

~~Live Laugh Love~~

Divya Mehra

Extended text
Aruna D'Souza

The Tyranny of the Monochrome: Two Notes on Divya Mehra

1. White on White Crime

When a sign went up at bus stops and other sites in Port Coquitlam, B.C. for a whites-only mom and tots group, was the social media outrage that ensued a product of the existence of such a social space, or merely of the audacity of admitting it out loud? Surely, anyone who has lived in Canada or the US as a person of the global majority has seen the ways that people organize themselves into segregated groups, consciously or not. (How many of my white friends count me as their only brown friend, I often wonder, and what happens when I'm not there? How many people do you know who blithely meet for dinner or host parties where no BIPOC people are invited – not necessarily out of malice

but as a product of siloing and bonds of affiliation?) But to admit to the fact, especially in the way that this group did – “join other proud parents of European children as we create an atmosphere in which our kids can feel like they belong” – was both comical and extremely not okay. Comical because it was so deeply pot-kettle: colonialism operates by making BIPOC people feel they don’t belong in their own homelands, or, when people are forced into the diaspora, in their new homes; how funny to see, then, after all those centuries of effort, colonizers complaining about feeling unwelcome. Not okay because its language so easily aligns with the growing neo-fascist rhetoric that is taking over the world.

But more than that, there is something shocking about whiteness naming itself, largely because it so rarely does so. Instead, whiteness lurks, not in the shadows, exactly, but in and around and among practically all institutional structures, all interactions, all conversations, all social formations. It is so omnipresent that it becomes undetectable. It permeates our colonial/postcolonial/settler-colonial world. The poster’s crime, I would argue, was blowing its cover.

The color white can be defined in two ways, depending on whether you’re talking to a

physicist or a painter: in terms of light, white is the presence of all the hues in the visible spectrum, but materially, as with a painting or an object in the world, white is registered by the eye as the absence of colour. What a great metaphor for the duality of the colour's racial correlate, which at once claims to be universal and simultaneously insists on being invisible. When Ad Reinhardt or Frank Stella painted pure black paintings, they were understood to be addressing everything in general or nothing at all. When African American artists like Jack Whitten or James Little did, they were assumed to be speaking to race, to the specificity of their identity. (Whitten leaned into this political reading; Little strongly refused it.) As far as I know, no one has seriously argued that Robert Ryman's white works – a decades-long exploration of the formal and spatial possibilities generated by painting white squares on white supports, playing with minute variations of tone, texture, medium, mounting hardware, and so on – are about racial whiteness, even though I suspect only a white man could be so widely celebrated for such a solipsistic practice.

Until now, that is. When you walk into the gallery that houses Mehra's *Equal Opportunity Statement (Port Coquitlam, British Columbia 2023)* (2024), you may at first think you're seeing nothing at all. Or that you're simply

seeing unpainted walls. Look closer, though, and you'll realize that Divya Mehra has put everything into this room: the unspokenness of racial whiteness as well as its audacity; the duality with which it has claimed its power since it was understood as such; and the history of art, which has tenaciously insisted on the neutrality of abstraction when wielded by white male artists.

2. Building Walls

There is a story, likely apocryphal, that the British colonizers of India planned to dismantle the Taj Mahal and sell it for parts. (The tale has persisted no doubt because it's so believable – Lord William Bentinck, the governor-general of India in the 1830s, did in fact sell marble from the Agra Fort.) There is another story, this one more probable, that the British removed the precious and semi-precious stones inlaid into the surface of the structure, an act of not simply economic theft but aesthetic theft, too – draining the delicate flashes of colour from the smooth, cool, intricately carved surfaces of the architectural wonder.

Divya Mehra's *Home from Home* (2024) travels through this history. If colonialism under the British Raj was a form of extraction, the so

called post-colonials have not escaped such a fate. Now it takes the form not of occupation and direct control, but of the pressure of existing within the terms of global capitalism and the demands of consumer culture and tourism. The blithe commercial appropriation of everything from hair oiling to haldi doodh (rebranded by Starbucks and other coffee chains as “turmeric latte”) is so common as to be unremarkable. (It would perhaps sting less if there was an accompanying embrace of the people who originated those forms, or if there was an acknowledgement of and even reparations for the estimated 62 trillion Canadian dollars Britain siphoned from the country.) But unlike the deracinating impulse of appropriation, the tourist craves an experience of authenticity that conforms to their romanticized and exoticized idea of the other far removed from the messiness of lived experience.

