure, exhilarate thought and taste.

Shani Mootoo's colour-photocopier images of female genitalia pressing twigs and berries to the glass plate are, on one hand, brazen documentation of the artist's relationship with the machine. Bearing in mind Mootoo's lesbianism and the copier's function, the series can be seen to make ironical inferences about reproductive capability. On the other hand, the three works in the untitled "berry" series suggest a narrative reading, with some of the berries climactically bursting in the final work...staining memory, if not skin, or glass, or ideological meaning. Mootoo's addiction to saturated colour and flurried detail is an astonish-

ing feature in her work. She titles the berry works with the taxonomic language of biological classification, with the titles—*Pyrocantia coccinea*, *Cotoneaster horizontalis* and *Solanum dulcamara*—having inspired intimate love verses which are included as text within each work. In *Cotoneaster horizontalis*, for example, Mootoo writes:

*Your sweet lips...
I think of you often,
persimmons sapodillas mangoes
Do you see yourself in my breaths and
sighs?*

Only occasionally (but often enough to remind us) does Mootoo incorporate words and visual images which refer to her Indian/Trinidadian background. When they do occur (as in the third line of the above) they introduce a deliberate, exotic breath that is calculated to entice and please as well as to foreshadow the ideological complications that prevail, these days, whenever ethnicity and race are invoked.

Kyo Maclear reveals a formal restraint in *Pinned to the Wall* that is, in every way, a contrast in sensibility to Mootoo's exuberance. For this piece she has made twenty-four black and white photocopies of pictures of butterflies (not real ones), coloured them with pencil crayons, cut them out and arranged them on a wall-grid of cork board tiles. In the centre tile is a shelf occupied by a catch-

ing bottle (presumably with a perforated lid). Initially we're frustrated by the remoteness in her strategy; the process is a simulation, the specimens are facsimiles, and there's a simple "illustrativeness" about the work that seems to diminish the interactive possibilities for the viewer. Yet through the overt reference to the Madame Butterfly stereotype, Maclear's method—her simple adherence to a scientific (albeit a high-school biology project) model—provides just the right measure of persuasion to her suggestion that we revisit racial issues stemming from the popular characterization of Asian women. There is a clarity and school-girl diligence exhibited in *Pinned to the Wall* which makes it appear ingenuous, and which gives it its particular charm. On the exhibition label, Maclear makes a taxonomic check-list, but replaces the actual scientific names of the butterflies she has used with latinizations of her own, such as *Nupta Papyrus* (*Paper bride*) and *Ecantia Alabania* (*Mimic white*). This display of wit is the single instance of expressiveness she permits herself, but it also consolidates for us her intent in making the piece. Maclear's other work in the show (a work in progress) demonstrates another version of herself. Curiously, it too contains no reference to her particular Asian lineage (Japanese). The work contains images of hands and hand prints, combined with some text, and is about "touch," "loss" and "memory," but we suspect that it is cryptically about identity, as well.

From the outside, Brenda Joy Lem's *Temple of My Familiar* reminds us of a prefabricated, backyard storage shed with a few oriental flourishes. It is smoothly constructed of unpainted particle board and lumber bolted together. These modern materials contrast starkly with the Chinese traditionalism represented by the soft, red slippers on the steps and the red



Brenda Joy Lem, *Temple of My Familiar*, mixed media, 1994.

lanterns hanging from the roof beams. Lem bids us to go inside, but requests that we be "thoughtful and consider [our] role." She informs us that we are entering the temple of her body. It's an alarmingly intimate invitation and, once inside, we succumb to the sense of ritual she has constructed; if we make a sharp sound (as a hand-clap or shout), a figurine shoots out from a box in the miniature shrine, like a cuckoo clock; when we view the video screen implanted in the floor and surrounded by smooth stones, we are introduced to artifacts which seem to be personal memorabilia, including photographic images of family. For Lem, familiar seems to connote *family*. We're confronted by the generosity of Lem's gesture of sharing, but instead of feeling burdened by it, we're suddenly buoyed by a sense of privilege.

