

**What
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What Haven't We Learnt Yet, