

Large Text

2023 MVS Studio Program Graduating Exhibitions

Works by Durga Rajah, Nimisha Bhanot,
Omolola Ajao, and Sarah Zanchetta

May 3–July 22, 2023

University of Toronto Art Centre

**Art
Museum**

2023 University of Toronto MVS Studio Program Graduating Exhibitions

The Art Museum, in partnership with the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto, is pleased to exhibit the graduating projects of the 2023 Master of Visual Studies students Durga Rajah, Nimisha Bhanot, Omolola Ajao, and Sarah Zanchetta.

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

Our Supporters

We gratefully acknowledge project support from
The Valerie Jean Griffiths Student Exhibitions Fund in
Memory of William, Elva, and Elizabeth.

Foreword

“Contemporary art is working on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation. That is why contemporary art is less a production of individual artworks than it is a manifestation of an individual decision to include or to exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world, to give them a new context or to deny it to them: a private selection that is at the same time publicly accessible and thereby made manifest, present, explicit.”¹

—Boris Groys

The students of the MVS program’s graduating year 2023 have been through an array of experiences: from entering a program remotely, to graduating with an in-person exhibition of work that they have crafted during their two years here. Each of the graduate students has used their time, space, and opportunity in the University of Toronto’s Masters of Visual Studies program to grapple with their own lived experiences and to weave unique narratives that inform and entice the viewer.

Omolola Ajao’s *I Believe I Saw Alien* invites us into a site of affective interrogation. Induced through voice and rhythm, this atmospheric two-channel video spurs us towards new horizons of visibility, a speculative of Black performance on the stage of anti-Black conditions. Textually narrated, this video essay provides an analytical/poetic reflection

across memory, presence and futurity. Juxtaposing found footage with the artist's own personal documentation, the work provides a captivating reflection between public and private accounts of Blackness. This interspersed imagery between mediatized and private visual representations forms necessary and unique connections, resulting in an installation that is at once meditative, romantic and imagining. This work is both intriguing and multidimensional and offers the viewer a complex perspective, one that is new and distinctive. This work echoes and responds to the visual theory of Black scholars, moving us to embrace impactful and ulterior visions.

Nimisha Bhanot's feverish video montage, prints, sculptural objects, and paintings come together to speak to the life of South Asian women and femmes in the subcontinent and within the Diaspora investigating the entanglement of everyday transitional objects and potential spaces like the Internet and social media. Using film stills and screen grabs from personal digital archives as sources for her paintings, Bhanot depicts a dichotomy between imagery of early memories of women in the Diaspora portrayed by the Indian film industry and Canadian cultural programming, in juxtaposition to present-day social media posts by feminist activists residing in the South Asian subcontinent facing censorship. The act of sourcing material captured through a transitional object speaks to significant moments of and encounters with femme liberation and radical hope for Bhanot. Pointing to numerous examples of marginalized figures that have been censored, Bhanot's work tackles issues from sexual liberation to religious freedom to critiques of the caste system. In her video montage series, Bhanot

sources footage from her personal digital archive to present a glimpse into her layered existence. In this project, the aesthetics of radical hope are presented to us as an archive of encounters in the third space. This third space becomes a place from which to be present in solidarity with South Asian women and femmes as they challenge and disrupt societal norms.

The installation work of Sarah Zanchetta aims to present a relational experience with poison ivy demonstrated through a year-long engagement with the plant where she studied it, foraged for it, and created dye baths with it.

I drew us a lukewarm bath considers the process of finding oneself through developing a deep and sustained relationship with the forbidden parts of nature. Interested in exploring the feeling of absence, Zanchetta has used all means possible to build a living archive, a soliloquy with this plant as a means to grapple with the loss of land-based knowledge that she never had, and to begin a journey of connection back to nature. This exploration of kinship with poison ivy is manifested as an installation using shimmering crystal organza fabric that mimics the different stages of the dye bath water. The installation also includes three fabricated containers that hold imagery of the poison ivy plants suspended in water. These elements come together with a variety of hand-sewn gloves delicately made from the digitally printed fabrics designed by the artist. The hands suggest a movement outwards from the centre of the installation, alluding to future possibilities for the relationship between artist and ivy, but also, perhaps, to the potential of this connection for others as well.

These artists offer meaningful and rewarding explorations of their charged relationships with the world, introducing us to these relationships through their embodied positionalities and curiosities. Looking within provides perspective, creates intricate frameworks, breathes life into old relationships in need of mending and allows us to imagine exciting new theoretical contexts. It is a thrill to experience this work and to feel grounded in the potential for the future. These projects have the power to be many things at once, a refreshing and transformational offering.

—Sanaz Mazinani

*Assistant Professor, Studio Art | Arts, Culture and Media
University of Toronto Scarborough*

1. Boris Groys, “The Topology of Contemporary Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee and Terry Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 71–80.

