

ARTIST'S TALKS AND SCREENINGS:

Tuesday October 28, 6pm
Nat Taylor Cinema, York University
4700 Keele Street, North York

Wednesday October 29, 12-1pm
Room 320, Zavitz Hall
Guelph University, Guelph

Wednesday October 29, 8pm
Ed Video, 16A Wyndham Street, Guelph

Thursday October 30, 12-1pm
Toronto School of Art
110 Spadina Avenue, 7th floor, Toronto

Thursday November 6, 7:30
Ontario College of Art and Design
Room 126, 100 McCaul Street, Toronto

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Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday 11-5

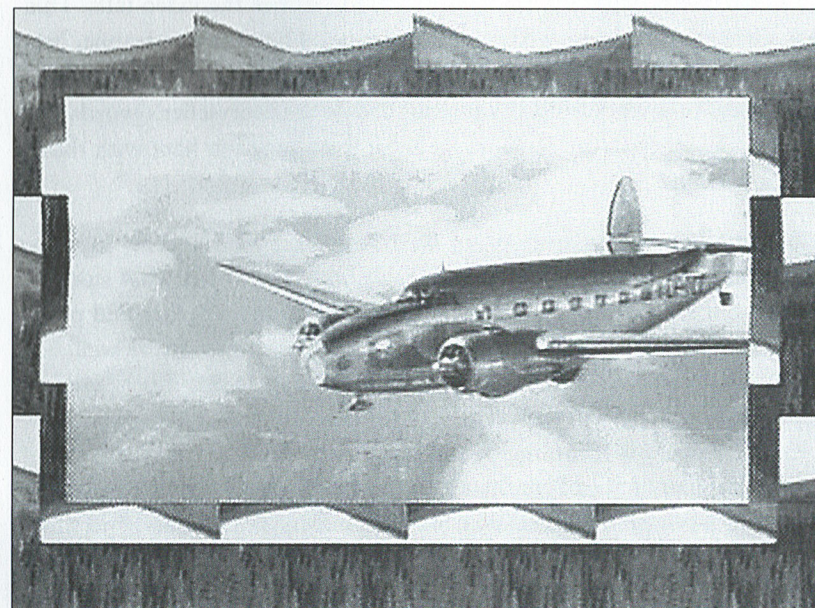
YYZ Artists' Outlet gratefully acknowledges the Canada Council for the Arts Visual Arts Section Dissemination Assistance Program for its support of Leila Sujir's community activity schedule.

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Design by: Michelle Teran

Leila Sujir

"THE DREAMS OF THE NIGHT CLEANERS"



Opening: Wednesday, November 5 at 8pm

"Dreaming Ourselves"

Watching Leila Sujir's *The Dreams of the the Night Cleaners* a few years ago at the Walter Philips Gallery in the Banff Centre was a completely different experience from watching it a couple of weeks ago while preparing to talk to Leila about her work. Then, it was a good video, interesting in its mélange of stories and effects, a strong "docufiction," to use Sarah Murphy's words. Now, possibly because I was watching it in my own home, the domesticity of the video caught my attention, and I found myself caught up in one of the many stories the video tells. This is a story of a mixed-race daughter, Usha, her white mother Jeanne, her sense of loss about her history, the death of her Indian father, and her brownness in a white land (I am reminded of the Storyteller's words early in the story: "And in Canada, all of us, trapped in here with these indelible stains.").

But just as I saw the story of my own Scottish mother and my Indian father playing out, recognized myself in Usha, angry about what stories she has not been told, the secrets that bind her family together and push them apart, I was suddenly reminded that this is Leila's story as well. This time, I watched with surprise and a little shock when this headline appears on screen: "Pilot Missing in B.C. Believed to Be Roger Sujir." *That is Leila's father*, I thought, and wondered why that detail was not one of the many remembered from my first viewing. My analytical academic self of course knows at once that for readers and viewers, and thus for artists, autobiography is tyranny; that academic self knows that Usha is not Leila, that Jeanne is not Leila's mother, that these are characters in only one of the stories that Leila skillfully interweaves to tell a larger one

of loss, or secrecy, of colonialism and of racism. And yet I feel compelled to ask her when we talk about *Dreams* about what of herself *is* in this video. Leila informs me that her mother was in fact very involved in the work on *Dreams*, and that one of her commitments in the video was to provide "roles that inscribed older women" in the characters of Jeanne and the Storyteller.

I do not ask her, because I similarly identify with, and am too disturbed by, the frequent cuts to a single image of the young mother Jeanne lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Leila will later query me on that omission, and simply say that it is an image from her memory, an image of family violence, one of the secrets that perhaps calls into question the childlike nostalgia for lost origins, for father and mother and the intimacy of family.

It would be an extraordinary disservice to Leila's work, however, to focus on this story alone, although it is perhaps the underpinning narratively and visually. The recurring images of planes, the planes cleaned by night cleaners, the small biplane like the one her father flew to his death in, tie all stories to the personal one of Usha and Jeanne. Again, Leila reminds us that all these stories are inextricable: "the image of my father's plane over the snow is co-existing or haunting – in the same way that history at the time of Mackenzie King is still haunting us – and has its trace in the present."

Yet, *Dreams*, as its title suggests, is about much more and, arguably wider, potent issues: the documentation (which is superb in its cumulative effect) of Canadian racism, mostly through the print media and Mackenzie King's posturing in public policy documents; the treatment of South Asian workers by corporate employers; class conflict among South Asian workers (Devika's and Usha's evolving friendship is underwritten by this tension); Western obliviousness to the history of colonialism and the existence of neo-colonialism.

