

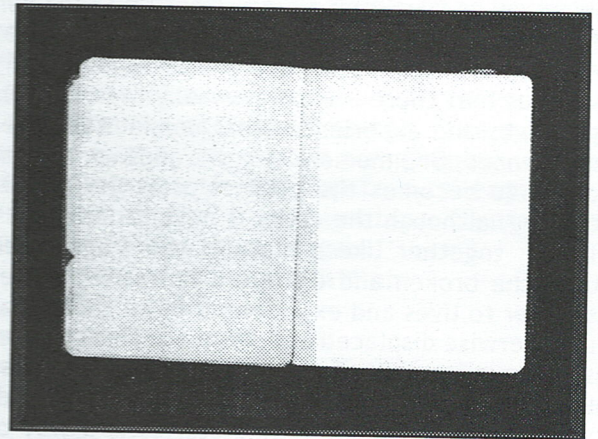
FEMINIST PRACTICES: LATERAL MOVES

Artists

Jamelie Hassan
Leila Sujir

Curator

Corinna Ghaznavi



Jamelie Hassan, *Egypt Journal*, 1999.

Women and people in third spaces have some similar issues. When investigating these we must be aware of looking at practice as opposed to inserting work into a theoretical framework, and recall what Audre Lorde has warned against, regarding the issue of a dominant white feminist discourse: "The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries."ⁱ Similarly, in this context of South Asian or Middle Eastern artists, concepts of the Other or marginalised are not sufficient for understanding identity that falls out of the dominant system, metanarrative, or mythology.

Problematizing the term 'marginality,' Marwan Hassan points out that "Middle Eastern artists whether in the diaspora or still living in the region cannot simply be classified as 'marginal.' This term 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."ⁱⁱ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak carries this idea forward and stresses the origin of the term, which "In the early print culture of the West it was in the margins that the so-called argument of the paragraph or set of paragraphs was written.... Thus I am beginning to think of the concept-metaphor of margins more and more in terms of the history of margins: the place for the argument, the place for the critical moment, the place of interests for the assertions rather than a shifting of the center."ⁱⁱⁱ

This place for the argument is a place for

stories. Stories are never simple things. Traditionally they start with "Once upon a time" and end with "happily ever after." This obscures the fact that they are an ongoing process, pieced together slowly and continually by different events. There is a piece of memory, a piece of history, a story heard from another, an image that triggers connection. There is experience. Jamelie Hassan and Leila Sujir use narration as a way of questioning stories that have become entrenched in us: instead of "once upon a time" their stories more appropriately use the Arabian Nights beginning, "There was and there wasn't." The stories these artists tell us start from a subject position and open out, like ripples in water, to encompass what at first may seem to be outside the story but really shows us that there are always many layers. Lives upon lives and experiences that connect to other experiences. One moment triggers another, so that adding to becomes the process of larger understanding, although the claim is never adding up.^{iv} Pieced together like a mosaic, the fragmented story, the broken and disrupted narrative, moves us closer to lives and experiences of all those that are otherwise displaced and silenced. This requires us to move laterally. To move laterally, is to do so out of necessity because one has difficulty in finding a place to belong. Telling stories is a way of exploring cultural difference and a way of breaking open categories that are too confined to encompass real lives.

Midnight's Children, Shame, and The Satanic Verses make up the installation *The Trilogy*, created in 1990 by Jamelie Hassan in response to the censorship and Fatwa called on Salman Rushdie. In this work, Hassan addresses the event and its political, personal, cultural, and social implications. Though each piece has the same title as a novel by Rushdie, they do not illustrate the novels but rather address these and the events surrounding them. What we see are the implications of reading Rushdie

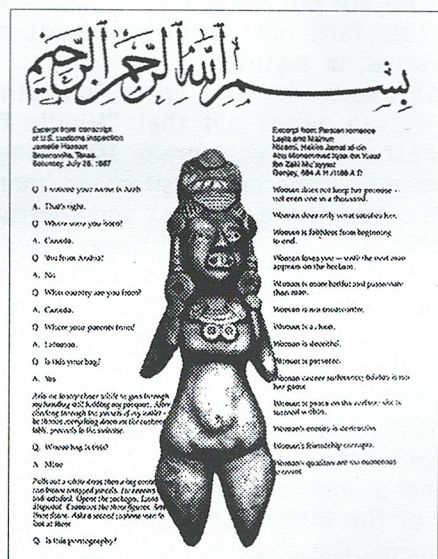
and Hassan's relationship to the personal, political and artistic.

