

# HERE Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists



AGA KHAN MUSEUM



# A Sign, a Trace, a Fold

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plural site or location. The subtitle includes the word *locating* to recognize the reality that many Canadian artists live and work in cities such as Berlin, London, or New York, which often feel as far away as Vancouver is from Halifax or Whitehorse is from Cape Dorset. How do we locate these artists in a wider sense and is nationalism even relevant or important to them? Also included in the title is *artists* instead of *art*, since this isn't an exhibition about Canadian art historical trajectories (which are steeped in European traditions); rather, it is a group exhibition of contemporary art by artists working in Canada or Canadian artists working internationally that is curatorially framed and centralized around a tenth-century CE stele — an artifact from the permanent collection of the Aga Khan Museum.

The ethos of the Aga Khan Museum, unique to North America with its exquisite collection of the arts of Islam, exemplifies plurality. The collection demonstrates the connection to a multitude of cultures, histories, and traditions offering a view that is much needed in this time of one-dimensional, identity-based polarization. The concept of pluralism, initially developed through philosophy and linguistic studies, denotes there is no singular or true account of what knowledge is or which moral frameworks to follow but demonstrates how peoples of differing values live together.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural pluralism is distinguished between two forms: multinational and polytechnic. The multinational state is one in which "nation" denotes a historical community that has a distinct language and culture (i.e., indigenous peoples in North America or the Lapps in Finland and Norway), while the polytechnic state is one in which diversity is created through immigration where ethnicities are "allowed" to be maintained. Prior to the 1960s, countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States — which have

become *the* key nations of immigration — practised an "Anglo-conformity" assimilation model of immigration that was reconsidered in the 1970s and each of these countries then moved toward a "multicultural" approach. Canada therefore exists somewhere between the multinational and the polytechnic state.<sup>3</sup> Jaret Vadera, an artist included in this exhibition, describes the unique experience of being a polytechnic Canadian:

My mother migrated from the Philippines and my father from India a few years before I was born. Some of my earliest memories are of growing up in Flemingdon Park in the 1970s and 1980s — just a few blocks away from the Museum. This neighbourhood has been a springboard for migrants for decades now. Growing up here had a big impact on me. Surrounded by so many different cultures, religions, and languages, I developed a deeper appreciation of the different ways that we see the world. I was part of a generation of code-switchers and shape-shifters. And my experiences growing up in Toronto at that time have informed my artistic practice.

When I was growing up, "Where are you from?" was a common question that I was asked. It is a polite but often malignant question. "Where" often meant that your body or that your accent was being marked as belonging to an "other," that you weren't "from" here. That we weren't "allowed" to be just Canadian. The Toronto I grew up in, practised an "it's a small world, after all" style moralistic multiculturalism that, good intentions aside, allowed for prejudice and racism to lurk just beneath the surface. But years later, as my generation has grown into the cultural fabric of the country, it is undeniable that being Canadian exists somewhere in the intersections and the overlaps, in the noise, in the negotiations, and in the rhythms of our transcultural country.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of artists has a perspective that reflects the pluralistic collection of the Aga Khan Museum. Taking a cue from this collection, *HERE* radiates/emanates from a particular artifact that has several sites and surfaces, several *heres* within itself: a marble *spoila* or baluster from the third century CE with scrolling acanthus leaves on one side



a kinship for those of us who are Canadians. Our beginnings are imbued with inscriptions inherited from generations and landscapes, or old and new neighbours. We continue to gather and add to these inscriptions, furthering pluralism and pluralistic perspectives; we are not static. *HERE* echoes the cultural exchange found within an ancient artifact as it is found in contemporary works of art.

The stele can be regarded as a shape-shifter whose mapping has been transformed as reflected by several artists included in *HERE*. Jaret Vadera's practice looks at shape-shifting and the politics of perception, exploring how different social, technological, and cognitive processes control how we make sense of the world around and within us. *This, That, and the Third* (2017) is a constellation or collage of various elements that examine matrixes that construct identity and the image. Vadera transfers the perception of the visceral, human world into the digital domain in what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari study as micro-politics by mapping different spaces from social, political, or geological aspects. The broken line of perception and sensation, including memory, are the juncture or meeting point between the space of the world and man.<sup>9</sup>

While Jaret Vadera considers these meeting points as "glitches" that "short-circuit passive image consumption,"<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Zvonar also utilizes the tradition of collage in two works included in *HERE* — one a more straightforward image collage using found, pre-existing images, while *Tiny Devotions* is a sculptural collage recycling an old ivory necklace. She takes objects that incessantly surround us and subverts the familiar to form a reclamation that is feminist or can truly belong to her — a world of pictures that she creates but that already live somewhere in the mind's eye rather hauntingly. Zvonar shifts meaning through the action of collaging to make images and forms that are sometimes

humorous, sometimes appear to be a protest, or are just simply sexy, treading on the familiar but causing a sensation similar to a double take.

