

In Pursuit of the
Perfect Pose

Dalia Amara
Rah
Rajni Perera
Shellie Zhang
Tau Lewis



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Curated by: Leila Fatemi

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Centre for
Contemporary
Photography



TOP Shellie Zhang, *Pink Handbag #2*, from *Aesthetic of Surfaces* series, chromogenic print, size variable, 2017
BOTTOM Tau Lewis, *Something Joyful*, plaster, wire, fur, leather, fabric, pillow stuffing, stones, human hair, acrylic paint, shopping basket, jute - sculpture, 67 x 20 x 32 inches, 2017



TOP Rah, video still from *Ethnic Roots*, 2016
BOTTOM Dalia Amara, *Lips*, archival pigment print, 30 x 45 inches, 2017



In Pursuit of the Perfect Pose

Leila Fatemi

When considering the dynamic that exists between Western colonial powers and minority groups, it is important to reflect on the structures and recurrent behaviours that define and articulate the identities and experiences of racialized people. These impositions outline the manner by which one must perform an ethnic identity that is created in direct opposition to dominant Western culture—in essence, whiteness—while the alternative option is a futile attempt at performing an assimilated identity. The lived experiences and encounters of discrimination that women of colour face are directly linked to the dictation of these performances. If projections of the self are heavily shaped by Western ideals that are intrinsically tied to identity construction and performance, how then do the many intersections of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, race and geography form the varied experience and identities of women of colour? What elements of identity construction are mandated through the social structures that perpetuate historical theories of Otherness within modern society, and how can these ideas be explored to serve and give justice to the fluidity of identities?

The many barriers that exist in contemporary culture for racialized women, including the pressure to conform to specific exoticized expectations of ethnic representation, result in an assigned identity based on socially devised notions of ethnicity and gender.

The sociological understanding of these notions often ignore or discredit non-binary experiences, simplifying identities of racialized women to static, consumable elements, which works to calcify and homogenize identity into easily understandable categories. The practice of creating confined categories of being continues to perpetuate the idea of the Other, often resulting in pressure for racialized women to be compliant to a fabricated identity. Such identities are to be learned, adopted and performed; based strictly on conventional understandings of gender and ethnicity and irrespective of their relevance to the experience of the individual. The experiences of women of colour are often masked by a constructed perception of what their experience should look like, which becomes even more complex when expectations of assimilation occur alongside expectations of ethnic performance. This leaves two options: perform ethnicity or perform whiteness.

In pursuit of the perfect pose brings together works by five artists of diverse backgrounds to look at posing as an element in the negotiation of assigned identity, by which it can be contested, elaborated, satirized or confirmed. Using photography, video, sculpture and installation as tools for performance, the projects demonstrate the myriad ways in which identities are constructed and therefore malleable and open to change. Through the acknowledgement of these constructs, the works included here highlight and explore methods of performance as a critique of the foundations of these restricted identities in order to pose questions of the accuracy of such representations as well as the histories built on defining and isolating racialized communities within North America.

In *Body Traces*, Dalia Amara investigates appearance and femininity through a Western lens, through which beauty becomes a signifier of both assimilation and commodification of the self. Her series of images deconstructs how vanity can be appropriated and used as a representation of the external ideals to which ethnic women are held to and required to perform for the sake of



Tau Lewis, *Something Joyful*, plaster, wire, fur, leather, fabric, pillow stuffing, stones, human hair, acrylic paint, shopping basket, jute - sculpture, 67 x 20 x 32 inches, 2017



TOP Dalia Amara, *Practice Heads*, archival pigment print, 45 x 30 inches, 2016
BOTTOM Rah, *Ethnic Roots Installation*, projection on mixed materials, 2016

societal validation. Ritualistic notions of Western beauty standards permeate globally, and through years of subtle colonial infiltration have become a definitive aspect of how ethnic women mask cultural insecurities. Through an approach that draws inspiration from commercial photography and sci-fi imagery, Amara uses masks, silicone body parts, makeup and mirrors to consider the conscious and subconscious acts of ethnic concealment and the unachievable. The disparate, and at times abstract, series of photographs operate as self-portraits. Together, they are an attempt to learn how to accurately perform femininity by using her studio as a playground to focus on both the redundant and more hidden aspects of feminine performance and beauty. The repetition and experimentation found within Amara's images are indicative of the ongoing practice whereby racialized bodies are physically masked and manipulated in order to master codes of feminine gender expression, specifically the markers of beauty that have been marketed and sold globally. These representations are further explored in her video *Posing*, where Amara reverses the gaze of the camera back on to herself. In doing so, she captures the intimate moments of tirelessly perfecting various poses, attempting to study herself through the eyes of society, as one would in a mirror. In an ongoing effort to find the most flattering pose, the artist documents herself moving between mirror and camera in order to find a pose that will assert her understanding of perfected female body language. The repetition and continuous practice of constructing herself for the camera assumes both a speculative and ever present audience, whose rigid yet contradictory ideals she can never quite attain.