In the installation *Shame* we see the words IS THIS PORNOGRAPHY? Above two looming images of pre-Columbian Mexican figures, a table with a telephone, answering machine and the figurine still partially in its wrapping and, above the table, a panel with a photographic image of that figurine between a transcript of a customs officer and the artist in Brownsville, Texas. Beside this a misogynist passage from the celebrated 12th century Persian-Arabic romance of *Layla wa Majnun*. The recordings we hear on the answering machine are one from an art institution promising to return the artist's work and pointing out how that institution works to enable a practicing artist to exhibit, one from the artist to her son, and two obscene phone calls directed at Hassan herself. The question printed on the wall - is this pornography? - recites the custom agent's question to a colleague upon unwrapping the pre-Columbian figure. The question follows the passage:

I noticed your name is Arab
That's right.
Where were you born?
Canada
You from Arabia?
No.
What country are you from?
Canada.

Feminist ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran tells of an incident where she had to apply for a visa for India in the Indian Consulate in Paris. After being closely questioned she was asked to return the next day to speak directly to the Head Consul. The question that caused confusion for both parties was "what is your origin?" Visweswaran writes: "The consular official's questioning highlighted in a brief moment a series of contradictions about how we understand and talk about identity. By "origin," was she referring to my parentage? Place of birth, or both? If she meant to emphasize my parentage, was it because I "looked" Indian...Did it matter that one parent was Indian by birth and the other not? Was it important to know that both were American citizens? Did it matter what I called myself, or with what culture(s) I claimed affinity? For me, race, nationhood, culture, and identity were as surely entangled in the consular official's question as she had seen it to be "straightforward."^v

The problem is not that of a confused identity but rather of one, which does not fit into the categories provided. Hassan juxtaposes the title of Rushdie's book with two kinds of obscenity. Obscenity directed at her by the customs agent and by the phone messages. The title of the novel, *Shame*, points to the contents of Rushdie's work, as well as to the shame of censorship and fundamentalism and the shame of ignorance in the way that the customs agent addressed both the artist and the object she was bringing with her. Hassan points to the complexity of identity, culture, and



Jamelie Hassan, *Shame* (Detail),
from *The Trilogy*, 1990.
Photo: Patricia Holdsworth

categorization. As Homi Bhabha points out, differential identities are performative, which means that they are continually 'opening out.' Here, difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between ...*^{vi}

Leila Sujir's docufiction, *Dreams of the Night Cleaners*, made in 1995, addresses problems of belonging and questions the systems that have been set up to categorize identities. The work combines stories of individuals, memory, dreams, and history. It circles around three women: Usha, a flight crew scheduler, Devika, a night cleaner, and Jeanne, mother of Usha and retired archivist and writer. Usha fights with memories of family violence and family secrets as well as her own identity, which does not seem to have a place in the country she is in. Devika, who had began her Masters degree in India around the topic of the World Bank and its corruption, is frustrated both by her job and the failure of white liberals to see and listen to her as she is vs. how they expect she should be. As employees of Canadian Airlines, Usha struggles with how she fits or doesn't fit into the 'Canadian' identity, and both are threatened by job loss if a proposed merger goes through. In one scene we see Usha on the phone. We hear only her side of the conversation:

U S H A, Usha.
 What do you mean?
 No, I'm from Calgary
 Yes.
 Here.
 Yes, I said Calgary.

Kamala Visweswaran points out that: "Certainly the question "Where are you from?" is never an innocent one. Yet not all subjects have equal difficulty in replying. To pose a question of origin to particular subjects is to subtly pose a question of return, to challenge not only temporally, but geographically, one's place in the present. For someone who is neither fully Indian nor wholly American, it is a question that provokes a sudden failure of confidence, the fear of never replying adequately."^{vii}



Leila Sujir, *Dreams of The Night Cleaners* (Video Still), 1995.

