AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE: ANNA WILLIAMS AND SARINDAR DHALIWAL

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Italian film director Frederico Fellini once said, “All art is autobiographical, the pearl is the oyster’s autobiography.”¹ This statement resonates with the artistic visions of Anna Williams (b. 1984) and Sarindar Dhaliwal (b. 1953) whose autobiographical artworks form the basis of this dual artist exhibition and serve as a framework for a discussion of larger personal, social and cultural narratives. In visualizing stories of their lives, the artists focus on the details associated with these experiences and the textual components that play on the meanings and ambiguities of language. This includes the ways that subjects, objects, materials, colours, titles and other linguistic elements can enhance the artist's self-examination by interweaving visual discourses with subjectively experienced, gendered identities.

For Anna Williams and Sarindar Dhaliwal the use of words and domestic materials are significant in expressing symbolic and historical associations with gender. The titles of the pieces are more than mere description; each title reveals a narrative through references to content and wordplay. As well, the words, which are a key element in most of these works, allude to a story, myth, or event from the specific histories of these two women artists. Williams, Canadian born, and raised in a family originally from England, confronts traditional ideas about identity and narrative. By using conventional materials in unconventional ways her artworks subvert expectations about the materials and subjects portrayed. By contrast, Dhaliwal who was born in Punjab, India, and grew up in Southall, England, creates art that is rooted in transnationalism and
feelings of displacement. Her artworks combine symbols and objects from Punjabi culture with memories and experiences from her past.

Anna Williams

A Family Portrait: Granny, Aunt Barbara, Mum (covered) and Aunt Bee. Each accompanied by their respective tea cozes

2009-2012

Varied dimensions

Cast bronze, fabric, thread and acrylic paint

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463982_A_Family_Portrait.html
Anna Williams

*Aunt Barbara*

2009

Approximately 20 x 15 x 55 cm

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463982_A_Family_Portrait.html
Anna Williams

*Aunt Barbara’s Tea Cozy* (detail of side A)

2009

Recycled fabric, embroidery thread

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463982_A_Family_Portrait.html
Anna Williams’ *A Family Portrait* (2009), as the title denotes, is a group portrait of her female relatives as teapots set upon long, stork-like legs. Each teapot is representative of the relative’s outward appearance and inner character. The teapots are named after the women depicted: *Mum* (2009), *Aunt Barbara* (2009), *Granny* (2009), and *Aunt Bee* (2009). Accompanying each teapot is a tea cozy sewn from articles of clothing donated by the relative and embroidered with a phrase or drawing, associated with each woman.

For example, Williams depicts *Aunt Barbara* as an angular turquoise teapot with a matching large thin square handle and a rounded spout. The surface of this teapot is rough, as if worn by time. The tea cozy evokes the unique essence of this woman. Williams lists the ingredients of Aunt Barbara’s “40-year Recipe”: “2c love, 1c respect, 1c trust, ½ c security, 1/2c devotion, 1/3c resentment, 3tbsp white lies, 1 tsp tolerance, 3 children, forgiveness as needed, adjust to taste.” This recipe describes Aunt Barbara as a mother, who loves cooking and who seldom strays from recipes or routines.

Made out of bronze, a material known for its strength and solidity, Williams was able to raise the teapots up on thin bird-like legs. The stork legs animate the teapots and also refer to women as chicks (US) or birds (UK). This grouping of female relatives emphasizes that Williams' family is led by matriarchs. The teapots express both the daily tradition of drinking tea at 4pm, and the idea of the woman as reproductive vessel. Also significant is the historical connection of women and crafts, such as sewing and embroidery, performed in the domestic setting. Within this context these crafts can be seen as evocative portraits of the women who produce them.
Anna Williams

*A Portrait of My Father*

2009

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

Artist’s Collection

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463958_A_Portrait_Of_My_Father.html
Anna Williams

_A Portrait of My Father_ (detail)

