

TORONTO



Shaan Syed, *Wall Painting in Three Parts for the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, 2017*, oil paint, Polyfilla.
Installation view. From “HERE: Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists.”

“HERE: Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists”

AGA KHAN MUSEUM

Cultural institutions across Canada are marking the country’s sesquicentennial through exhibitions that revisit history and reexamine current notions of nationhood. “HERE: Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists” is one of the most distinct shows to emerge from this initiative. Its unique character is largely owing to its venue, the Aga Khan Museum, an institution dedicated to showcasing pluralism through both its permanent collection of Islamic art dating back to the eighth century, and regular exhibitions of more recent art from disparate parts of the so-called Islamic world. Curated by Swapnaa Tamhane, “HERE” cleverly adopts the museum’s pluralist mandate to interrogate the idea of Canada and assert the importance of cultural difference within society. Though not named explicitly, the transcultural condition of diaspora—whether the result of willful

migration or of forced displacement—and the hyphenated subjectivities it produces are presented as generators of such difference.

The exhibition is organized around a marble artifact from the museum’s collection, a third-century Roman *spolia* repurposed seven centuries later as a funerary stele in North Africa. Engraved with scrolling acanthus leaves on one side, and an epitaph in Kufic script on the other, it is a succinct example of a material object that transcends any singular place, time, or culture. The contemporary works in the show are similarly multivalent, drawing cues from both the museum’s collection and its architecture. The titular “here”—an index of both location and presence that also allows for works that critically engage their respective sites and investigate the vexed relationship between landscape and belonging—is understood as never fixed but always labile, differential, and relational.

Geometry and abstraction recur throughout, often in conversation with the modernist architecture. One notable example is Jaret Vadera’s hypnotic video installation *Ascent*, 2009/2017. Here, digitally manipulated footage of sunlight reflecting off water is projected on the walls of a long ramp leading up from the institution’s underground garage into its light-filled lobby, resulting in a cascade of twinkling verticals that gradually transition from dark to light. Elsewhere, Shaan Syed’s eye-catching *Wall Painting in Three Parts for the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, 2017, consists of a row of three sizable rectangles of, respectively, lemon-yellow, teal, and deep-coral oil pigment thickly applied directly onto a gallery wall. Embedded in the center of each vibrant field is a line, straight or squiggly, of heavy white spackling paste, variously riffing on the patterns found on Berber carpets or North African tile work. By manipulating sign, medium, and scale, Syed enacts a productive dialogue between two traditions of abstraction normally thought of as oppositional. On an adjacent wall hangs Dorothea Rockburne’s minimal *Locus Series Nos. 1–6*, 1972–75, for which the artist used aquatint and relief etching to precisely mark six rectangular sheets of white paper with deep creases, delicately splintering the unified fields into multiple triangular planes.

Cleverly installed in some of the museum’s interstitial spaces, textile works (and mixed-media pieces referencing cloth and carpets) similarly reinterpret multicultural fabric traditions. Floating above the café, Brette Gabel’s patchwork quilt *Blanket*, 2017, bridges

Islamic, North American, and First Nations aesthetics through shared geometry. Sukaina Kubba's *History of the Defeated*, 2017—suspended above the collection's display of richly embroidered robes—comprises two glistening translucent sheets of painted latex. Nearby, Nep Sidhu's striking tapestries *Malcolm's Smile 7a–c*, 2015, smuggle in references to the history of indigenous oppression in North America, and Malcolm X's condemnation of it, through cryptic abstract symbols and stylized Arabic script—coalescing into a gesture of transnational solidarity that exceeds the bounds of ethnicity, race, and the nation-state.

Emphasizing multivalence in its playful title, Vadera's *This, That, and the Third*, 2017, is a constellation of four works—a hand-drawn copy of a speculative sketch of a woolly mammoth based on its bones; a video whose subtitles and robotic voice-over narrate an ancient parable in which blind men describe an elephant by way of touch; a glittery, hide-like collage; and a large, amorphous black vinyl sticker affixed to the wall next to it. Though each suggests an elephant, together they never quite cohere into a legible image. Indeed, in this exhibition, the concept of diaspora itself is understood not as a fixed category of cultural difference, but as a dynamic and strategic methodology that spans many cultures and migratory trajectories, and that generates and promotes multivalence.

—Murtaza Vali