Durga Rajah

Breathe

What does it mean to be me? Is it my body? My being? My existence? What does it mean to be 'I'? How I situate myself is entirely dependent on my own interpretation of the word 'I'. I cannot tell you how to interpret the word 'I'. What happens to the word 'I' when you read it? Can I be in a photograph and yet disappear from it? Where do I go if my likeness is not captured and rendered directly into the photograph? What is the correlation between being present and being visible? What is the space between ceasing to be visible and ceasing to exist?

I lie on the ground with a camera on my chest in a room lit only by a single light fixed above the lens. I bear the camera's weight as I breathe. It is hard to forget about your breath when you carry the weight of something on your chest. I breathe in, I pause, I breathe out. I continue to breathe.

I am present,
I am not seen,
I am

About the Artist

Durga Rajah is interested in the formal and material aspects of photography, and in its potential as a reflective medium. In her recent work, she explores performative strategies which imbricate subjecthood within the photographic process, as she reevaluates photography's role as a medium of representation and artmaking.

(durgarajah.com)

Nimisha Bhanot

This research project investigates the complex, interwoven relationships between transitional objects, potential spaces, quotidian archival practices, and South Asian diasporic identity formation. Contemporary archival practices such as the acts of posting, screenshotting, photographing, “liking,” etc. have transformed the common mobile phone into a transitional object, thus creating virtual spaces that blur the line between indoor/outdoor, becoming potential spaces for play and exercises of creativity. The interstitial nature of this virtual potential space allows it to function as a third space for experimentation with multiple facets of identity, be it national, cultural, or sexual. By utilizing the personal archive as a starting point, this body of work critically examines contemporary archival impulses and the psychoanalytic tensions that trigger the feverish need for consignment through an integrative bicultural lens. While also exposing holes in the archive, this archive of ticklings offers a rich insight into the landscape of diasporic identities, one that exists as a temporal entanglement of the conscious and subconscious, indoor and outdoor, home and “not home.” Its contents act as contestations to the processes of push and pull, acceptance and rejection, and transformation and preservation that make diasporic identity formation, where minority and majority cultures are balanced into a unique equilibrium. By venturing into the multiple facets of the virtual potential space, this work presents itself as a record of a momentous time in history for the Internet, transnational medias, and communication in relation to the self and identity. As our technological dependence increases,

the lines between the indoor and outdoor blur, thus allowing developmental tools like the transitional object and potential space to take on a new appearance, a new meaning, and a new purpose.

About the Artist

Nimisha Bhanot (she/her) is a visual artist whose work challenges and critiques the socio-political role of women and femmes from an integrative bicultural perspective, accepting and rejecting aspects of South Asian and North American culture. Her current research interests take a step back by utilizing the personal archive as a starting point and investigating the complex, interwoven relationship between transitional objects, potential spaces, quotidian archival practices, and South Asian diasporic identity formation. Bhanot received her BFA in Drawing and Painting from OCADU in 2013. Her work has been profiled by BuzzFeed, BBC, Huffington Post, Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, and CBC Arts, among others. (nimishabhanot.com; @nimishabhanot)

Omolola Ajao

I Believe I Saw Alien is a two-channel installation. Formed as a video essay, the work speaks with a Black 'alien' that has accepted Black non-humanity long ago, who converses with a young Black human grasping towards Black alienness. As 'faith' is the crux of the work, the film shifts past the inherent valuation of Black life as representative or simple. Through this intramural conversation, this work complicates the ontology of the Black human, creating a lens that theorizes a state of Black under and outside of recognition. An appreciation of Black embodiment and Black onlooking forms together to explore the adaptive methodologies for Black life to congregate, communicate, and persist amidst anti-Black systems.

About the Artist

Omolola Ajao is a Nigerian-Canadian filmmaker and video artist.

Her work forms upon the vastness of Black migratory life, often conceiving from subjectivity. She embraces Black reality as means of endless imagination, exploration and excavation, often playing within form, rhythm, and narrative to speculate upon migratory presence. Her artistic works contend with visibility and voice and have been presented internationally. Her prescient work endeavours to challenge and fissure the anticipated narratives of video-ed and

documented Black life. She is a Union Doc Fellow, a Hot Docs Fellow, and a TIFF Accelerator Fellow.

Sarah Zanchetta

Utopic.

I was asked to imagine what my work would be in an idealized setting, where anything and everything could be possible.

In this dream state, it would be you growing in the space surrounding, wandering and covering the fabric which we created together.

The audience would be allowed to sit on the floor next to you, to understand the risk that reaching out their hand would have, and the ability to enjoy this tension.

However, utopic does not exist here.

You are not allowed in this exhibition space, no plants, no fire, no wind, and no water.

Our fabric has moved home; awaiting something a new, not held within the boundaries of the never-ending bureaucracy.

