



"Welcome Stranger Welcome Home",  
catalogue essay for *home and away*,  
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver,  
British Columbia, 2003

## Welcome Stranger Welcome Home

Germaine Koh

The video installation *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home* (2002) extends Jin-me Yoon's concerns with the interrelated questions of displacement and location, cultural identity, and the construction of collective imaginaries. Originally developed as a contemporary artist's response to the collection of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, it draws on that city's self-conscious portrayal of itself as frontier town—an actively sustained image most notably disseminated through the annual Calgary Stampede rodeo and festival.

The three video tracks of *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home* are projected in a horizontal row, abutted to form a synchronized panorama. The left and right projections are hand-held camcorder footage of the Stampede Parade recorded as extended takes, with the left showing the festivities advancing from left to right and generally background to foreground, and the right rolling back in reverse. The central projection is a series of half-length shots of a youthful Asian woman (the artist) digitally overlaid in front of a number of landscape paintings, maintaining eye contact with and performing a different wave to the camera in each shot. The sound track of parade noises includes a dizzying mixture of marching-band, rock and other culturally specific music,

and orchestrated cries of "yahoo!", all focused by the periodic ring of a small bell.

The background pictures of the central video are from the Glenbow's collection of "railway paintings." Stylistically derived from earlier European landscape traditions, these Rocky Mountain vistas were commissioned by railroad companies around the turn of the 20th century as part of a strategy for promoting travel to the newly "opened" (but of course previously inhabited) Canadian West. To realize this is to be reminded to what extent the identity of the region has always been a selective and idealized construction tied to tourism and founded on a sort of Romantic nostalgia, and also to realize that the forced historicism of today's Calgary Stampede is a continuation of the first packaging of the region—not to mention a fiction admixed and confused with images of the American Wild West and now of global commerce. It furthermore tends towards the uniformly celebratory, despite the diversity of (often tragic) histories embedded in the region, whose vestiges appear in the form of frontier-themed parade floats from various cultural groups.

Apparently waving in response to the parade activity (particularly the audio, to which her movements sometimes correspond) as though its central object, Yoon's character wears the androgynous uniform of a contemporary skater kid—tee shirt, spiky short hair. Our perception of her presence modulates according to her different waves and slight changes in her facial expression from half-smiling to more sober. Sometimes she is the indulgent parade queen; sometimes she might seem to be a tourist greeting folks "back home." Sometimes she appears self-conscious, sometimes attention-seeking, and other times weary. Her garb is improbable

for some of these roles, suggesting that she has been spliced-in from some other reality, making it clear that she is playing a part, and underscoring the artificiality, even alien-ness, of her assembled surroundings (one of the floats even features caricatured extraterrestrials in requisite cowboy gear). Some of these readings are likely influenced by associations that her body carries: must be a tourist, can't really be the face of Calgary. Yet at the same time her body—accustomed as it is to being the object of cultural projection—is perhaps as likely as any other to be able to adapt to these disjointed images. In fact, it is hard to imagine anyone fully or simply inhabiting this place as elaborated in its own hype. Whose home is it, really, and who isn't a stranger to (estranged from) it?

As usual in Jin-me Yoon's work, the complex composition of the piece crucially structures its reading. Yoon stages the viewer's encounter with the elements of her works in order that their spatial and formal interrelationships prove to be meaningful, and often to correspond with social structures. For example, in *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996) and her *Intersection* series (begun 1996), formally related sets of photographs reflect each other across a corner of a room, in a relationship enacted and mediated by the presence of a third element, the viewer (the reflection relies on the presence of a perceptor). In the case of *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home*, the images form a cinematic panorama that, instead of unfolding temporally and spatially, compresses forward and backward into the center. The central image becomes a sort of present-tense vanishing-point that is also contiguous with both past and future—a neat analogy to the compulsive reiteration enacted through the Stampede's commercially-tinged historicism.

The electronic assemblage of parts suggests that the language of digital imaging might also be structurally significant. The digital importing of Yoon's body, the non-linear shuffling of space and time, the destabilized viewpoint, even the periodic ding that could suggest some processing signal—all underscore the orchestrated character of the situation. Recall that Yoon has previously considered the structural implications of virtual space, exploring the dislocation of cyberspace as a metaphoric site for dispersed community in the web site *imagining communities (bojagi)* (1996). In *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home* the central figure becomes a kind of avatar, a digital stand-in that travels through artificial worlds.<sup>1</sup> Given that her role-playing presence is nonetheless the most stable element within this spectacle, the piece seems to hold hybrid or unfixed identity as a fundamental condition (or maybe a survival strategy) of places constructed in the cultural imaginary—such as the anachronism of a contemporary Canadian Wild West.

All body images have a signifying function, carrying cultural associations while they represent individuals, though in cyberspace avatar icons are deliberately adopted as symbols (signs with conventionally accepted meanings), while elsewhere one does not choose the historical and social expectations one's body inevitably bears. Because identity is projected onto physical form, we realize that the connotations of Yoon's body might appear "foreign" to the frontier legend, even with its adoption of the language of globalization and even while the overall installation should provoke doubt about attributing a fixed identity to what is, after all, a performance. Yoon understands that her own body is bound to be perceived as a generic type—indeterminate Asian or

mother or member of a visible-minority group. She has employed this fact as a means of emphasizing specific social conditions arising from the confluence of histories in particular places. For example, that her body was likely to be read as that of a foreign tourist and not as Canadian when she posed in front of the standard sights of Banff National Park in *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991) was calculated to reveal not only certain prevailing assumptions about who does and doesn't naturally fit into the national image, but also the seemingly natural conflation of Asian identities within Canadian narratives. In other words, the unlikelihood of her being perceived as an individual points to the cultural conditions at work in particular places.

Regarding her use of her own and her family's images as tokens of social processes Yoon has noted, "I find that what may appear to be personal narratives in fact imply larger social and historical considerations. Seen in this light, what I choose to recount is no longer about me as an isolated individual."<sup>2</sup> This might be a useful reminder for her works interweaving family and socio-political histories, such as *body a thread dis ease a mountain* (1994) or *Touring Home From Away* (1998), and it should be evident in pieces such as *Souvenirs of the Self* and *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, in which her models were pictured in deliberately impassive poses that referenced conventions for public self-presentation. On the other hand, the socially open (albeit equally conventional) gesture of the *Welcome Stranger Welcome Home* character ends up provoking curiosity by being quite ambivalent, appearing resistant to the different roles and vulnerable at the same time. Despite the fact that the piece is clearly an intervention into a cultural rhetoric and not an individual

story, it is nevertheless tempting to borrow this indeterminate portrayal as a point of departure to consider the personal, particularly as it relates to the local. Within her work Yoon has explored how her image and history function within wider social conditions, yet we could also note that her deployment of her body as example (not unrelated to her well-respected teaching activity, one could venture) reveals a more basic — and individual — willingness to be a public figure, even to fulfill the function of an elder for certain communities. This underlying decision does stem from a personal ethic that, within rhetorics of globalization that make strange the very idea of home, reminds us of the importance of local memory and action.

<sup>1</sup>The term "avatar," originally designating the incarnation of a deity in Hinduism, now also commonly refers to a physical appearance created or selected to represent oneself within interactive virtual environments <sup>2</sup>"Other Conundrums: Monika Kin Gagnon in conversation with Jin-me Yoon," *Jin-me Yoon: between arrival and departure* (Vancouver: Western Front, 1998), 46–7