Photo: Mark Washeim

This failure of confidence marks Usha as she tries to come to terms with her own past and tries to make clear to Devika that she feels the same as the night cleaner. Resentfully Devika points out to her that their positions are vastly different. Furious and frustrated she relates the story of the interviewer who wanted to force her into speaking of India as a place of poverty and religious riots vs. India as a place of riches that fed England. Who denied her the opportunity to expand on a topic that she was well educated about and that demonstrates the continuation of financial colonization by the West. The video ends with a car-freeze frame of the two women, laughing, and an aerial shot of the river. It is a moment when we move back into fiction. In the end we don't really know how the story ends, yet are left with two women that find common ground. Demonstrating that there is a space that they connect to and within which they connect to each other. The laughter that overtakes them spontaneously in this last scene recalls Bakhtin's assertion that "laughter can explode worlds."

Jeanne plays the role of archivist and historian by relating events of her own history - her marriage and immigration to Canada with her Indian husband, his trouble in the West ("this country at a distance is a wonderful dream. Close up I began to see the nightmares"), and his subsequent death in a plane crash. Like a dream we see images of this plane and the newspaper clippings reporting the death. Jeanne also pulls out other newspaper clippings and reads a text from Canadian history: "I think of the reports of the ship, the Komagatu Maru's imminent arrival in 1914, being circulated seven weeks prior to its actual arrival in Vancouver harbor - the coming of such large numbers of South Asians, 376, is described in the newspapers as a "threatened invasion...I can't believe that...The premier of B.C., in 1914, Richard McBride, just prior to the arrival of the ship, the Komagatu Maru, stated (in the Times, London, April 1914) the following: 'To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white people, and we always have to keep in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country.'"

On the topic of history, Spivak has said: "my own feeling is that one works *with* history as much as against it, taking history to be something like a script that is at one's command as an assignment. That is an assumption one must make as one moves."^{viii} This is the kind of assumption that Sujir (and Hassan) make. The videos of Sujir reflect fantasy, drama, memory and fiction. Weaving these together she creates work that opens up and re-writes events and subjects. Sujir is interested in how mythologies are formulated, how systems are set up and points out that Mackenzie King, who, as Deputy Labour Minister in the early part of the century, was instrumental in setting up immigration policies that restricted Asians from coming to Canada, was not inventing but merely putting into

position. This positioning, this formulating a mythology, is full of contradictions. It displaces so many people who then don't have a legitimate sense of belonging. It is a mythology that continues. Stories, then, are a way to enter into alternative narratives. Not, and again I quote Spivak: "to recover a lost consciousness, but to see... the itinerary of the silencing. You see, that's what one looks at. So from that point of view, our view of history is a very different view. It is also cumulative, but it's a view where we see the way in which narratives compete with each other, which one rises, which one falls, who is silent, and the itinerary of the silencing rather than the retrieval."

