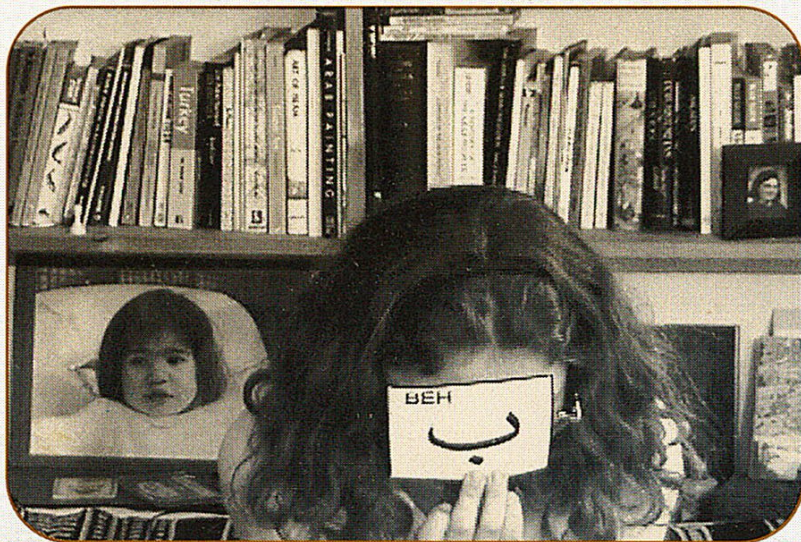


FEMINIST PRACTICES:



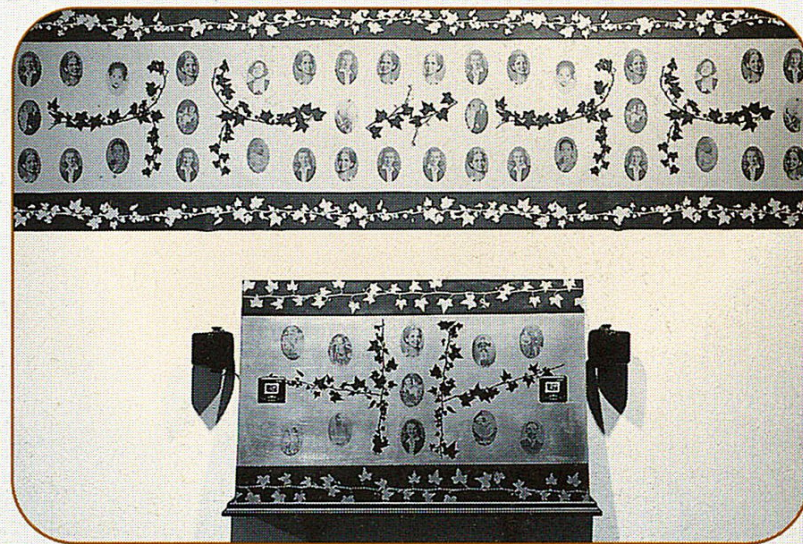
JAMELIE HASSAN

September 9 - October 16, 1999

Curatorial Talk Thursday, September 9, 7 pm
Followed by Opening Reception 8 pm



LATERAL MOVES



LEILA SUJIR

FEMINIST PRACTICES: LATERAL MOVES



As personal narrative takes its place within the interstices of history I would answer Visweswaran affirmatively when she says "the process of remembering implies that one must speak of memories. If one does not speak is memory lost?"⁶ There are many forms of speaking and many positions from where to do so. Hassan's and Sujir's artistic practice is both lyrical and political. In the context of this exhibition their position - as women, inseparably posited in the realms of the private and public, as lateral movers - is both fluid and specifically located. By making lateral moves they are in the process of continual mutation as Minh-ha sees it in gender: "A social regulator and political potential for change, gender, in its own way, baffles definition. It escapes the diagnostic power of a sex-oriented language/sex-identified logic and coincides thereby with difference, whose inseparable temporal and spatial

dynamic produces the illusion of identity while undermining it relentlessly."⁷ This dynamic allows us to tap into those breaks and crevices overlooked by dominant narratives and delve into the contingent: the poetic, the subjective, and the potential for insight and change.

Corinna Ghaznavi, 1999

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Undone Interval: Trinh T. Minh-ha in Conversation with Annamaria Morelli" in Iian Chambers and Lidia Curti, *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996: 8.

² Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1994: 9.

³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London and New York, 1991: 157.

