



Returning the Gaze



Teaching Resource Guide

Exhibition Overview

Returning the Gaze

October 11 – 28, 2016

Angela Aujla

Nimisha Bhanot

Humber Liberal Arts and Science students

Gender. Sexuality. Race. Social Media. Pop Culture.

Returning the Gaze is a vibrant and dynamic cultural commentary on pressing issues of gender ideology and gender inequality in our society. The exhibition features independent and collaborative works by acclaimed Toronto artist Nimisha Bhanot, emerging visual artist and Cultural Studies educator Angela Aujla with Humber Liberal Arts and Science students.

Aujla draws directly from her students' written work and gender analysis to create multilayered, text-based artwork that showcases student thought on contemporary issues in popular culture. Bhanot presents a new series of portraiture that idolizes young social media icons who transgress limitations set by gender, sexuality and race in their activism and artwork.

The namesake of the exhibit, 'the gaze,' refers to the objectification and disempowerment of a person by classifying and expecting specific behaviours that are appropriate for their classification. As such, the exhibit aims to confront the oppressive gaze through behaviour that affronts the same social code that is enforced upon the various roles represented in this exhibit, including cultural norms, racial tensions and patriarchy.

How to Use This Guide

There are several key themes that open a window into the exhibition *Returning the Gaze* for students. A brief explanation of each key term can be found in the **Glossary** section of this guide. In order to help prepare your students for the exhibition and to extend the learning back into your classroom this guide contains **two artworks** on display in the exhibit with discussion points and activity suggestions to aid in unpacking that piece. Remember, there is not one way to "read" or interpret the artworks which are rich with multiple layers, meanings and contradictions. In the section of this guide titled **Analyzing Images** Humber educator Jennifer Susan Marotta (PhD) has prepared a series of questions for students to consider while in the gallery.

Marotta has also graciously provided an in-depth lesson plan that covers the topics of "racialized stereotypes" and "constructing the 'exotic' other" through the reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This module titled **Introduction to Orientalism** can be found on the exhibition page for *Returning the Gaze* on the Humber Galleries' website or by following this [link](#).

Glossary

Gender is a social construct that refers to certain attitudes, thoughts and behaviours being associated with either the biological male or female sex.

Gender ideology refers to the expectation that individuals act according to the normative gender roles embedded in a given society.

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender. It advantages or disadvantages an individual based on their gender rather than relevant characteristics or attributes of the individual.

Social transgression refers to challenging the established societal standards of behaviour and deliberately opposing what is normally accepted by society or what has been accepted in the past.

Objectification refers to the degrading of an individual by viewing them as an object rather than as a human. It involves a focus on an individual's physical attributes and a dismissal or ignorance towards other important attributes of the individual such as intelligence or personality.

Sexual objectification refers to the depicting of an individual as an object of desire rather than a human with thoughts and desires of their own. This involves viewing or speaking of an individual as only their bodies or of fetishized parts of their bodies.

Subject is a philosophical term that refers to a being that observes whereas the **object** is the thing observed.

The gaze refers to the objectification and disempowerment of an individual by classifying and expecting specific behaviours that are appropriate for their classification. The gaze is the subjective perspective that frames the spectators' understanding of the object.

Male gaze is a term coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey that refers to the masculine point of view that is depicted in popular culture, visual arts and literature where women are objectified. The male gaze depicts women as objects of desire to be used for male pleasure and suggests to women that this is how they are perceived and therefore how they should behave.

Orientalism is a concept developed by cultural critic Edward Said that refers to an inaccurate Western interpretation of Asia that relies on stereotypes and false representations of its culture. It often exaggerates, exoticizes and distorts Eastern culture to appear backwards, exotic and/or uncivilized.

The Other is the opposite of the self, us and the same. It refers to those who are on the periphery or margins of social and cultural norms.



Nimisha Bhanot

Talking Back with the Selfie Gaze
(2016), oil on canvas.

This painting is part of the series *Social Media & The South Asian Diaspora* in which Bhanot pays homage to South Asians who use social media as tools for activism and social change. The models in this series use the gaze to talk back to patriarchal expectations be it through dissent, sexual liberation or fashion in gender non-conforming individuals. Subjects of classical portraiture traditionally included monarchy, upper class or religious figures. Bhanot's series aims to equate change makers in the South Asian diaspora to the cultural elite usually depicted because of their influence in using the Internet to shape a normative framework for cultural and gender identity in first and second generation South Asians.

Social Media

Who controls the gaze in a selfie?

Can taking a selfie be a feminist act?

Key Themes

- Male gaze
- Orientalist gaze
- Diversity and representation in media

Digging Deeper

- The woman depicted in this painting is Sanam Sindhi whose Instagram account @trustmedaddy inspires many South Asian girls who struggle with self-love. Sindhi's fashion forward selfies blend street-style with bindis, brightly coloured hair and nazarbattu dots. Sindhi says: "soooo many girls like us need to see other women of color telling us that our beauty is important too!"
- Find a selfie from any social media site that you feel does not conform to a typical western beauty ideal. Make a list that contrasts what you expect to see against how this image breaks or subverts that convention. For example: blonde hair vs. green hair.

Activity

- Write a short story or character study based on a selfie you find on any social media site. How does the subject portray her/himself? Do societal expectations play a part in the way they fashion their identity? What does their clothing, personal adornment, objects in the scene and background reveal about the subject?



