

In Pursuit of the
Perfect Pose

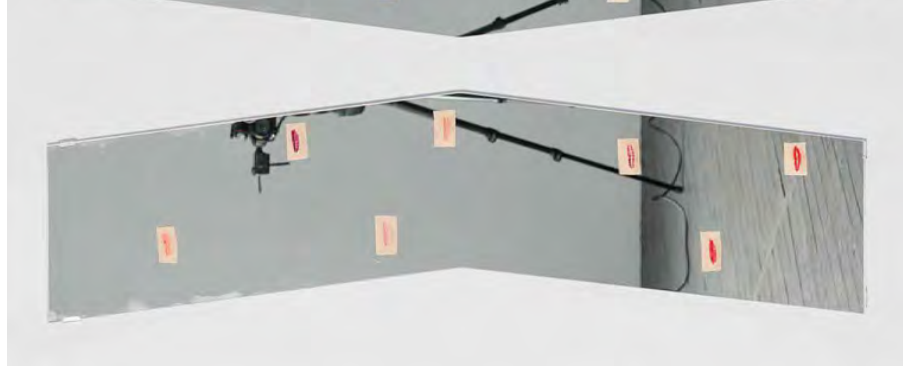
Dalia Amara
Rah
Rajni Perera
Shellie Zhang
Tau Lewis



OCTOBER 27 - DECEMBER 2, 2017

Curated by: Leila Fatemi

G44 Centre for
Contemporary
Photography



Handbag #2, from *Aesthetic of Surfaces* series, chromogenic print, size variable, 2017
Including *Joyful*, plaster, wire, fur, leather, fabric, pillow stuffing, stones, human hair, acrylic paint.

TOP Rah, video still from *Ethnic Roots*, 2016



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



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

sociological understanding of these notions more or discredit non-binary experiences, gender identities of racialized women to static, mobile elements, which works to calcify and fix identity into easily understandable categories. The practice of creating confined categories continues to perpetuate the idea of the Other, existing in pressure for racialized women to be able to a fabricated identity. Such identities are to be adopted and performed; based strictly on colonial understandings of gender and ethnicity reflective of their relevance to the experience of an individual. The experiences of women of colour are masked by a constructed perception of what experience should look like, which becomes a complex when expectations of assimilation alongside expectations of ethnic performance. There are two options: perform ethnicity or whiteness.

The *result of the perfect pose* brings together five artists of diverse backgrounds to look at an element in the negotiation of assigned identity which it can be contested, elaborated, and confirmed. Using photography, video, and installation as tools for performance, the artists demonstrate the myriad ways in which

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

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 *Maharanni's* series use a surreal approach to interrogate the relevance of influential colonial symbols and

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

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

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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