Using text, visual imagery and blended media, all three artists show themselves to be articulate and forthright in

expressing sophisticated concerns about ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality and culture. Each one introduces us to her work with a personally important, stereotypical referent and then urges us toward the fuller richness of her intent. Whether the artist's pleasure is sensuous, polemical or confessional, it's conveyed to us with a deft playfulness. "For Our Own Pleasure" is initially disquieting, but then cajoles us to seek enjoyment in both its materials and some very provocative ideas.

Bryce Kanbara is an artist and curator living in Hamilton, Ontario.

Rosalie Favell Living Evidence

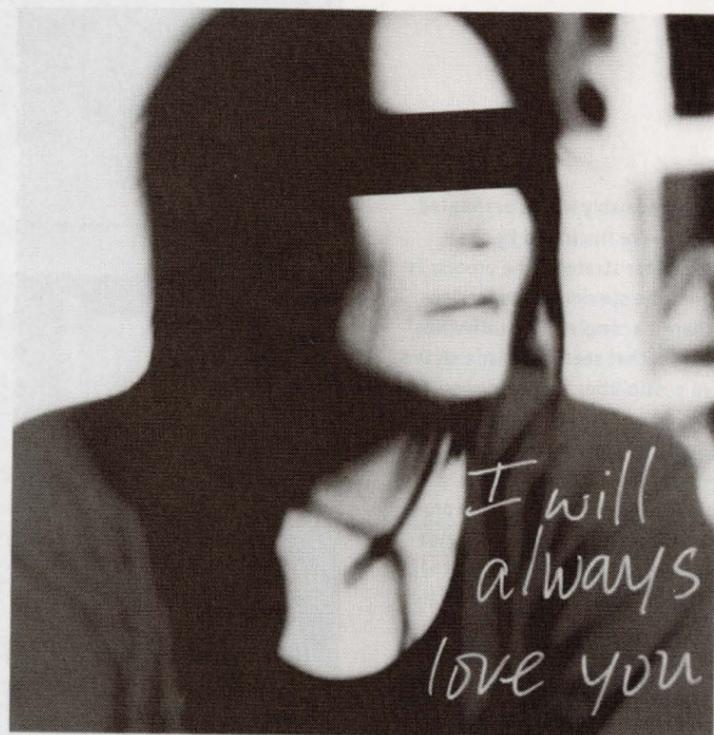
June 4 – August 21, 1994
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina

*I wanted to make a simple statement
to mark the passing
to honour what had been
to illustrate how much she had meant to me*

she was my whole world

*I wanted to share this
to revisit, remember and remake
this moment in time that is everlasting
in my heart
for the world to see*

—Rosalie Favell (excerpt from
artist's statement)



Detail of photographic installation *Living Evidence*, 1994.

GREG BEATTY

Among the most cherished possessions in most households is the family photo album. Often containing photographs arranged in chronological order, the album functions as a public record of family events such as birthdays, weddings and vacations. In *Living Evidence*, Winnipeg Métis photographer Rosalie Favell presents a photo-textual installation formatted to resemble a photo album. But instead of depicting conventional images of heterosexual family life, these photographs document Favell's three year lesbian relationship with a First Nations woman.

The "album" consists of thirty enlarged Polaroid photographs, each mounted on a square of black paper with adhesive photo corners. As a practicing photographer, Favell took many photographs of herself and her partner during the time they were together. When the relationship ended in 1989, she set these pho-

tographs aside. Later, when her pain had subsided, she decided to use the images to construct a *memento mori* to her failed love affair.

The exhibition mixes single portraits of Favell's partner with double portraits of Favell and her partner together. Favell produced the latter images by holding her camera at arm's length. As a result, they are often out of focus and off-centre in terms of composition. The furtive quality of the imagery, as opposed to the formal elegance of a professional portrait, heightens our sense that we are witnessing something which society considers taboo.

Because of public tolerance toward physical acts of affection between women, it is possible to read the photographs as depicting a relationship between sisters or close friends. This impression is reinforced by the coded narrative structure of the "snapshot," in which people feel compelled to stand close together

and smile for the camera. Favell counters this structure by inscribing handwritten excerpts from her diary for that period on each photograph. These excerpts, which range from breathless declarations of love to expressions of doubt, anger and resentment, identify the women as a lesbian couple. They also chronicle Favell's growing awareness that she is trapped in a dysfunctional relationship.

