

“Perform your otherness, perform your identity – because...?”

A conversation with Zinnia Naqvi by Anushay Malik

Zinnia Naqvi is an interdisciplinary artist based in Toronto who has exhibited her photography and installation-based work across Canada and internationally. She was selected to participate in the Mayworks Festival of Working People & the Arts' 2022-2023 Labour Arts Catalyst and was paired with the Asian Canadian Labor Alliance (ACLA) as part of the festival's collaborative art-making program.

“It was beautiful, exotic, oriental...so I decided to subvert it” Zinnia Naqvi said in one of our first conversations, describing one of her earlier works, *Veena*, a video installation that delivers a powerful message about how the colonial gaze reduces things to a palatable caricature of the real. *Veena* opens with the robotic sounds of a woman describing her experience as diaspora while her face is projected onto beautiful *saris* hanging from the ceiling. Although her appearance seems real, her voice sounds noticeably computer-generated, creating dissonance that makes this piece uncomfortable to watch. This work is reminiscent of the pieces that Naqvi has made for the Labour Arts Catalyst.

The question of agency comes up repeatedly in Zinnia's work. She recalls being a young girl and feeling the gendered division of seriousness in the household where her father and uncle would be debating politics and “it was always like ‘oh the men are arguing leave them alone don't get involved...’ and I always felt like, well it was frustrating because I also had opinions.” Zinnia's art provided her with a way to experiment and tell stories thereby reclaiming power.

During my conversation with Zinnia, we discussed her approach to art, which reminded me of Frantz Fanon's idea of the “native intellectual” – the anticolonial organizer, artist or scholar who has been trained in Western ways but must turn away from addressing their oppressors as an audience and instead focus on their people. Zinnia's work resists the pressure to conform to the white gaze, and she emphasizes that her practice is not rooted in bitterness but in love and gratitude toward those who have paved the way for her. Her goal is to create work that is accessible but also challenges the desire to make it easily understandable for those in power. This is exemplified in one of the stories she is showcasing in the festival.

ACLA Ontario provided the artist with a rich archive of cases, images, and stories to work with. While going through this material, Zinnia was struck by the story of Professor Kin-Yip Chun, a geophysicist at University of Toronto who very publicly sued the university for racial discrimination. His case was taken up by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, who backed Chun's allegations citing a toxic work environment and “old boys club”. Two of Naqvi's pieces at Whippersnapper Gallery stage Chun's desk at different points of his legal battle, which had taken over his life after he challenged the alleged racism. The cockroaches in one of these pieces

serve a dual purpose: they are both literal and symbolic, drawing inspiration from the work of the artist Tazeen Qayyum, they represent the “other” who is perceived as something to fear. In a literal sense, they are a reference to a 2003 report about Chun’s case which stated that at one point Chun was placed in an office that was infested with vermin and cockroaches. For Zinnia, “there is no right answer, Chun did everything right, he went to all these ivy league schools, and he was almost there, but kept getting denied tenure because other people were just a ‘better fit’”.

The other stories Naqvi stages in this body of work are disturbingly similar. They feature workers and students who are either kept in precarious positions or are deemed to not belong based on what they look like. In each of the images Naqvi uses the archival story to imagine the before and after, to take the viewer into the intimate and private worlds that the public story does not allow us to see. In each of these, her methodology and imaginings are guided by the desire to show “the chaos of the experience” for Chun, for international students and for the disciplining of Canadian identity and who gets to claim it.

Naqvi’s latest work draws on stories that are different from her past work, which was based on personal experiences and family archives. She is careful to be mindful about privacy and representation when writing these stories because they are not hers, but they are still familiar because they resonate with Naqvi’s own childhood experiences. As a child she became aware of how race and poverty intersected, and how the policing of her identity allowed for some types of diversity but not others. For instance, during her time in art school, Naqvi was one of the few racialized students in her program and felt pressure to “perform” her identity. Naqvi’s multiple worlds, both local and global, make up her Canadian identity, but her experiences have shown her that her identity is not always accepted as valid.

These stories intersect not just with ethnicity or what we call “race”, but with precarity. Zinnia recalled how her father’s past as a left-leaning student organizer in Karachi in the 1970s influenced her upbringing. Zinnia’s desk, which is featured in all the pieces, is her way of inserting herself and her past into the artwork. As someone who currently teaches in a precarious position in the same university that Chun was fired from, she is aware that the support she has received is a testament to struggle; “I am paying homage to his struggle because it made space for people like me.” The final question I ask Zinnia is about this precarity and the path forward from there. The answer is an important one: we need the support of others. Specifically, Zinnia emphasizes the importance of mentorship for BIPOC/IBPOC artists, guidance in finding funding and assistance in navigating inaccessible systems and grant-writing. “We really have not moved on as far as we would like to” she says. Perhaps by coming together with those who share our aspirations for the world we are building, imagining a new world into existence will be possible.

To learn more about “The Professor’s Desk” by Zinnia Naqvi, visit <https://mayworks.ca/2023-festival/the-professors-desk>

Anushay Malik is a labor historian with a geographical focus on South Asia. Her teaching and research interests focus on labor movements with particular attention to the space of the city and the way in which it affects worker organization and possibilities.

Zinnia Naqvi (she/her) is a lens-based artist working in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her work examines issues of colonialism, cultural translation, language, and gender through the use of photography, video, the written word, and archival material. Recent projects have included archival and re-staged images, experimental documentary films, video installations, graphic design, and elaborate still-lives. Her artworks often invite the viewer to consider the position of the artist and the spectator, as well as analyze the complex social dynamics that unfold in front of the camera. Naqvi’s work has been shown across Canada and internationally. She is a 2022 Fall Flaherty/Colgate Distinguished Global Filmmaker in Residence and recipient of the 2019 New Generation Photography Award organized by the the National Gallery of Canada. Naqvi is member of EMILIA-AMALIA Working Group, an intergenerational feminist collective. Naqvi received a BFA in Photography Studies from Toronto Metropolitan University and an MFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University.

Founded in 1986, **Mayworks Festival of Working People & the Arts** is a community-based festival which annually presents new works by a diverse and broad range of artists, who are both workers and activists. Our programming presents bold, insightful, responses to pressing issues at the intersection of art, social justice and labour. Mayworks is actively engaged in a social dialogue that challenges the logics of capitalism, and seeks to reimagine and represent a just future.