⁴ Visweswaran 1994: 117.

⁵ Marwan Hassan, "Material Visions" *Fuse Magazine* 22 (1999): 23.

⁶ Visweswaran 1994: 70.

⁷ Minh-ha 1989: 116.



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Feminist Practices: Lateral Moves seeks to investigate the 'lateral moves' that women are required to make. It assumes that multiple subjectivities are inherently embodied by women and specifically explores these subjectivities as they relate to a post-colonial paradigm. Both Jamelie Hassan and Leila Sujir, as Canadian women of Middle Eastern and Asian descent, are situated within this very paradigm where "...people are always socialized to understand things from more than their own point of view, to see both sides of the matter, and to say at least two things at the same time."¹ Their artistic practice, understood as stories from the interstices, has the unique ability to mesh the personal with the political, the myth with the factual. They create realities and fictions as a way of presenting and making sense of a complex cultural scenario that both of them embody. This entails making sense of rather than defining; of opening up to contingency rather than presenting a closed narrative.

As artist-in-residence at the historical Eldon House in London, Hassan researched the history of the women in the house and the practice of colonialism as it is present there. This, juxtaposed with Hassan's own history and position, becomes the material for her two installation pieces: one centering around the travel journals of Millie Harris, the other around a lithograph printed in 1793 showing

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the British Marquis Cornwallis taking the two sons of Tippoo Sultaun hostage. By adding her own stories to both of these existing ones - and thus positioning herself centrally within the narrative - Hassan both disrupts and 'makes sense' of the past and present. Juxtaposing her own journals and experiences in Egypt with those of Millie Harris from nearly one hundred years ago, Hassan both finds a way to link her history to that of a woman radically positioned elsewhere and to question the authority of constructed narratives, performing an inversion: "Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of Quixote and Hamlet is a spectator of Hamlet?...These inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. With the loss of ethnographic authority, the subject about whom we write now write back, and in so doing pose us as anthropological fictions."² Hassan performs a double inversion, reading back to the narrative by a wealthy colonial woman and answering from the position of a post-colonial Arabic-Canadian.

This position, despite our officially labelled 'multicultural society' is itself problematic: "There is indeed little hope of speaking this simultaneously outside-inside actuality into existence in simple, polarizing black-and-white terms. The challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself: the becoming Asian-

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American; the realm in-between, where predetermined rules cannot fully apply.”³ This issue is the focus of Hassan’s video which addresses aspects of language and identity. We see second generation Canadians seeking to link back to their cultural roots by learning Arabic and finding themselves made to feel different by that very community due to their own loss of language. How to link back to a history and culture from an entirely different spatial, social, economic and cultural position? Where - though affinity is genuine - Visweswaran points out, “we of the alphabet soup...are the ones who cannot properly pronounce our own south Asian names.”⁴ Yet “your history,” as Hassan claims, “is not your own but a collectivity of struggles around issues addressed from a totally different space, time, place and position.”

This notion is furthered by Sujir in *Luminous Wallpapers, For Jackson* where she explores cultural hybridity and signals a broadened community. We see six small video monitors attached to copper plates which have photo murals

on them. In the videos we see two interviews taking place. The portraits adorning the mural are not from a genealogical source but stem from archival photographs. With this Sujir underlines that the term ‘marginal’ “...conceals the complex and contradictory relations that they may have with themselves, their own societies, their production or the nations to which they have migrated.”⁵ The subjects of her videos are Sujir’s Canadian mother, Ruth Horricks-Sujir, and former Human Rights Commissioner, Rosemary Brown, who became the grandmother of Sujir’s nephew, Jackson. The very different accounts the two women narrate from their past are linked by their strength and vision and the emphasis on the complex interwoven fabric of the private and political.

These are again inexorably linked in *Archival Moments* where Sujir has worked archival historical footage into a poetic response to national and provincial immigration policies. On three TV monitors embedded in marble we see a series of eyes - sleeping or dreaming; eyes witnessing as history passes over them. Words such as Mackenzie King’s “it is only natural to keep Canada white” not only affected immigration policies but consequent history on a private and political level. Further, these policies and histories continue to reverberate in our present context. The marble references national monuments and points to the necessity of remembering that which was buried. The work throws open questions like: what is ‘natural’, what is ‘unnatural’, and what is ‘national’? To whom/what do we erect monuments, and by whose power? Who authorizes the categorizing of peoples into races and yet again into ‘unclean’?