As the excerpts "I am part of her. She has total control of me" and "I found me when you left" indicate, Favell was particularly concerned with her loss of identity. In an interview, she attributed this loss in part to feelings of low self-esteem at the beginning of the relationship. But Favell's vulnerability to her partner's influence was exacerbated by two other factors. Firstly, through her partner Favell was able to explore her Métis heritage. This opportunity was not available to her when she was a child. Presumably, the fellowship and guidance she found within the Native community helped her cope with the discrimination she suffered as a member of a visible minority. Because Favell's partner was her primary conduit to this community, the relationship took on added importance in her mind. As well, alcoholism fostered a co-dependency between Favell and her partner which isolated them from family and friends. It was her partner's refusal to seek treatment for her addiction which ultimately resulted in the relationship breaking up.

No relationship is immune to the stresses and strains of everyday life. But homosexual couples are especially vulnerable because of homophobic attitudes which preclude them from acknowledging their relationship in public, and deny them the same social benefits and support that heterosexual couples receive. This heightened vulnerability is reflected in the claustrophobic nature of the photographs. Each image is executed in extreme close-up, thereby eliminating all references to the outside world. As well, most of the photographs are taken indoors. Only rarely does Favell

depict herself and her partner in an outdoor setting.

The spectre of homophobia is also evident in Favell's decision to mask her former partner's eyes with black tape to protect her identity. Like the handwritten excerpts from her diary Favell applies the tape directly onto the photos' surface. While Favell is aware of the debate surrounding the issue of "outing," and is quite comfortable identifying herself as a lesbian, she did not wish to jeopardize her ex-partner's social well-being. But the photographs are Favell's property and she was concerned that if she did not use them she would be allowing her ex-partner to continue to control her life and work. Favell introduces this concern into the photo images through the formal device of the mask. By diminishing her ex-partner's presence in the photographs, she is able to more easily locate herself—either visually, in the double portraits, or textually, in the single portraits, which Favell has inscribed with excerpts from her diary.

In curating *Living Evidence*, Ingrid Jenkner elected to install the exhibition in a branch library located in a predominantly white, upper middle-class Regina neighbourhood.¹ She did this to heighten the visibility of Métis and lesbian cultures. Providing patrons with access to "information" for cultural, economic, educational and recreational development is a part of the Sherwood Village library's policy. Numerous non-fiction books on homosexuality occupy library shelves (under the Dewey Decimal System, call number 306.766 is assigned to the sociology of homosexuality), as well as literature by such lesbian authors as Beth Brant, Ann Decter and Sandra Scoppetone.

The library's policy guidelines define "information" as encompassing "products of creativity and imagination as well as facts and knowledge." Jenkner stressed the importance of defending Favell's photographs under the same policy but library staff were distinctly uncomfortable with the notion of information on lesbian lifestyles being presented in the

form of art, and seemed content to forward all complaints to the Dunlop office. While this paradox is almost certainly attributable, in part, to a latent strain of homophobia among library employees, it also reflects the visceral power of art to provoke a response in its audience.

In a recent perusal of the gallery comment book, only one negative remark questioning the Dunlop's judgment in mounting the exhibition, and declaring homosexuality to be against "God's plan for his people," was discovered. The favorable reaction of most viewers to *Living Evidence* likely stems from its poignant subject matter. Few people cannot identify with the heartache Favell experienced when her love affair ended. "Your work is very impressive" a second patron wrote. "This is the third time I've been here and I'm moved with each viewing. These are truly strong statements of deep passion and understanding. Thank you for sharing them with us."

It was not Favell's intention to shock or provoke. "I am not an 'in your face' type of artist" she notes. "This is my attempt to let people know I am normal. To integrate my lifestyle with everyone else's." A photograph of Favell and her partner kissing, for example, would not have been inappropriate within the context of the exhibition, but Favell chose not to include any images depicting physical acts of love. Her concern for the feelings of others may function as a form of self-censorship, but this self-imposed limitation, in conjunction with the psychological tension generated by the unique formal properties of the photographs, does dramatize the extent to which Favell felt constrained in articulating her identity by the codes, conventions and prejudices of dominant society.