The work of artist Rah similarly examines the suppression of ethnicity in pursuit of an identity inline with Western values that encompass many aspects of the self, both visible and hidden. *Oreo's Bedroom* is an immersive installation where the audience is invited to enter and interact with a deeply intimate and personal space. The elaborate furnishings, reminiscent of a teen's "dream" bedroom, reflect a commercialized, adolescent version of femininity.

Oreo's bedroom is embellished with a variety of different objects such as a hairbrush full of dark brown hair—a stark contrast to her signature platinum blonde hairstyle—family photos that have been altered to make the subjects appear 'whiter', items representative of Iranian culture strategically stuffed under the bed, and a journal that chronicles her experience of discrimination and subsequent internalization of white beauty ideals. These items highlight her internal conflict and attempt at rejecting her ethnic background in favour of a desire to be visibly in alignment with the majority group. Using this method of revealing and concealing aspects of Oreo's identity, Rah brings the viewer into intimate contact with acts that are usually performed in private, encouraging a reflection on their own relationship with the racialized female body. By exaggerating the visual stereotypes that shape female gender and ethnic identity, Oreo's character functions as a critique on white washing, and the value of identity and cultural expression.

Looking more critically at the role of power and how it imposes on formations of identity, Rajni Perera's works *Untitled* and *Zahra* from the *Maharani's* series use a surreal approach to interrogate the relevance of influential colonial symbols and re-appropriate popular depictions of South Asian women. In many contexts, authority is perpetuated until these codes of relation are embodied by the colonized society, shaping the manner by which individuals relate and form their identities relative to colonial hierarchies. The resulting us versus them complex creates barriers that exoticize ethnic communities and create confused identities in a perpetual state of performance based on the mimicry of Western standards. In her installation, Perera uses chairs as a symbol of the throne and a signifier of power. The direction of the power is confused and subverted as she hangs one chair upside down from the ceiling, seat facing an upright chair below. Between the two chairs, Perera fills the space with batwings, often symbolic of rebirth, suggests reformation of the current understanding of power roles and their relevance to diasporic people.

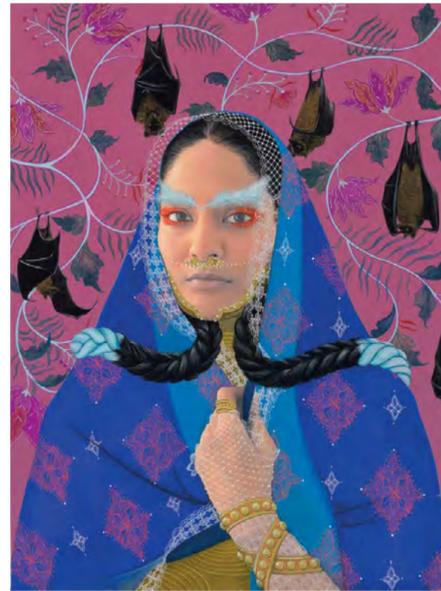


Shellie Zhang, *Pink Plum Blossoms #5*, from *Aesthetic of Surfaces* series, chromogenic print, size variable, 2017

This notion is present in the embellished portrait from her *Maharani's* series, which further highlights the exoticization of Eastern cultures and femininity, and re-appropriates Western narratives and kitschy visual representations of "the Orient". Through symbolic reversal and re-appropriation, Perera redirects the colonial view of women of colour by questioning the authenticity of these narratives and their place within contemporary culture.

Tau Lewis takes a more personal approach in her work by exploring the ways that colonial and traumatic histories have created vulnerable identities that stem from childhood and effect daily life.

Reflecting on her place within a society that perpetually isolates racialized women, Lewis creates doll figures that become extensions of herself. Using personal belongings and found materials to create the doll, she employs laborious, repetitive and time-consuming methods of construction such as hand sewing and carving. With reference to the playground via the swing, and other subtle details incorporated in the doll, *Something Joyful* identifies various childhood memories while exploring the internalization and recognition of societal hostility that many young Black children face. Name-calling, stereotypes and false representation of Black bodies begin at an early age, forcing an inner conflict that results in larger issues of struggling with identity and conformity. The figure is represented through a series of photographs where Lewis positions them in various scenes that she hopes will bring a sense of safety and comfort. Questioning



Rajni Perera, *ZAHRA2*, mixed media on paper 43 x 54 inches, 2016

the timelines in which such understandings result in an acceptance or rejection of Othering, this work serves as a self-portrait where the artist considers the effects of internalized racism both past and present while employing meditative methods of dismissing negative notions of self.

