"Private Thoughts / Public Moments"

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

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

Review by Germaine Koh

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

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

Meera Sethi intervened upon the albums of didactic material housed in prominent kiosks throughout the Canadian galleries. The existing laminated pages present photographs and documents not only of traditional historical subjects such as leaders, decisive battles, political events and narratives of development and technological advancement, but also of tendencies in popular culture, everyday life and entertainment. Inserted amongst these, Sethi’s pages for Crossing Histories (2000) bore quotations from Canadian statutes, which marked policy changes in the treatment of marginalized peoples, such as the Chinese exclusion act of 1927, revisions to the Indian Act, and a 1793 Upper Canada statute limiting slavery. Presented as long tracts of text drawn from legal statutes, the dryness of Sethi’s insertions signaled a certain historical seriousness distinct from the lightness of the existing image-based pages, and had the effect of complicating them. It was appropriately ironic that she borrowed certain trappings of academic historiography (unembellished primary texts to recall the non-dominant narratives often excluded from established histories. However, this gesture of remembrance might have had even more impact did the albums not already tacitly acknowledge the contentiousness of presenting a uniformly heroic historical account, including as they do some documentation of more infamous moments, such as the operations of slavery and the existence of the Ku Klux Klan in Canada.

In her video installation Space-Shifter (2000), Neena Arora adopted an audio track from another didactic station—a conspicuous, chapel-like structure housing headphones and seats for viewing J.E.H. MacDonald’s painting The Beaver Dam. The original 12-minute educational soundtrack (curiously available in both male and female voices, providing different flavours of expertise?) leads the museum visitor through a series of relaxation and viewing exercises, emphasizing awareness of one’s...
character of its sitter. The relaxed yoga pose and loose, colourful clothing of the figure of Mrs. E hints at scenes unacknowledged in adjacent paintings, namely the influence of theosophy and Eastern thought on Varley and others of his circle. Nearby, James filled one of the let drawers usually used to present Group of Seven sketches with simulated memorabilia and fictionalized diaries “written” by Mrs. Ely at the time of the real visit of the Indian mystic poet and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore to British Columbia in 1912. Describing a spiritual excitement related to Tagore’s writing, the strikingly-authentic-looking diaries become a second, imagined, portrait of a person finding personal identity through the guidance of another. The work also subtly recalls histories of exclusion: the drawer is lined with a world map tracing the trans-Atlantic routes that both Varley and Mrs. Ely would have followed when immigrating from Britain, and those taken by Tagore in 1916—when he was denied entry into Canada—and in 1929.

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

Germaine Koh is a Canadian visual artist and independent curator of no fixed address.