2009

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

Artist’s Collection

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463958_A_Portrait_Of_My_Father.html
A Portrait of My Father (2009) by Anna Williams continues the family theme. This object is a life-sized replica of her father’s chainsaw cast in bronze and covered in pink acrylic paint. The sculpture has a double purpose. It is at once an autobiographical subject in that it conveys the artist’s personal perspective of her father, and a historical narrative of maleness. Williams’ representation of her father as a chainsaw relates to memories the artist has of her father with this much-used machine. The artist says she has vivid recollections of her father using his chainsaw, sometimes in unsafe or risky ways, such as when clearing a trail while on cross-country skis.³

Using her father as a model, Williams contradicts the stereotypical notions of fatherhood to reveal the divergent facets of the family man she loves and admires. The artist’s appropriation of the chainsaw draws on the hyper-masculine concept of a strong, action-oriented male.⁴ The chainsaw, a tool typically wielded by rugged men, is an aggressive, violent machine with the sound of its loud motor and sharp, serrated edges. The chainsaw connotes the raw power and unbridled energy of manhood.

In contrast with the precise nature of the chainsaw, the artist's use of bronze casting, pink paint⁵ and polka dots reflects the nurturing and thoughtful side of her father and her image of a more ideal male. According to the artist, the polka dots also allude to her father’s flashy, eccentric style of dress. As a mute, static sculpture, the chainsaw is no longer an extension of the male persona. The pink paint acts as a soft counterpart to the tool’s aggression to signify the warmth, generosity, and caring side of Williams' father.
Anna Williams

*Squadron*

2009

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

[http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2464275_Squadron.html](http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2464275_Squadron.html)
Anna Williams

*Squadron* (details)

2009

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

[http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2464275_Squadron.html](http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2464275_Squadron.html)

From the personal and familial Williams delves into the social and cultural manifestations of identity. *Squadron* (2009), an installation, consists of 34 individual sparrows cast in bronze, painted “international red” and with white-stenciled crosshairs on the backs and wings. The birds suspended from the ceiling form a concentrated swarm. Here the artist is referencing the larger ongoing narrative of minority communities being overlooked, and having to constantly struggle to be heard.
In the 2008 American election, California voted yes to Proposition 8, which defines marriage solely as a union between a man and a woman. By revoking the right of same sex couples to marry the proposition reversed the California Supreme Court’s ruling that it is the Constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry. In this work Williams responds to the loss of civil rights of the gay community that encompasses the marginalization of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people.

The title, Squadron refers to a large military group, either a fighting unit in the army or a group of aircrafts flying together in battle. In contrast, the sparrow is an ancient symbol of friendly household spirits, and was an icon of freedom for peasants and minority populations in Britain in the Middle Ages. Here, in the conflation of squadron and sparrow, the work represents the gay community as a repressed people whose citizenry has been targeted, as evidenced by the white crosshairs. The artist writes that the color “international red” represents borderless notions of inward struggles and outward battles associated with sexual identity. The bronze casting is painted over by the artist, in order to prompt the viewer into questioning art historical notions of tradition and conformity.
Sarindar Dhalwal

*Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree*

1989

Dimensions unknown

Slate, halved and hollowed out coconuts, pigment

Sarindar Dhaliwal's works are also focused on family connections and larger narratives that originate from her autobiography. *Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree* (1989) consists of a series of 16 slabs of black slate laid in a row like railroad ties; seen here on the wooden floor of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. This work is part of a series titled *Punjabi Sheets* wherein the artist visualizes issues related to globalism and transnationalism with the use of elements from the Punjabi culture in which she was raised. In this work family member's names and relationships are etched onto the slabs and organized into explanatory sentences. The names of the artist's relatives are written in Punjabi and highlighted in white whereas the relationships, raw and uncoloured, are written in English. The slabs are to be read from top to bottom. To the right of each slate slab is a halved and hollowed out coconut containing pigments whose colours refer emotionally to the ordering of these complex family ties.