Yet the deadlines and the exhibition continue, I had to make something to fill this space that could connect back to you.

How could I speak to and for everything we created,
that could stand in this room and have your presence,
as if this imposter was the real thing.

However, it could never be you, poison ivy.

So instead, I will bring the audience into an artificial mirage
of a moment,
to where most of the creation of our kinship took place.

Where our relationship was mediated by gloves and tepid
water,
sunlight, cool wind, and the colours of your leaves.

A chance to spill these moments into this exhibition,
to invite the audience into the water, and into the kinship.

To capture the pause between your poison flooding my
gloves and scarring my skin.
The pause between words as I speak your name in
conversation.

The pause between not knowing and beginning to
understand.

Pausing here, at the moment when I drew us a lukewarm
bath.

About the Artist

Sarah Zanchetta (she/her) is a textile artist and writer. Her curiosity-driven practice researches and questions the loss of knowledge in connection to the land and plants which surround us, specifically our fringed relationship with poisonous plants. (sarahzanchetta.com; [@zanxetta](https://www.instagram.com/zanxetta))

From the Artists

Durga: This work emerged while writing a paper for Charles Stankieveh and Ala Roushan's Breath: Concerning Air & Atmosphere Graduate Symposium in 2022. I would like to express my gratitude to my principal advisor, Gareth Long, who motivated me and challenged my ideas and assumptions. Thank you to my thesis panel, Jean-Paul Kelly, Francesco Gagliardi, Morris Lum, and Noa Bronstein for their conversations, critiques, and guidance. I also want to thank Zach Blas, for his encouragement and insights. Finally, thank you to my cohort for their support and companionship through this program.

Nimisha: A HUGE thank you to my family and my best friend for their endless support over the past two years, I absolutely could not have done it without you all. I'd also like to thank my panel for listening to my ideas and helping me see my practice through a new light, and my peers who have given me space to be myself. Lastly, I'd like to thank ME—this mind and this body of mine that have carried me through a pandemic and through this degree!

Omolola: Thank you to my panel and my primary advisor, Dr. Zach Blas. Without your knowledge, presence, and criticality this work would never have come to pass. Thank you to Dr. Brett Story, Will Kwan, Director Jean-Paul and Nataleah Hunter Young who met with me and my work where I was at despite its varied evolutions and often fragmented methods. I could not have picked a better panel to guide me through this (because I did). Thank you to my parents and Sarah and James, always.

Sarah: I want to thank my advisor Luis Jacob; my panelists Jean-Paul Kelly, Karen Kraven, and Mitchell Akiyama; and my external panelist Amanda White for their guidance, thoughtful conversations and support throughout this work. I'd especially like to thank my partner, Bohdan Lukach, for their patience, encouragement, and care throughout this work and so many others. Thank you to my close friends and family for their continuous love and companionship. Lastly, I would like to thank my MVS cohort and the extended MVS faculty for their curiosity, excitement, and interest along the way.

From the Faculty

Our congratulations go to Durga, Lola, Nimisha, and Sarah for their achievements.

Thanks to the MVS and U of T faculty who served on MVS Thesis panels this year: Mitchell Akiyama, Zach Blas, Francesco Gagliardi (Centre for Drama, Theatre & Performance Studies), Dina Georgis (Women & Gender Studies Institute), Luis Jacob, Jean-Paul Kelly, Karen Kraven, Will Kwan, Sue Lloyd, Gareth Long, Morris Lum, and Brett Story (Cinema Studies Institute). Thank you to all the exceptional Visual Studies faculty who met and engaged with the artists in our program. Our gratitude to Digital Media Technician Renée Lear and all the staff at Daniels.

The 2023 MVS Exhibitions would not be possible without the greater Daniels community, especially Dean Juan Du and Associate Dean, Academic, Jeannie Kim. Thank you for your continued support and encouragement of our students and faculty.

This year again sees the incredible intersection of the MVS Studio and MVS Curatorial graduating exhibitions at the Art Museum. For Daniels, this sharing of space generates pivotal relations between our scholarly and creative researchers and the communities amongst which we work. For this, we are incredibly grateful to Art Museum Director and Daniels Associate Professor Barbara Fischer; the museum's curatorial and technical staff, work-study participants, and volunteers; and, in particular, Micah Donovan, Exhibitions and Projects Coordinator, and Daniel

Hunt, Assistant Coordinator, Exhibitions and Projects. Thank you!

—Jean-Paul Kelly

Director of Visual Studies

Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto

Public Programming

Opening Reception: MVS Studio Program and MVS Curatorial Studies Program Graduating Exhibitions

Wednesday, May 3, 6pm–8pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Free and all are welcome! For more information, visit
artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416-978-8398

University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
416-978-8398

Hours

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact artmuseum@utoronto.ca

Admission is FREE.

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