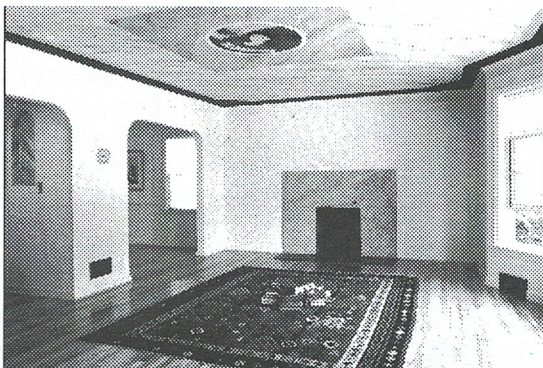
ix

As Sujir gives voice to night cleaners, to immigrants, to children of immigrants, to memory, to secrets, and other areas that have been silenced, Hassan gives voice to Bedros. In the 1997 video installation, *Boutros Al Armenian/Mediterranean Modern*, she reinserts the figure of an itinerant painter into history; not only making him visible but also giving him back something of the identity lost. He signs his Armenian name, Bedros, at the end of the video. Boutros, the Arabic name for Bedros, was a painter fleeing the Armenian genocide in the twenties. He arrived in French Mandate Lebanon and resided in the house of Hassan's grandfather where he painted the interior and subsequently went to other village households to paint his decorative motifs. From found footage - a video letter sent to her mother as the family house is being modernized - Hassan narrates the story of Bedros as he paints the rooms. We hear stories of Hussein Shousher, the merchant recently returned to Lebanon from America, of his four year old daughter, Aysha, and of rebel attacks. There are also stories of violence signaled by death, the appearance of the French officer, and the flight of the villagers; and the stories of the images that Bedros is inspired to paint: drapes, colours, a woman's face and images copied from confectionery tins and trays brought back from America by Hussein. Thus aspects of a café and Hussein's former business in Sioux Falls, South Dakota re-emerge in Lebanon. Beyond the layering of

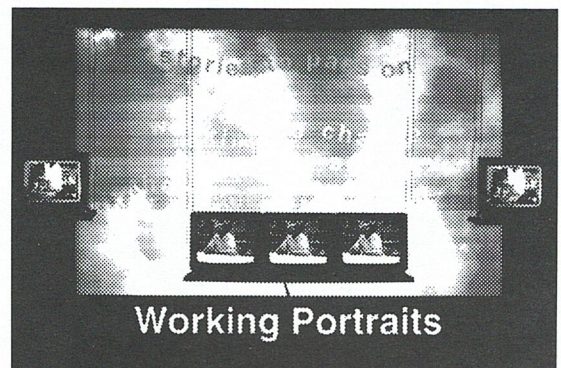
history, domesticity, violence, birth, travel and books is, of course, Bedros: himself displaced and making a new life in a place where he no longer possesses a family name. Underlining this loss is the fact that the house was dismantled in 1995, wiping out all trace that gave him an existence within Hassan's family. By positioning him centrally in her work, Hassan reclaims the painter and expands his identity, one that is revived by memory, one that, as it turns out, can be traced to other places.

Making visible identities and subjectivities that are obscured is one of several themes that run through Leila Sujir's 1992 video installation, *Working Portraits*. Working late at night with the cleaners triggered the sense of story around issues of being highly visible and invisible. A staff of over 300 people made up the cleaners at the University of Calgary, a whole community who maintained the buildings, rooms, and grounds, and yet remained mostly unseen. Watching the video I was reminded of the fairy tale of the cobbler who arrived every morning to find his workroom cleaned meticulously by some invisible force during the night. The cobbler was conscious of the transformation whereas most of us are not. The installation had three central monitors showing the speaker in the portrait (one of the caretaking staff) flanked by two monitors showing this particular person at their job. What struck me most was the cleaning of the chalkboards and replacing of the chalk on the ledges. At the beginning of each class it must be taken for granted that a new piece of chalk is there. Does anyone wonder how it got there and - more significantly - who the person that placed it there is?

The caretakers came from a variety of places including India, Tibet, Holland, the Sudan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines and Tanzania. Their stories included war, flight, survival, dreams, work, night school, children, parents, adjustment, upheaval and displacement. Although the phrases "back home" and "my country" are often heard there is also a clear understanding that there is no going back. Be this due to political and/or economic turmoil or to the



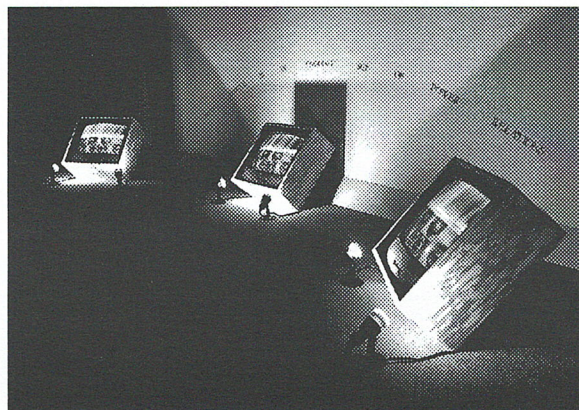
Jamelie Hassan, *Boutros Al Armenian/Mediterranean Modern* (Installation view, Windsor, Ont.), 1997.
Photo: Cheryl O'Brien
Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Windsor