The narrative of this work is about family and the fusion of cultures and languages. The artist is reclaiming her experiences growing up in a Punjabi household and going to school in England. A lack of explanation and the nuanced way of stating in one or two Punjabi words how someone is related to you either maternally, paternally, through blood or through marriage, can create dissonance in a young child’s mind. This incongruity, mixed with a supposedly rational British versus an emotive and by extension irrational view of Punjabi culture created confusion for the young artist.\(^{10}\) In this work Sarindar straddles these two vastly different societal traditions. She attempts to repair, reimagine, reclaim and reconcile these complex familial relationships that she is expected to respect, understand and adhere to. The artist explores these inconsistencies and conflicts from her childhood – almost as a way of learning and filling in her lack of knowledge by using a hybrid mixture of Punjabi and English words.
Language in this work is used critically. The slabs of slate, reminiscent of a classroom blackboard, evidence the artist’s uncertainty of the Punjabi culture, and her willingness to make public the idea of learning through rote memorization. The poem-like layout of the names and relations is a direct reference to the way school children are taught to spell and memorize words. In a similar way the artist as an adult had to go back and learn the words and associations she refused to learn or could not learn when she was a child.
Sarindar Dhaliwal

_Punjabi Sheets #3: Birbansian, 1953_

2004

Variable dimensions

Mixed-media installation, paint, paper, wax, marble

Sarindar Dhaliwal

*Punjabi Sheets #3: Birbansian, 1953* (detail)

2004

Variable dimensions

Mixed-media installation, paint, paper, wax, marble

Punjabi Sheets #3: Birbansian, 1953 (2004), also a site-specific installation with words on slate, is an Indian folklore tale handwritten in red on a large black chalkboard. A long shelf, the length of the large chalkboard, holds 47 egg-shapes of decreasing size, made of wax, marble and paper. For this visual narrative the artist tells a story by handwriting it on the wall. The folktale describes a mother and aunt who are desperate to save a dying baby, and who come across a mender of pots who tells them to place a fresh egg in the road so that when it gets crushed by the first cart or rickshaw that passes by the baby will recover. 

This work can be read as an autobiographical portrait of the artist’s early years in India’s Punjab region as the location and date refer to the artist’s place and date of birth. The retelling of the folktale can be interpreted as a metaphoric portrait of her mother and aunt who loved her with her as the baby who survived illness. Her rewriting or reimagining of this past becomes both a way to remember and symbolically memorialize her early years in India.

The use of multiples in Sarindar Dhaliwal’s artworks is also a signature of sorts – a reworking of ideas in her mind, and a way to accept them. The eggs in the installation recall the egg in the story to which she now owes her life. In a quasi-obsessive manner, the artist made each of the eggs to represent each year of her life since leaving her hometown at the age of three. The decreasing size of the eggs indicates the artist’s fading memories of her early years in India as a child.
Sarindar Dhaliwal

*Call the Wind Virago*

2004

Variable dimensions

Indian cotton fabric

Swamp Ward Window Project

Sarindar Dhaliwal

*Call the Wind Virago* (detail)

2004

Variable dimensions

Indian cotton fabric

Swamp Ward Window Project

As well as an affinity for symbolic expressions of personal and family narratives, Sarindar Dhaliwal like Anna Williams is interested in the broader meanings of female identity, especially with regard to patriarchal repression and the rejection of women. *Call the Wind Virago* (2004) is a site-specific installation consisting of 60 sets of multi-coloured Indian cotton curtains installed to fit the windows of the porch of the Swamp Ward Window Project, a non-traditional contemporary art venue in Kingston, Ontario. On each pane, in black vinyl lettering, is a woman’s name written vertically; below the name, horizontally, is a year in brackets.