Zadie Xa collages several materials together to fashion a shape-shifting cloak in *YZilla the Witch of Flyness in Green Jade City* (2015), her first textile work. Xa began making capes/cloaks to create paintings in motion enacted by the body to give it magical powers (like those of superheroes or wizards), believing that people of colour need and use mechanisms similar to shape-shifting to navigate through societal constructs that privilege a white male perspective. This idea of shape-shifting resonates with the modern Canadian multicultural experience in that we are constantly in a state of negotiation of cultures, both negotiating our own as well as others in a perpetual state of transference, learning, and relearning. During her teenage years in Vancouver, Xa was influenced by everything from punk rock and hip-hop (a form of collage in itself) to Korean shamanism practised by women. Her work continually questions or provokes the challenges of how to confront and deal with race while simultaneously fusing and pushing new boundaries of identity within materiality, textile, video, and performance.

The seven centuries that lie between the two surfaces of the stele make this artifact emblematic of "time" literally embedded into/onto its surfaces and indeed contained within. Two sculptures from Babak Golkar's *Time Capsules* series from 2016 — a taxidermy fox and a small tombstone that declares a two-line poem — are containers for the actual artworks encased within not to be opened until 2116. His series questions the idea of value — what is valuable now might not be in a century — and he brings the power of economic value into the artist's hands.

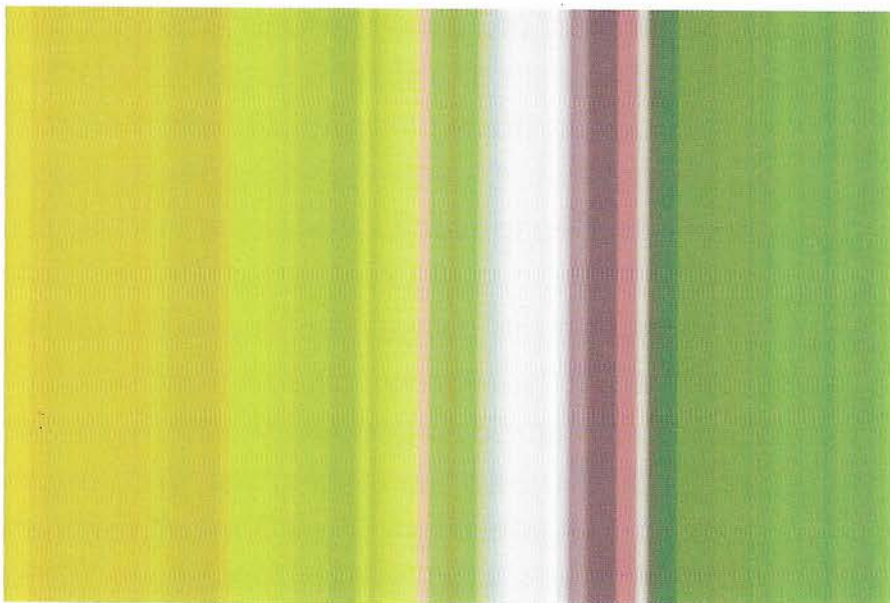
Derya Akay considers the encapsulation of time in a sculptural work installed for

# Jaret Vadera

Born 1976, Toronto, Ontario, lives and works between Toronto, New York, and various cities in India

Jaret Vadera's work — through artworks, curatorial strategies, collaboration, and education — explores the politics of perception. *Ascent* is a video work that began with a series of experimental videos from footage of the sunlight reflecting off the surface of water. The invisible grid of the video matrix was shifted slightly and the y-coordinates were averaged to become vertical bands as the video gradually transitions from multicoloured bands to brighter and brighter yellows and blinding whites. Placed for the exhibition in an underground ramp area of the Aga Khan Museum that leads from the parking lot to the first floor, the vertical bands embrace and immerse viewers as they physically experience the incline and ascend to the Museum.

Vadera's intent was to explore ways of representing consciousness and to use technology as a way to understand how we see and think. He regards the digital matrix — which is much of how we experience images today — as an invisible grid that mirrors our own biological, cultural, and cognitive structures through which we “see.” Here, because the image has been tampered with, hence creating vertical bands, the experience of the image has shifted. Without knowing that the original image is a film of light dancing on water, we simply read this as an abstraction. But does



Jaret Vadera, from *Ascent*,  
2009/2017. Two-channel  
video installation, 3 minutes.  
Courtesy of the artist.