There is a joke that circulates regularly on social media that goes something like this: the English plundered the whole world looking for spices, so why is their food so bland? I keep thinking of that quip when looking at Mehra’s 2018 work featuring the Taj Mahal, which centered tourists’ fascination with the structure as the ur-symbol of India itself, but in an attenuated, watered-down form. She titled her bouncy-house version

of the monument *Afterlife of Colonialism, a reimagining of Power: It's possible that the Sun has set on your Empire OR Why your voice does not matter: Portrait of an Imbalanced, and yet contemporary diasporic India vis-à-vis Colonial Red, Curry Sauce Yellow, and Paradise Green* – a mouthful that points to the paucity of neo-colonial, consumer-driven attempts to empty the Mughal edifice of meaning by turning it into a mere photo-op for the leisure class. (The flattening is especially problematic given the way that Hindu nationalists have attempted to erase or at least undercut the Mughal influence on Indian culture itself, driven by an anti-Muslim chauvinism – it is not a neutral symbol by any means.)

Now, with *Home from Home*, we are again faced with the realm of child's play, this time having less to do with whiteness' projections into elsewhere, and more with its retreat into itself. The little castle is based on the original 8-bit Super Mario Bros on Nintendo – it's the building one encounters in Mario and Luigi's attempts to save Princess Toadstool from a demonic turtle. For those of us who grew up in the 1980s, the game – now almost hilariously primitive in its form – represented both the heights of technological advancement and innocent fun.

What does it mean to create a fortress of white yoga blocks based on a childish game? On the one hand, it gives us an insight into the way that white culture has turned the Global South into the playground for their fantasies of discovery. On the other, it reminds us that such fantasies are, in fact, defensive, just as a fortress is, just as the “safe space” of the Port Coquitlam mom and tots group is. How does whiteness protect itself? As we’ve seen, thanks to the politics of grievance that has gripped the Americas and Europe, it does so by claiming itself as the embattled, as the victim, as under threat of contamination. So it creates places to hide, either by refusing to be named, or building walls around itself.

But there is an irony here that cannot be escaped. Because even within this seemingly meaningless icon, otherness is present. That little Super Mario castle harkens back to a moment when a wave of migration of coders and engineers from Asia, especially South Asia, came to North America to settle in Silicon Valley and Seattle, where Mehra now lives. It is part of a game whose structure – an endless horizontal scroll, in which the protagonists conquer yet more and more territory, until there is no more territory to conquer – replicates the unfettered expansionist drives of both colonialism and capitalism. And it is built of none other than

yoga blocks – an accessory to one of the most thoroughly co-opted facets of Indian culture, but one that nevertheless has come to represent a kind of bougie white femininity. As Mehra shows us, whiteness can never really hide behind walls, because so often those walls are composed of the rubble of empire itself.

Aruna D'Souza writes about modern and contemporary art, intersectional feminisms, and diasporic aesthetics. Her work appears regularly in 4Columns, The New York Times, and in numerous artist's monographs and exhibition catalogues. *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest in 3 Acts* was named one of the best art books of 2018 by the New York Times. Recent editorial projects include Linda Nochlin's *Making It Modern: Essays on the Art of the Now* and Lorraine O'Grady's *Writing in Space 1973-2018*; she co-curated the retrospective "Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And" at the Brooklyn Museum in 2021. She is the recipient of the 2021 Rabkin Prize for art journalism and a 2019 Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant. She was appointed the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor at the National Gallery of Art in 2022, and the W.W. Corcoran Professor of Social Engagement at the Corcoran School of Art, George Washington University, in 2022-2023. Her most recent book, *Imperfect Solidarities* was published in 2024.

Divya Mehra: Live Laugh Love is on view at the Contemporary Art Gallery from October 18, 2024 to January 12, 2025.

Divya Mehra (b. 1981, Winnipeg) is known for her meticulous attention to the interaction of form, medium and site. Her works are a reminder of the complex realities of displacement, loss and oppression. Mehra's work has been exhibited, screened and commissioned by Frieze Sculpture, Los Angeles; Creative Time, New York; MoMA PS1, New York; Queens Museum of Art, New York; MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco; Nuit Blanche, Toronto; and the Embassy of Canada in Washington, D.C. She has been featured in publications such as the New York Times, Times of India, ArtAsiaPacific, Hyperallergic, The Globe and Mail, and The Washington Post. Mehra's work is in numerous public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Global Affairs Canada; and the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. She is the recipient of the 2022 Sobey Art Award. Mehra lives and works in Seattle.

Divya Mehra: Live Laugh Love is generously supported by the Friends of Divya Mehra.

At the Contemporary Art Gallery, we carry out our work on the ancestral and unceded lands of the x̱m̱əθḵəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. As a predominantly settler-led organization, we acknowledge our responsibility to each of these nations, who have stewarded this land, water and air for thousands of years. We are committed to building sustained, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities and supporting the work of reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignty.

The Contemporary Art Gallery is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council and the BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch. We are also grateful for the support of Vancouver Foundation and our members, donors and volunteers.

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