**Angela
Aujla**

*Becoming Canadian (2016),
digital collage.*

Becoming Canadian brings together a number of elements to show the resilience, determination and hope demonstrated by so many generations of South Asian Canadians. The iconic Peace Tower situated at the Center Block of the Canadian Parliament Building is featured alongside a family photograph of the artists' Nahni (maternal grandmother) taken before her journey from the Punjab to Canada. Various government stamps remind us of the different stages involved in 'becoming Canadian.' The faint, but familiar airmail envelope striping at the bottom of the image signifies the fading ties and communication between Canada and the homeland. The juxtaposition of these images question the homogeneity of a Canadian identity in our globalized society.

Identity

Is there a unified Canadian identity?

Discuss the differences between race, ethnicity and culture.

Key Themes

- identity
- nationalism
- diaspora
- hybridity

Digging Deeper

- “Hybridity” is a term used by post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha to describe new transcultural forms that arise from cross-cultural exchange. This hybridization challenges assumptions regarding cultural purity, authenticity and totalizing norms because the ‘colonizers’ and the ‘colonized’ are mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture.
- Consider examples of hybridity that you encounter in daily life. These may be types of culinary fusion, fashion mash-ups, etc.

Activity

- Discuss recent news items where various cultural practices have been at odds with Canadian policies. For example: Conservative MP Kellie Leitch’s proposed questionnaire to screen immigrants and refugees for anti-Canadian values, the Quebec ban on the sikh kirpa as well as various controversies banning religious headgear (turban, hijab, etc.)

Analyzing Images

Group work questions for analyzing images in “Returning the Gaze.”

Select a work that you find interesting from each artist and think about the following questions.

1. Who are the artists and what is the name of the works that you will analyze? Describe the artworks. What do you think was each artist’s objective or purpose?
2. Consider the techniques that each artist used to produce these pieces. What might be significant about their use of specific materials, patterns, or colours?
3. How do you think the political, social, racial, or economic climate of the time impact the artist’s motives?
4. How is pop culture used to make a point within the artwork?
5. How is this artwork being received? Do you like it? Why or why not?
6. Is its purpose of the artwork to highlight an issue? Start a discussion on racialization (the social construction of race)? To encourage or discourage political engagement?
7. What does the title “Returning the Gaze” mean? How do these artworks live up to this title? How might they fall short?
8. What is the tone of the piece of art? Tone means an artist’s attitude toward the material and/or those viewing it. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, sarcastic, outraged, baffled, tender, nostalgic etc.
9. What larger themes does this artwork speak to in society? For instance, what do these pieces tell you about what society thinks about the construct of “womanhood” or “the Other”?
10. How do these artworks inform or destabilize our notions of femininity? In what ways are the subjects of the artworks performing their femininity?

Exhibition Contributors

Angela Aujla (MA) is a visual artist and Cultural Studies educator. In her 15 year tenure as a professor in Humber's School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, she developed a number of courses that address the intersectionality of race and gender. As an emerging artist, her artwork is reflective of and inspired by the courses she developed and taught at the Humber, her professional development and interactions with students. In much of her work, she seeks to emphasize the resilience and dignity of South Asian women, particularly as it is the women who have traditionally had the difficult task of being the keepers and transmitters of culture, language and tradition, a task made particularly challenging in diasporic contexts. In the words of Sikh poet, Amrita Pritam, there are many stories which "are not written on paper, but are written on the bodies and minds of women." Angela hopes her artistic style will reflect conceptions of culture, tradition and identity being in constant re-creation and flux, rather than static and timeless. Angela's work has been part of a number of recent group exhibitions in Ontario and California. Her work is held in private collections domestically and internationally. She was recently profiled by Kaur Magazine in a story, 15 Sikh Women Artists You Should Know. Her work can be viewed at

https://www.instagram.com/angela_aujla_art/

Nimisha Bhanot (BFA) is a contemporary Canadian artist whose work critiques the societal role and perception of South Asian women from a bicultural lens. Being Indo-Canadian has influenced the themes in Bhanot's work as she aims to portray the process of accepting and rejecting associated with building a dichotomous identity. Whether portraying Badass Brides, Bahus (daughter-in-laws)

or pinups, Bhanot juxtaposes cultural signifiers against sexually liberated composition to challenge patriarchal expectations of women. The outward gaze of her subjects, along with the titles of each work talk back to these expectations. Her influences include Sarah Maple, Kehinde Wiley and Raja Ravi Varma. Recent online exposure has allowed Bhanot to share her work internationally via the Internet, radio and print with great success. Her work has been profiled on Buzzfeed, BBC Asian Network, Huffington Post, Harper's Bazaar India and Elle India magazine, among others.

<http://www.nimishabhanot.com/>

<http://www.nimishabhanot.com/nimishabhanotcomcv/>

<http://www.nimishabhanot.com/pressmedia/>

Jennifer Susan Marotta (PhD) is a Canadian Cultural historian and will be facilitating the artists' talk on the opening night of the exhibition. She is instrumental in developing pedagogical materials on decoding visual images. These materials will guide faculty in Liberal Studies, as well as in other schools, in engaging their students with the curricula produced through this exhibit. Her experience in teaching gender studies and racialization, combined with her experience in creative curriculum development make an invaluable contribution to the educational component of this exhibit.

Marotta has created an in-depth lesson plan that covers the topics of "racialized stereotypes" and "constructing the 'exotic' other" through the reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This module titled **Introduction to Orientalism** can be found on the exhibition page for *Returning the Gaze* on the Humber Galleries' website or by following this [link](#).