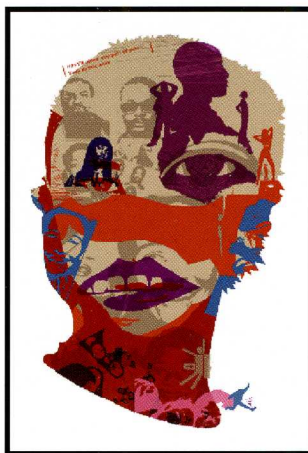


Unofficial Ambassadors

-TESSA LIEM

The exhibition *Rightfully Yours* runs from November 15th until December 15th at the Justina M. Barnike Gallery, Hart House.

Tejpal Aji is this year's Curator-in-Residence and this exhibition is his first.



The exhibition titled *Rightfully Yours*, features ten artists and is Tejpal Aji's curatorial debut. An artist and a student, taking a year off to take the position of Curator in Residence, Tej described one requirement for the show: that it include artists not only from here but, also, everywhere else. Everywhere else is a slight exaggeration but in addition to local Canadian artists the exhibition features work representing and addressing issues in Albania, Sweden, South Africa, and Germany.

The broad range of media within this exhibition will not surprise those who are familiar with the contemporary art scene. *Rightfully Yours*, features photography, video, sculpture, and installation. This makes it challenging to gloss over the complexity of what is being presented as each piece warrants consideration in its own right. Nonetheless, the exhibition is presented as a whole body, its pieces unified by the careful choices of the curator and mention of a few will certainly inform the others left to be discovered. To some attending the gallery the connections between the work may not seem clear, but Tej talked about the projects in detail and said that as a curator it is important to "acknowledge the fact that you're also an installation artist...and whether or not it is fashionable to talk in these terms, everyone's work becomes your material and its positioning becomes important; presenting it in a way that evokes a discussion between the works and between experiences."

Canadian artist Camille Turner plays with the idea of Canadian Ambassadors slash beauty queens in one part of the gallery. A video featuring "Rinkeby", an unofficial Swedish slang that Tej equated with, "for lack of a better term, gangsta" is playing on another wall. The "Lesbian Rangers" project presented by Canadian artists

Shawna Dempsy and Lorrie Millan inhabits another corner. Alicia Fremy's dog-proof, bullet-proof and fire retardant dresses are presented as a response to violent hate crimes against women in a particular part of Berlin. South African artist, Steven Cohen, addresses the shutting down of a "tent city" in South Africa and that is not all. This list extends to include work from Albanian artist, Sislej Xhafa, as well as local artist, and OCAD professor Wendy Coburn.

There is no superlative question or answer being posed by the work featured in *Rightfully Yours*. A simple description of the work in this exhibition, unfettered by the social and political contexts in which these works were spawned, is intriguing on its own. But still, what is interesting about the work in this exhibition is exactly that: the art as it functions within a larger context. These works enter into a discourse about national identity, the disenfranchisement of parts of cultures and the question of who can be a representative or ambassador for a group of people. Furthermore, who is qualified as an authority to speak on behalf of an entire group of people? Tej said that he is interested in the roles artists can take by involving themselves in the discourse on poverty, violence, and equality everywhere from Albania to Canada. These artistic endeavors bring issues of social justice and equality into the arena of contemporary art, and vice versa. These artists have not declared their authority, but have raised these questions, and in effect have become unofficial ambassadors for fragments of cultures which have been labeled "substandard;" marked as invalid or non-existent; cultures that are either ignored or attacked not just across political borders but within them.

Tej spoke with enthusiasm about the artists and their work. During the interview a unifying concept that seems to inhabit each part of the exhibition became apparent. There is a discussion happening between the pieces: the experiences they come from and the translation of those experiences. The idea of discussion rather than questions and answers became of importance because as we spoke, it was as though his ideas about the exhibition had just been conceived. It became clear that the discussions happening between gallery walls can provoke critical thinking about the world that we inhabit. Of course, this was not the first time Tej had thought about these things. As a curator, slash artist, slash student, Tej has been thinking about these things for a while.

