

Large Text

my final prayer

Curated by atif mikhail khan

May 3–July 22, 2023

University of Toronto Art Centre

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Works by naakita f.k., Jasmine Gui with Abby Ho and Justine Wong, Thomas Haskell, and Pejvak

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This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

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my final prayer

The usual story goes like this: late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism entailed the secularized extension of the European Enlightenment turned global crusade of scientific empiricism and technological rationalism. European colonies continued to be made around the world. Yet there is nothing secular about this era. From Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) to the radio broadcast of the Apollo 8 crew reading from the Book of Genesis while orbiting the Moon for the first time (1968) to Bush's military "crusades" (2001), a number of sinister and often violent realities hid behind the façade of secularism.

What modernism conceals is its flip side: colonial modernity, a period that dates to the early fifteenth century. This period coincides with the sacrifice of flesh, blood, and bones—but only particular flesh, blood, and bones—to keep the monstrous altar wheel of colonial modernity turning.

According to Trinidad-born feminist philosopher M. Jacqui Alexander (2006), colonial modernity was about strategic dismemberment of all sorts, from biological death to physical dispossession to the destruction of the sacred-spiritual.¹ The accumulation of corpses in the colonial modern leaves us feeling stuck. In the last lines of *Black Skin, White Masks*

1. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

(1952), Martinique-born political philosopher and doctor Frantz Fanon responded with a demand for embodied transformations: “My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”² A question emerges: what spiritual prayer will dislodge the stuckness?

my final prayer presents four contemporary artists traversing the visual edges of prayer, spirit and the body. They identify points of intersection between contemporary political violence and notions of spirit, suturing the two in their affective relationship. The exhibition seeks to expand our understanding of spirit as an affective mode, inhabiting both the self and world differently. While organized religion has invented spirit as accessible only to some, the four artists in this exhibition invent a different kind of embodied spirit, one on the edges of visibility.

Thomas Haskell’s ceramic pieces, the *Consuming Caribbean* series and *Midnight Robber*, 2020, evoke transnational Caribbean genealogies of Carnival and, by extension, playing mas, where Afro-Caribbean histories are reclaimed after the emancipation of the enslaved as histories of the people. Playing mas reflects uneven histories and spiritual encounters where the body is a critical portal to spirit. Haskell’s *Consuming Caribbean* lends various fruits anthropomorphized and haunted qualities (such as *Bread-Brain Fruit*, *Pawjaw*, *Pomcytongue*, and *Pomebreast*), introducing layered questions of what it means to consume the human body composed of blood, flesh, and bones.

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2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York City: Grove Press, 1967), 250.

Pejvak, a collective comprising artists Rouzbeh Akhbari and Felix Kalmenson, presents a video installation titled *Weak Enough to Hear: A Deluge in Six Acts* (2019). The piece is haunted by the murder and fictional ghost of Ahmed Jabbar Kareem Ali, a 15-year-old boy drowned by British troops in 2003 after being accused of looting in one of the tributaries of the Euphrates, Shatt al-Basra, in Southern Iraq. Across the video's six acts, land and water act as storytellers, raising questions about how and by whom power is manifested through the control of access to river and land, resource and history. Through the ghost of Ali, spirit guides the viewer through embodied visual markers such as the water, landscape, bones, and trees extending and exceeding organized forms of religious practice.

The paper and mixed media installation *resurgent artefacts* (2023) sees Jasmine Gui with Abby Ho and Justine Wong evoke three paper Daoist talismans with pressed words (tied to grief) bursting outwards from the papers' seams. Rather than enclosing or supporting text in the conventional manner of a communicative vessel, paper here acts as a talisman that both invokes (what is contained within the talisman) and revokes (sealing things away). Gui's written poetry (presented in the accompanying wall vinyl and audio recording) likewise stretches words that often fail to give form to grief through her play with language.

naakita f.k.'s *Stone Tape: A haunting* (2021) closes the exhibition with a question: what possibilities exist in haunted space? naakita's episodic video series transcends the invisible (specter, ghostly presence, haunting) and

blends it with what is visible (landscape, built environment), challenging the binary visual optic of visibility / invisibility.

Together, the artists refract and unsettle the visual form of spirit to activate the *otherwise* articulating different prayers from the devils we know. As Fanon wrote decades earlier, to move beyond the monstrous altar wheel, spirit must be activated. Our access to a different way of being is at stake.

About the Curator

atif mikhail khan (b. Lahore) is a curator, writer and researcher based in Rexdale, Toronto. His recent research looks at the intersections between transnational militarization, the edges of visual practice, and themes of spirit in contemporary social and political thought. Previously, he co-curated *The Centre Cannot Hold: Labourious Memories* at the Jackman Humanities Centre alongside Erin Storus and Sherry Chunqing Liu.

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