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***Blood Ties* curated by Eve Tagny & Geneviève Wallen**

**Omar Badrin, Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy, Aditi Ohri, Fallon Simard, and Eve Tagny.**

February 17-March 24, 2017

*Blood Ties* investigates the spiritual, corporeal and material bonds that cultivate sentiments of belonging shaping familial histories and intimacies. The keys to understanding where we come from and where we are heading are not readily available to us; we must actively create them ourselves in conjunction with our kin. In this context, this exhibition aims to generate a necessary space to allow reflections about one's relationship to their immediate landscape, ancestral connections and transmission of knowledge, as well as the layered inter-cultural exchanges informing our familial ties.

The selected artists - Omar Badrin, Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy, Aditi Ohri, Fallon Simard, and Eve Tagny - explore themes of kinship and social imaginaries. The presentation of narratives stemming from individuals from transnational and translocal families is intended to demonstrate the ways in which familial bonds are subjected to social and spatial negotiations underlining periods of longing, absence, silence and fluctuations.

*As curators, we chose to focus on certain aspects related to familial bonds, as we felt that in this space and time, family units have tremendously shifted. For this exhibition, we created a space that holds narratives conveying the leg of colonialism, migration, White supremacy, and patriarchal absence and*

*violence, as we came to understand that these factors affected all family histories (especially for BIPOC people).*

***"What do you want to tell me?" I ask my ancestors.***

Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy's path to connect with their ancestors manifests, in this instance, through a series of wax sculptures and a collage. Amorphous and multi-textured, wax silhouettes personify the difficult process of probing and meditating on healing ancestral wounds.

The muddy, sticky textures of the sculptures invoke the emotional labour of excavating passed-down traumas and intergenerational behavioural patterns, conditioning familial bonds. The tensions examined by the artist are uncomfortably rooted between one's personal quest for inner fulfillment and external expectations. The artist observes that:

*"It's always going to be a struggle because family, a lot of the time, they project a certain image of what they want you to be onto you, especially when you're living a radically different life from what they envisioned. There's a lot of judgment from them but it also comes with their own inner joy to see you flourish or live your life in a freer way than they thought they had."<sup>1</sup>*

The earth-toned sculptures are formed by an intense layering of diverging elements: transformed synthetic and natural elements, relics amassed during the past artist's travels, pieces of a hijab that belonged to the women of their family. Whilst some objects are apparent and interwoven, some remain hidden, yet they are part of the sculptures' core. It's in their

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<sup>1</sup> Sharir Omar-Qrishaswamy, interview with author Eve Tagny, January 30th, 2017.

subtlety that all materials reveal themselves, in the attention to details. Yet as viewers, we are condemned to have only access to a limited number of points of view, leaving us craving for more but also pushing us to imagine and reflect on the unseen.

### ***Bad Beti vs Good Beti***

Aditi Ohri's video and textile work *Modern Style Sari* (2010-2013), also refers to the practice of familial excavation. For this exhibition, she has created a transgenerational portal reminiscent of a historic and specific female space: the *zenana*. Until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in India, this room was reserved for women's gatherings in Hindu and Muslim homes. The artist embroidered on a veil, a honeycomb pattern inspired by Mughal architecture -- intentionally bridging the present and the past.

Romanticized by the artist, this communal place appears as a promising site to uncover empowering narratives pertaining to the women of her lineage. The potentiality projected onto the *zenana* as a beautiful, peaceful, and safe place to examine darker histories within her family tree is also an entryway to start conversations with other members of the diaspora about issues related to caste, class, mental health, domestic violence, and family dynamics. Ohri explains:

*"I hope to connect with other South Asian women, betis<sup>2</sup> who are conflicted about how to speak honestly about injustice and honour their families at the same time. I feel a tension between the empowered and rebellious "bad beti" that artists Hatecopy and Babbuthepainter represent and the "good beti" that many of us are expected to embody at*

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<sup>2</sup> Ohri was inspired by the work of artists Hatecopy and Babbuthepainter. In an interview with Samantha Edwards for *Toronto Life*, the artists mention that *Beti* means daughter in Hindi. "Bad Beti" then means bad daughter. Samantha Edwards, "Six explosive works by Hatecopy and Babbu the Painter, the Toronto pop artists who are adored by Mindy Kaling", *Toronto Life*, December 13th, 2013: <http://torontolife.com/culture/art/hatecopy-maria-qamar-babneet-lakhesar-babbu-the-painter-bad-beti-art-show/>

*home. Can the zenana as I imagine it be a space where we can be both? Or neither?"<sup>3</sup>*

During her upcoming trip to India in February and March 2017, Ohri will send clips of her travels to Xpace, with the intention of changing the projection during the course of the exhibition. These short videos will be dedicated to saris showing “their fabrics, their patterns, their falls, and their function as markers of social class and caste.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Being safe is being self-governed**

*“I found my grand-mother in a Youtube archive; my grandma was leading the Idle No More marches in my community, Couchiching. Seeing her presence in the archive was very powerful and rare. Rare because of the way the Canadian state works to erase women's roles in community, governance, and politics. Archives of Indigenous women as matriarchs who lead social movements and hold spaces of power are needed and powerful”<sup>5</sup>*

Fallon Simard’s video *Continuous Resistance Remix* (2016) covers the history of violence connecting Indigenous communities across Canada (from East to West). Mixing audio with 30 YouTube video archives about residential schools, resource blockades by Elsipogtog youth, Idle No More footage from Couchiching First Nation and forest fires, this work highlights the ongoing oppressive systems perpetuated by the state, white supremacy, and colonial heteropatriarchal values. Continuously fighting for land and humans rights, and ultimately for sovereignty, it is clear that what is at stake is cultural and land sustainability to secure a

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<sup>3</sup> Aditi Ohri, interview with author Geneviève Wallen, February 1st, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Aditi Ohri, interview with author Geneviève Wallen, February 1st, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Fallon Simard, interview with author Eve Tagny, January 28th, 2017.

healthier future for First Nations families. By embedding the intimate and the personal in specific issues affecting Indigenous populations, Fallon actively tries to reconnect with aspects of their ancestral culture and familial relations that have been violently disrupted by white supremacy.