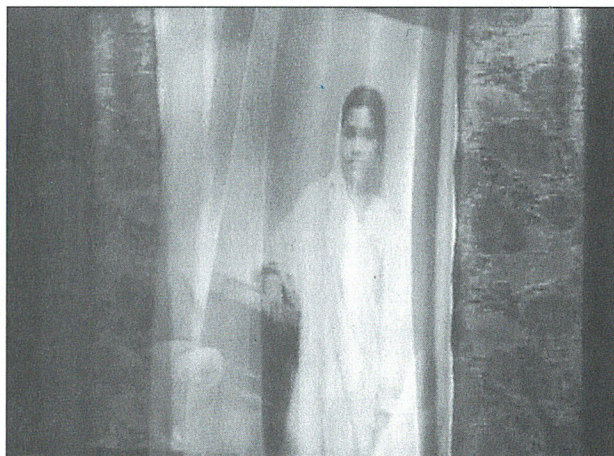
There is a poignant scene, which made me very angry in how commonplace it is, in which Devika, a night cleaner, is being interviewed by the stereotype of the western, coiffed, posed interviewer and is consistently cut off when she wishes to discuss what interests her most deeply: her own knowledge of the politics of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, among other financial and aid institutions that maintain neo-colonial power in India in the guise of aid. Indeed, all the interviewer really wishes to know about is Devika's subservient position here in Canada, and about the exotic "badness" of India: religious rioting, famine, poverty. What goes unsaid in Devika's angry outburst afterwards is what affected me most: that we literally cannot bear to see an Indian woman intellectual tell us about her own country and its history, nor will we listen to her when she comes to "multicultural" Canada and faces losing her only work as a night cleaner at an airport.

Clearly, this part of the story is very important to Leila, as she tells me about her aunt, "a rural sociologist who was determined that I not get romantic about India," and sent Leila out in the field to see for herself. "I found it really shocking when I came back and people just said *yeah yeah*. I suppose my sense of urgency comes from that complacency, that *yeah, that's too bad* reaction." Discussing the reaction of high school students to her video, however, Leila finds that is this scene that has been most affecting: white students identify with the interviewer only to recognize that she is the villain, while Asian students find they have support for their experiences. White students have written her to say that *Dreams* "has hit them hard in their belief system." The apathy of others in the West provides a moment in our discussion where I see Leila voice her passion about these politics: "What I find compelling is that colonialism is only getting more intense, and I wanted to convey that through the stories of the IMF and the World Bank; these areas that the West feels so superior to in terms of technology and progress were also their sources of wealth."

It is a credit to Leila's work that I cannot write about everything in her stories in such a short space: the rift between daughter and mother and the lonely image of the white mother (who also plays the archivist showing us the weight of historical evidence of Canadian racism) who does not understand why her Indian husband could not talk to *her* about his experiences as an Indian immigrant to Canada; the friendship between Devika and Usha typified by a telling scene in which Usha slaps Devika's fingers away when Devika tries to take over the computer keyboard. Or one of the final scenes in the video, a surrealistically funny journey by a poetic flying Jeanne-eggplant. Clearly, what Leila is attempting to demonstrate here and elsewhere, is her sense of "metanarrative and how it slips away; there is that larger story that we look for, but which disappears." The political thrust of the video, she suggests, can be found in the fractured plot, or plots, which are designed so that "people will look outside those edges of what plot tells us."

This insight leads me to the resolution of this video, a resolution that I had some difficulty with in both viewings, because, after the weight of the history and of the stories here interlinked, I didn't fully understand why there was this push for optimism, an almost-happy ending. The humour, to be sure, is a relief. It is a pleasure to see Devika and Usha laugh together, to see the brinjalled-Jeanne fly about somewhat euphorically. But I wondered why, and asked Leila, then, *why*? She tells me that the ending was time consuming to put together, to make just right, but adds that she has "a profound respect for laughter as an explosive device; it can explode despair. Humour is also political and can point profoundly to whatever is oppressive."

Perhaps, too, as the old-women characters of Jeanne-archivist and the Storyteller suggest to us, it is their stories that have to be told, and they who can give younger women like Usha and Devika the lead in rewriting their own stories. As Leila puts it, "I wanted the character of the mother to have a sense of urgency about this story, that it must be confronted."



“The Storyteller as well is trying to prevent another death, in the sense that this story is waiting to gobble up people – the larger story is haunting us, and people don’t know what larger forces are acting upon them. I wanted to convey through Jeanne and the Storyteller the necessity of telling this family story as well as those other histories, to make them public, creating the possibility for change to take place. For that to happen, the larger story, the metanarrative, has to change too.”

The final image of the video, a plane’s view of a river, Leila suggests, is an ambivalent one, neither promising happiness or despair, but simply one of new beginning and of hope. “Just the *possibility*,” she stresses. I myself hadn’t “read” that image so carefully, and perhaps that reading works to provide me with the release that the humour provides, as well as a haun-

ing sense that all is not well. Haunting. I’ll leave the final words, appropriately, with the Storyteller: “And we, the night cleaners not only of buildings but stories are dreaming of cleaning the nightmares, that collective history which is haunting and hurting and killing. We’re dreaming of a new story, a story which puts the world back together again.”

Aruna Srivastava teaches in the English Department at the University of Calgary, specializing in anti-racist and feminist theory and pedagogy. She is a member of the Calgary Women of Colour Collective and of Calgary Minquon Panchayat, a loose collective of artists of colour.