Leila Sujir, *Working Portraits* (Installation view), 1992.
Photo: John Dean

fact that their children are now Canadian. Also, because, as my own father has pointed out, once you leave you will never again regain that sense of origin or "home." They have entered Bhabha's 'third space' both as immigrants to this country as well as people having left their own countries for a different way of life. The repeated images of clouds, however, underline the fact of one common sky. Surprising, touching, and wrenching stories come to the fore as the caretakers speak, stepping forward in their identity, making themselves visible to a world where they are largely obscured - not simply because they are night workers but also because the categories set up to encompass them are not sufficient. We glimpse the layers of what makes up lives and understand what Bhabha means when he claims, "it is from this *instability* of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities - modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native' - that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in its enunciation: 'it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation...'"^x It is this act of recitation that the subjects of Sujir's portraits practice. Carving their own space.

Feminist Practices: Lateral Moves seeks to investigate the practice of Jamelie Hassan and Leila Sujir as women and as lateral movers. Leila Sujir's 1992 video installation, *Archival Moments in an Ongoing Set Of Power Relations*, was developed during an Artist Residency at the artist-run SAW Video in Ottawa. Sujir uses material from the National Film Board Archives, shots of flowers and flowing water, and eyes that dominate the screens, watchful eyes and sleeping/dreaming eyes. The archival footage fleetingly shows various moments of Canadian history: Mackenzie King as Prime Minister while enacting immigration policies restricting Asian immigration to Canada; the cabinet as it signs the National Registration Act that will sanction the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent; King's resignation; and a historic photograph of the Vancouver parade celebrating the resumption of diplomatic relations between Canada and India. The eyes serve as a reminder of those people directly affected by Canadian policies and

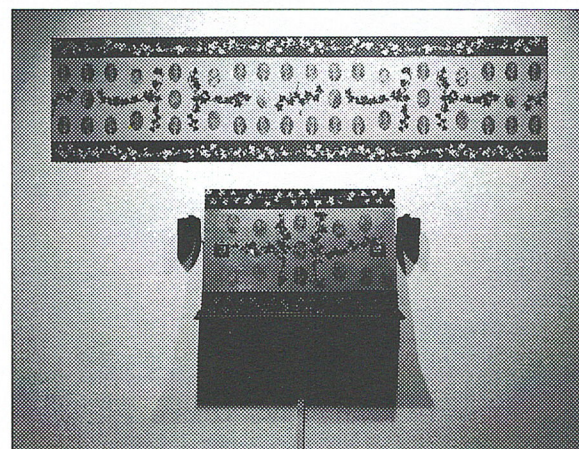


Leila Sujir, *Archival Moments* (Installation view), 1992.
Photo: William (Bill) Wilson

history. The gaze is powerful yet silent - signaling that which was left out in the narrative. It also insists on presence. Sujir has clothed her three monitors in marble casings, giving the work the frame of a monument. The little lights at the base, echoing the architecture of monument lights, underline the commemorative aspect of the piece. Empowering the margins and giving these a place in history.

In 1999 Sujir created an album for her nephew, entitled *Luminous Wallpapers, For Jackson*. On a mural we see portraits of various people somehow related to Jackson through several generations, indicating the rich history of the past two hundred years of people coming from Jamaica, the American South, India, Scotland, and Ireland to Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. The tiny monitors capture himself and his two grandmothers relating their own stories, reading from their memoirs, moving in their own private spaces. The piece exemplifies the possibility of a much more diverse cultural moment than the mythologies that Sujir is at pains to dismantle. Rather than including archival footage and history the way she has in previous works discussed above, her starting point is Jackson as a two year old child as center.