In *Womb* (2016), Simard re-centers matriarchal voices, and their crucial roles as keepers of ancestral knowledge. Women and Two-spirited people are presented as not only giver of life but also the carrier. Simard's meditative and abstract animation invites the audience to listen and ponder on the extent of labour implicated in keeping a community and culture alive. As protectors of the life created both in the domestic and public spheres, as leaders in the struggle for self-governance, this work posits the matriarch as the most potent force in reclaiming of both body and land, which in Simard's creative realm are inextricably intertwined.

## **White and African**

A large, inscribed paper unfolds from the ceiling onto the floor recalling both sacred scriptures and a disposable newspaper. While the materiality of Eve Tagny's text-based piece seems familiar, its content is only revealed as one gets closer.

*"Digging through my mother's archives, I found these texts that were read at my baptism in 1988, probably at a time where mixed children were not so common in Quebec. The first one was an adaptation of the traditional religious texts that my young Mother wrote. The second one was written by this unconventional, very open priest. Yet it was so striking, the choice of words to describe my cultural affiliations sounds so crude and inappropriate today. So I thought these two*

*very revealing texts were a good way to explore notions of belonging and identity as a visible minority.”<sup>6</sup>*

By calling attention to certain words such as “White” and “African”, the piece speaks of the difficulty of language in expressing realities that stand outside of normativity. What does the vernacular we employ to speak of culture and nationhood contains or reveals about our ideas, perceptions and values. The choice of words expresses both a desire for inclusivity, at a period marked by the utopia of multiculturalists politics and interculturalism in Quebec, and a gauche othering, that is evidently carried out unknowingly. Terms like “White tradition” repeatedly employed by the priest seem crude today and is revealing of the shortcomings of the time.

Nearly 30 years later, the new version shies away from gawky specifics about origins or nationality. The wishes expressed by the mother for her daughter are open towards “all cultures, all nations,” open towards the world. There’s an implied privilege, positioning the daughter as someone who has the means to be mobile, to transcend place yet not necessarily race.

Friends and family are not reduced to “sides”, are not divided into two traditions. The family support network is not solely inherited but is built through time, care and effort. Its multiple locations are to be navigated, bridges to be constructed on every shore.

### ***I see myself in her by my actions***

Colourful and intricate, Omar Badrin’s masks are both alluring and perplexing. Each of them appears as though they could recount an individual story of origin, but together they seem to be part of the same community. Within this exhibition, they epitomize the knotty and interwoven chronicles of events defining the singularity of one’s family history.

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<sup>6</sup> Eve Tagny, interview with author Geneviève Wallen, February 7th, 2017.

Longing, absence and silence are amplified in Badrin's work as they respond to his biography as a transnational and transracial adoptee. This reality is translated in his masks through holes, hanging threads, disfigurement, and the sheerness of the crochet as his ancestral history has been unavailable to him. However, his work speaks beyond any reducing boxes ticking his multi-local identity. Although Badrin is addressing the profound racial and cultural tensions lived as a person of Malaysian descent growing up in Newfoundland, his body of work furthers the concepts of cultural legacy. As his practice centers on a craft techniques passed down by his grandmother and his mother, it testifies to matriarchal forces anchoring traditions and genealogical continuity.

In Badrin's case, learning to crochet is an active process maneuvering against genealogical bewilderment and ancestral disconnections. He is thus creating a relational language for himself and his kin, expanding understandings of love and ancestral knowledge. Badrin states:

*"I have many memories of my grandmother and mother crocheting at home. Subconsciously, these moments, and the activities that family members perform, are the ones we end up identifying with these individuals... Crochet is an activity that I associate with my family history. It's also a skill that I can take with me anywhere and continue to share. I hope that this tradition will be just as meaningful to later generations of my family as it is to me."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Omar Badrin, interview with author Geneviève Wallen, February 4th, 2017.

As issues around translating his positionality arises in his work, Badrin confectioned a visual language which both connects inherited familial traditions and a broader cultural fabric.

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All parts shaping this exhibition, also conceal, protect, and withhold information marking a great level of intimacy when familial affairs are discussed. Some of these artists investigate the family unit directly, how we interact within it and with each other according to our status -- son and daughter of our mothers, of our fathers, older and younger siblings, related by blood, marital alliances, adoption, or any other forms of created bond. On the threshold of what is inherited and what is acquired (or yet to be acquired), one can observe in *Blood Ties* that these relationships are unresolved but active. In each body of work, there's a soothing poetry in accepting that behind the surface of what we see and know lies hidden potentialities for further discovery and understanding of one's present realities.

- Eve Tagny & Geneviève Wallen

*Blood Ties* is part of Myseum Intersections, an annual festival of exhibits exploring different perspectives on the city's natural, cultural, and historical diversity.



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