¹The Dunlop Art Gallery is a department of the Regina Public Library.

Greg Beatty is a Regina freelance writer with an interest in visual art.

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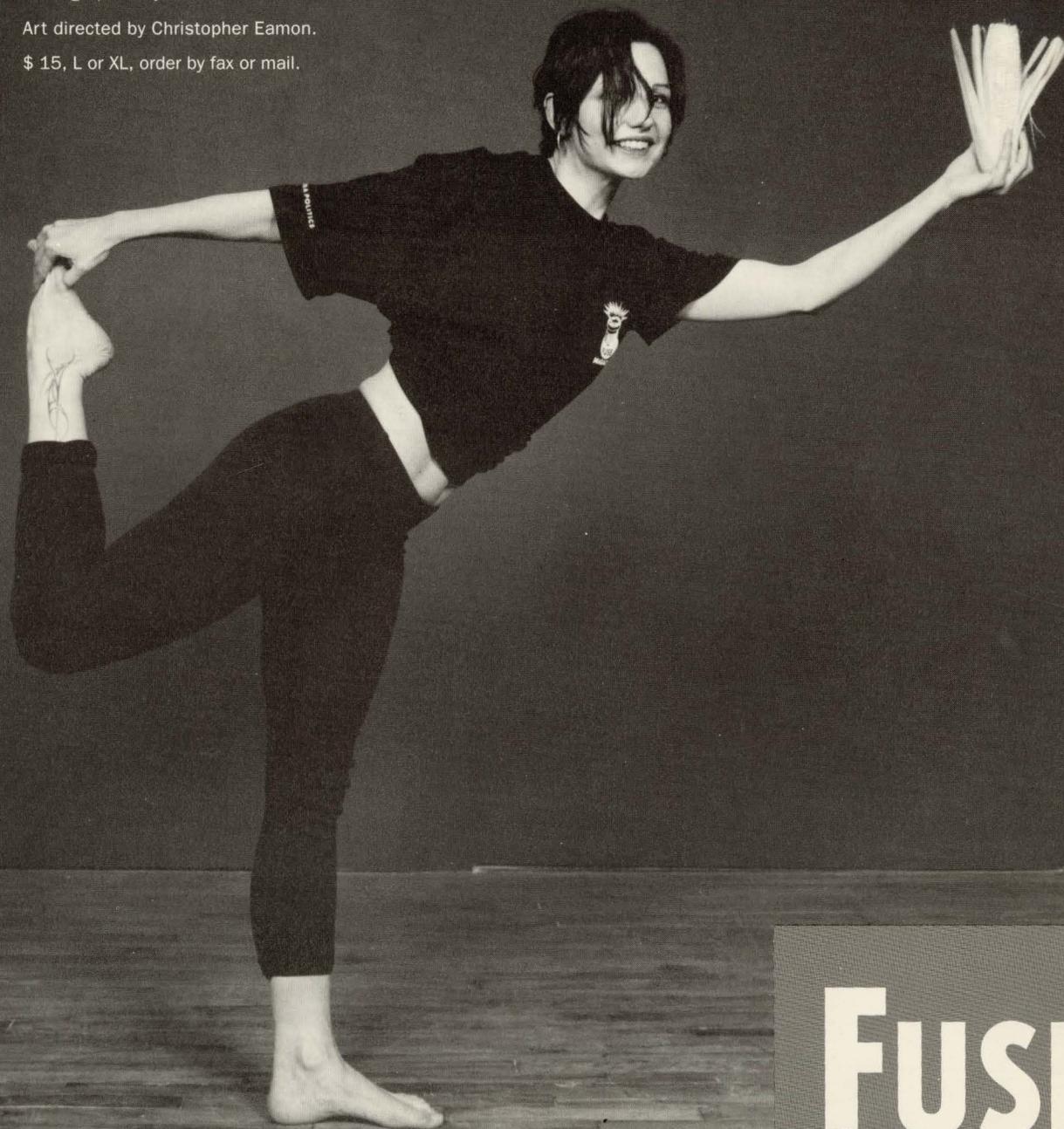
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