Topsy Turvy Land, Mysore Boys^{xi}, and *Egypt Journal*^{xii} are new works of Hassan's, which she juxtaposes with *Vittel*, an earlier piece from 1984. Children, who have an important part in much of Hassan's work, play a central role in these pieces. On children and society Marwan Hassan has written: "Civil society as it is manufactured occludes children. They know it and they resist this occlusion. Civil society is a pair of scissors trimming their wings."^{xiii} In a vitrine we see *Mysore Boys*. During her Artist-in-Residence at Eldon House in London, Ontario, Hassan found a lithograph from 1793 depicting the British Marquis Cornwallis taking the two sons of his enemy, Tippoo Suldaun, hostage. Focusing on this event, Hassan has created a collection of relics relating to the two boys. While their father and their culture were

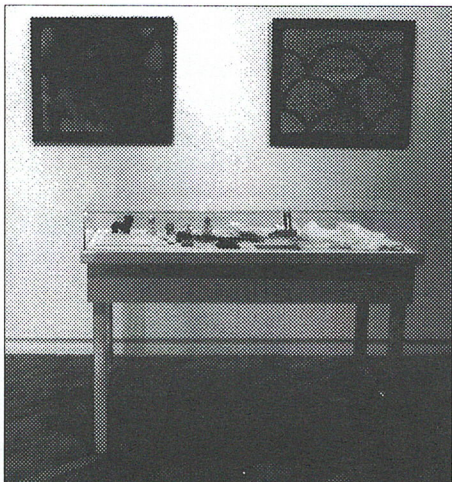


Leila Sujir, *Luminous Wallpaper, For Jackson* (Installation view), 1999.
Photo: William (Bill) Wilson

being slaughtered, these two boys became an adored phenomenon in English colonial salons. The relics create a narrative around the hostage sons, gathering elements that piece together their own experience against the background of the construction of Colonial history (a large collection of Tippoo Suldaun's possessions, including his swords, were part of the booty taken to England as collector's items after his death).

Certain elements, like the small T-shirts with pockets, worn also by the children in the video, *Topsy Turvy Land*, connect to the *Mysore Boys* where one theme is children and their claim to a cultural identity of their own - based on experience, interest, stories and memories. *Topsy Turvy Land* also addresses language and children's acquiring it. This time it focuses on two young Canadians seeking to learn Arabic as a way to explore their specific cultural connections. The work problematizes the notion of the Other as the children begin to relate their difficulties and we come to question that intimate construct that hooks language to identity. The children read, point to, translate, recite, and trace language. They use parables, proverbs and narratives. A history lesson, which is their own history, a lesson in geography (Question: "Why is Arabia called Topsy Turvy Land?" Answer: "It is a land of contradictions: the Red Sea is blue"). The piece is reflective of desire, the desire to know more, followed by the question, how can we know more? It underlines the lateral moves that one makes in order to connect. And demonstrates the plural of histories and geographies as open sites. Ruins and inscriptions emphasize the commemorative aspect of the piece. The book and sites - the kitchen, the studio/library and the memorial garden - are brought in as a way of learning and making affiliations on ones own terms; as a way of challenging traditional identity.

The commemorative links Hassan's work to Sujir's. Water is an essential element in *Archival Moments*. It washes over the screen and blurs the images, so that we see these as through a river or

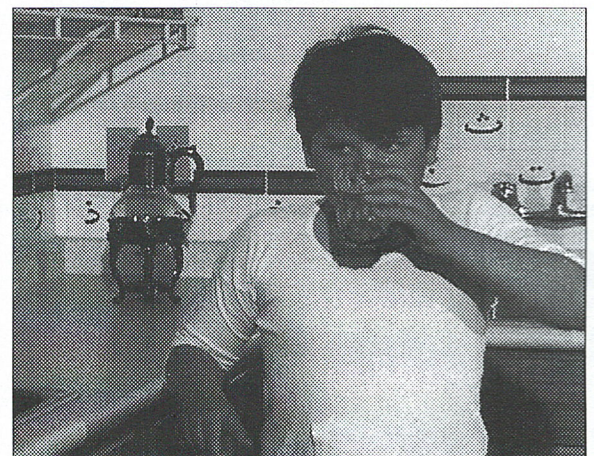


Jamelie Hassan, *Mysore Boys*
(Installation view), 1999.
Photo: Ingrid Mayrhofer

through a veil of tears. Sujir has said that she thinks of history as a river that washes and moves through people's lives whether we're aware of it or not. Traditionally, water is considered to be both cleansing and an element of change. In *Topsy Turvy Land* we also see water. Water does not represent a wiping out but rather another beginning, one that includes the arguments of the margin. Hassan emphasizes that it is not a question of one generation replacing another, but rather the inter-connections between those generations.