Before the turn of the nineteenth century, Clement Wragge, a British meteorologist, began giving women's names to tropical storms and hurricanes although it was not until 1953 that the National Weather Service started to name big storms after women.\(^{13}\) This continued until 1979 when the National Hurricane Center began to insert men’s names alternately with those of women’s.\(^{14}\) Dhaliwal's work acts as an archive of the women names of hurricanes between 1953 and 1979, and as a reflection on the ideation of women as unpredictable, emotional beings. The word “virago,” in the title of the work is a regendering of the Latin *vir*, meaning virile man. While it can refer to a woman of great stature, strength, and courage, its more common connotation is a loud, mean, over-bearing woman such as the evil stepmother in a fairytale.\(^{15}\) The comparison of women to storms, the decision of white, Western males, entails the negative association of women with unstable, destructive tendencies. As such women like hurricanes are apt to fly into an uncontrolled rage at any moment.

Since the strong focus of this installation is colour, the artist compares the sections of the windows to a paint box. Within this context the colourful curtains behind glass reflect the beauty and fragility of female-made objects when confronted by the destructive powers of Mother
Nature (also personified as a woman). Alternatively, the pairing of names and dates with the coloured curtains can be read as a memorial to the victims of the storm’s destruction, as well as to the women whose names were associated with the storms.

Autobiographical narrative is a running theme in these six artworks by Anna Williams and Sarindar Dhaliwal. These narratives follow a trajectory that increasingly expands outward from the personal, or microcosm of the family, to the macrocosm of global society. The personal wherein the artwork envisions the dynamics of familial relationships includes inanimate objects and written descriptions to evoke portraits of individuals. The meaning of these works is amplified by the narratives which explore the social constructs of gender identity, cultural specificity, prejudice and marginalization.
VIRTUAL EXHIBITION DESIGN

The idea for the online component of this dual artist exhibition is based on the exhibition’s title: “Autobiographical narrative in the artworks of Anna Williams and Sarindar Dhaliwal” where storytelling and personal narrative are the key aspects I want to emphasize. I have interviewed both artists in their homes or studios resulting in recorded, and later transcribed, conversations with both. In our interviews the artists told stories about the people, objects, places and experiences represented in the artworks that were meaningful to the process of creation and which are seen as critical parts of the artworks themselves.

Anna Williams, during our interview, describing the process of bronze casting used in the making of A Portrait of My Father, 2009.

Thus, in addition to images of the artworks included in this exhibition, I would also like to make available an audio (or video) component in which the artist describes the artworks and tells the story behind each one. In addition photographs from both interviews can be used as support material.

(Note: I would like that the descriptions and stories also be accessible in a written format for those who are hearing impaired.)
Below are two excerpts from my interviews with the artists.

For example, Anna Williams talks about her Aunt Barbara from *A Portrait of My Family* (2009):

“My aunt [Barbara] in Montreal is very, sort of, pragmatic and practical, and holds herself and family to very high standards, and is a fabulous cook, and really her passion is cooking so that idea of deciding what something is going be and making it, rather than exploring options and seeing what something turns into and fostering a certain direction and kind of being open to possibility and not sticking so rigidly to your recipe. It will see itself to end and that will be that.”

And another excerpt from my interview with Sarindar Dhilliwal where she speaks about *Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree* (1989):

“There are six words for aunt. My mothers sister, my mother’s brother’s wife, my father’s sister, my father’s older brother’s wife, and my father’s younger brother’s wife. So anyway if only she had said that to me at the age of four. But [my mother] didn’t have the language or she could never have actually articulated that because she didn’t read or write and was never allowed to learn.”
NOTES

4 “Artist’s Statement.”
5 On the topic of pink chainsaws, a quick Google search with the words “chainsaw” and “sensitive male” brought me to this image. It is disturbing to me that Hello Kitty now makes chainsaws, and they also make a pink AK-47. Again, here a whole bunch of gender issues can be examined with the juxtaposition of the color pink and these tools of aggression.
8 “Squadron.”
9 “Squadron.”
10 Sarindar Dhaliwal, interview with Stephanie Raudsepp, November 24, 2012.
11 Sarindar Dhaliwal.
15 In my family we used to call my grandmother, who was the sweetest and most caring woman, Hurricane Hazel, as she would whip around with so much energy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

http://annawilliams.com/BIO/1/.


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