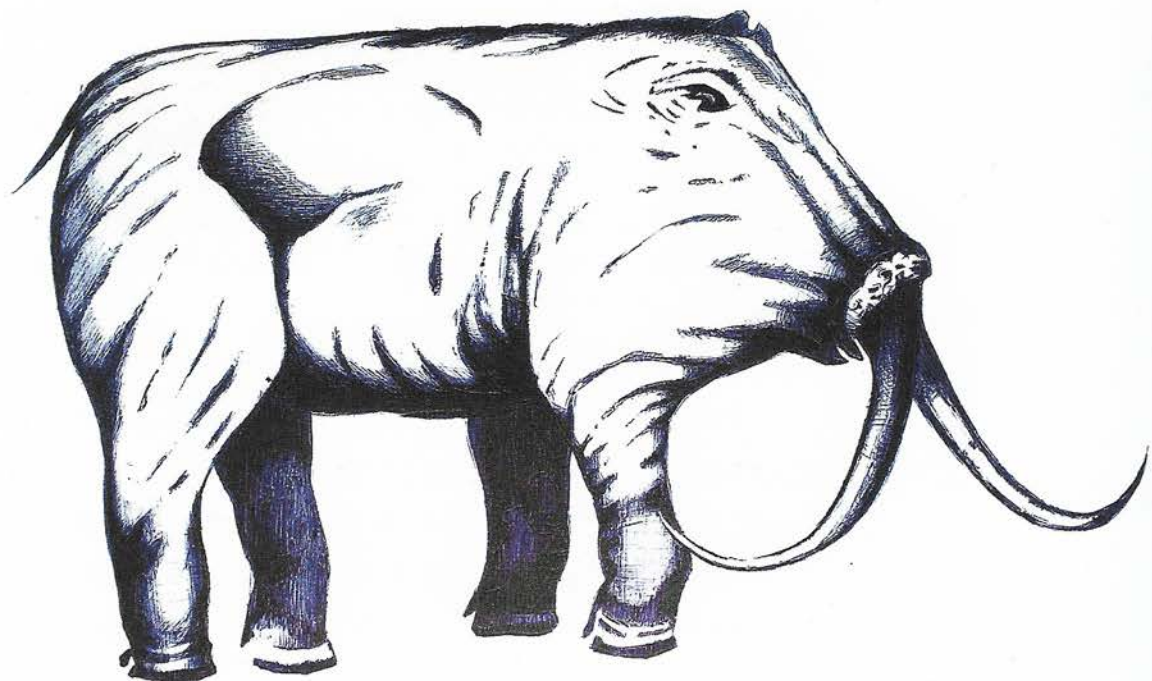
the phenomenon of watching light reflecting off water still come through? Is there something beneath an image? The relationship of shifting the y-coordinates to the relationship of our experience as viewers becomes similar in the capture of our consciousness. This video is akin to a painting, and as Vadera says:

I like the idea of a video being an immersive moving painting. I've often considered my videos as growing directly out of my interests as a painter. Painting taught me how to see. Or maybe it just made me more aware of the world around me. It taught me how to use a material process as a means to be in the moment. So, I do see my work as closer to moving paintings than I do to conventional narrative film or television.

The politics of perception are more directly experienced through the series *Diseases of the Eye* in which images from a book of medical illustrations from the early 1900s demonstrate how to remove a foreign object from the eye. This series points directly to the question of what is considered as "foreign" or invasive — there is violence in the removal. In a way, this series reflects the current political gravitation to the extreme right, and Vadera highlights the notion of literally removing that which is not "native." The work also speaks to a larger idea of what "value" is and how that idea of value changes with time. For instance, Vadera includes cowrie shells, which were used widely as currency in Africa, India, China, and the Philippines, as well in North America by the Ojibwa.

The last work, *This, That, and the Third*, is also a collage as experienced as an installation with several elements that tell a story about mapping, tracing form, and locating oneself both in





Jaret Vadera, from *This, That, and the Third*, 2017.  
*Everything Is a Copy of a Copy of a Copy*. Blue ink,  
29.8 × 41.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned  
by the Aga Khan Museum.



real and imagined worlds using today's technology. Digital mapping and multivalent interpretations are demonstrated through this work: Vadera maps images from the words in the sentence "This, that, and the third" through a Google search, which he then ties back to the locations of the servers around the world they come from. These locations are connected through a new aggregated image form that the artist turns into a Rorschach-like blob that looks simultaneously futuristic as it does mysterious. The artist also redraws an image of a drawing of a mammoth by a Russian trader who only had its bones as reference, and Vadera relates this to the parable of "The Elephant in the Dark," with translations from three languages relayed back to us through an accented digital voice. In particular, this story crosses many religions and faiths and has been a parable of how we might unite different perspectives. These components create a larger story that addresses the poetics of translation through multiplicity, a kind of parallax that can represent the spaces between and beyond. 