In *Aesthetic of Surfaces*, Shellie Zhang activates the vitrine space with vibrant patterns of Chinese brocade silk and photographs of collections of everyday floral objects. Using photo and vinyl, this installation focuses on the commercial practices that attribute these patterns to Chinese femininity and questions the relevance of these objects and designs to diasporic East Asian women. Used abundantly in popular culture, the patterns Zhang sources for these works are understood as markers and expressions of Chinese femininity, and frequently used on household tools and objects that are categorized to represent Chinese woman's role within the home. The subliminal implication of these mass-produced objects made for women, specifically East Asian women, further perpetuates the notion that this is the only acceptable identity to perform. The installation references a store window, further highlighting the commercialization of domesticity typically attributed to East Asian women who are all too often hyper-exoticized through a Western lens.

The exploratory manifestations of performance found in these works offer a unique understanding of the diversity of racialized experience and critique the confines of identity, calling for a deeper consideration of the obstacles that women of colour face on a daily basis. The artists' use of performance, humour and future projections of the self, reveal alternative ways of engaging gender and challenging stereotypes surrounding ethnicity. Highlighting these signifiers is one way to critique colonial legacies that require reform and recognition. These works encourage us to better understand the role we play in perpetuating histories, language and systems that need to be eliminated in order to free oneself from societal pressures to conform.

Cover image

Dalia Amara, *Assimilation*,
archival pigment print,
30 x 45 inches, 2017

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing art form. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Dalia Amara is an American-Jordanian multidisciplinary artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York with a practice based in photography, video and performance art. Her work uses domestic spaces or the studio as a staging ground for sites of trauma, desire, and banality. Born to multi-ethnic parents, and raised in the US, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar and UAE, the ever-changing home, along with the varying and at times contradictory cultural expectations, have all been at the heart of Amara's motivations in her work. Amara has been featured in Paper Journal (UK), Art F City, and The Art Newspaper. She most recently participated in "Skin Dips," a two-person exhibition with Florencia Escudero at Selena Gallery in New York.

Rah is an Iranian-Canadian video, photo and performance artist. Critiquing the visual stereotypes and performative aspects that shape female gender identity and Iranian ethnic identity, she reasserts fluid gender and cultural identities. Rah's work has been published and exhibited in galleries and museums internationally and is represented by Vtape. She has been the recipient of numerous awards and residencies including: SSHRC (2016), Finalist for Team Canada in Digital Arts (2016), Conseil Des Arts et des Lettres du Québec Grant for Film (2015) and Digital Arts (2014), Studio Das Weisse Haus Residency (Vienna, 2014), Artslant Georgia Fee Residency (Paris, 2014), Ottawa Art Gallery Award of Excellence (2013) and the SAW Video Award (2012).

Rajni Perera is a diasporic Toronto-based artist whose practice employs a variety of different mediums. Originally from Sri Lanka, Perera was raised between Australia and Canada. She graduated from OCAD in 2011 and was awarded the medal for Drawing and Painting. Currently represented by Saskia Fernando Gallery in Colombo, Perera has exhibited in Toronto and internationally. Her work is an accessible East-West dialogue of ideas concerning immigrant identity politics, female sexuality and power, and science fiction. Perera creates a subversive aesthetic that counteracts antiquated, oppressive discourse, and acts as a restorative force through which people can move outdated, repressive modes of being towards reclaiming their power.

Shellie Zhang is a Toronto-based artist, born in Beijing and raised in various parts of China, the United States, and Canada. By uniting both past and present iconography with the techniques of mass communication, language and sign, Zhang's work deconstructs notions of tradition, gender, identity, the body, and popular culture while calling attention to these subjects in the context and construction of a multicultural society. She has exhibited at venues including WORKJAM (Beijing), Scope Art Fair (Switzerland) and Public House of Art (Netherlands). Recent projects include a residency at the Art Gallery of Ontario with EMILIA-AMALIA, and an ongoing year-long peer mentorship program with Whippersnapper Gallery.

Tau Lewis (b. 1993) is a Jamaican-Canadian artist living and working in Toronto, Ontario. A self-taught sculptor, Lewis's current practice relies heavily on her surrounding environment; she uses live plants, found objects and repurposed materials collected throughout the Canadian landscape to create figurative sculptures investigating black identity politics and African diaspora. Lewis has exhibited at the Spring Break Art Fair, Mulherin New York and the New Museum, New York; Night Gallery, Los Angeles; COOPER COLE, Art Gallery of York University and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Leila Fatemi is an emerging artist, curator and community arts worker based in Toronto. Living between cultures, her work and curatorial endeavours stem from her daily experiences as a visible minority and aim to provide platforms and contribute alternative narratives to conversations of Ethnic representation in contemporary art. Leila holds a BFA in Image Arts from Ryerson University and has exhibited her work and curated exhibitions both nationally and internationally.

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