This lateral move as a way of connecting rather than experiencing polarities is also Hassan's *Egypt Journal*. Taking the journals of Amelia Archange (Milly) Harris (1868 - 1959) she juxtaposes her own work relating to Egypt - which includes *Vittel* as well as a watercolour painting and her choice of which pages of the Harris journal she has chosen to exhibit - with those of a woman travelling as a white Colonial nearly one hundred years ago. Similar to Sujir, Hassan manages to collapse the dichotomy of Colonial/Postcolonial, time, and space in order to make connections that open up a way for new understanding and possibility.

Stories do not have a clear beginning or end but are a process that is never really complete. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha points out that there is no such thing as singular origins, and that we need to think beyond narration in order to hear stories of cultural difference. These can be found in what he calls "third spaces" where "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation can be initiated in the act of defining the idea of society itself."^{xiv} Narration is making up stories, the art practice of Hassan and Sujir is political and creative; the materials they use are taken from documented history, from archival sources, from journals (theirs and others) from family stories, from memory, from their own and other's subject positions. The way that Hassan and Sujir weave together all these elements exemplifies a way of visualizing and contextualizing Bhabha's third spaces as well as underlining that these narratives are not totalizing, just as their subject matter cannot be absolutely categorized. They point to the one-sided representation of his-



Jamelie Hassan, *Topsy Turvy Land* (Video Still), 1999.

tory and metanarratives as well as to the fact that terms such as 'minority,' 'marginality' and 'cultural difference' are extremely complex. So that even while narrating, they also "look at the limits of narration, look at narrativity, make up stories that tell us, "this is history," or make up stories that tell us, "This is the programme to bring about social justice."^{xv}

Corinna Ghaznavi

ⁱ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, ed. C. Morraya and G. Anzaldua, Watertown, Mass., Persephone Press, 1981: 95.

ⁱⁱ Marwan Hassan, "Material Visions," in the exhibition catalogue *...east of here...(re)imagining the 'orient,'* YYZ Artists' Outlet, November 20 - December 14, 1996: 23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Harasym, ed., *The Post-Colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990:156f.

^{iv} See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 162.

^v Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1994: 115.

^{vi} Bhabha 1994: 219.

^{vii} Visweswaran 1994: 115.

^{viii} Harasym, ed. 1990: 114.

^{ix} Harasym, ed. 1990: 31.

^x Bhabha 1994: 152.

^{xi} Original image courtesy of Eldon House, London, Ontario.

Mysore Boys in memory of Rummana Hussain (1952 - 1999).

^{xii} 1889 - 1900 Egypt Journal written by Amelia Archange (Milly)

Harris (1868 - 1959). Courtesy of J.J. Talman Regional Collection, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.

^{xiii} Marwan Hassan, "Children and Social Space: Why Did Derrida Say No," in the exhibition catalogue *Identity Transfers: Jamelie Hassan, Sarindar Dhaliwal*, The Art Gallery of Peterborough, Sept. 9 - October 11, 1993: 32.

^{xiv} Bhabha 1994: 1f.

^{xv} Harasym, ed. 1990: 19.

Exhibition at A Space Gallery

110 - 410 Richmond Street West, Toronto, Canada
September 9 - October 16, 1999



The exhibition is co-sponsored by the
South Asian Visual Arts Collective

450 - 410 Richmond Street West, Toronto, Canada



We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Jamelie Hassan thanks the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ron Benner, Corinna Ghaznavi, Leila Sujir, Eldon House and the London Regional Art & Historical Museums, London, Ontario, J.J. Talman Regional Collection, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario and the Ontario Arts Council, Toronto for their generous assistance in various aspects of this exhibition.

Leila Sujir gratefully acknowledges the support of Corinna Ghaznavi, the SouthAsian Visual Arts Collective and Jamelie Hassan, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Director of the Art Gallery of Peterborough, Illi-Maria Tamplin, Katherine Yitalo, Stephen Rose, Barbara Prokop, Andrew Jaremko for his work in these multi-channel video installations as Audio/Visual Technologist, Ed Sinclair, Michael Balsler, and Bill Payne.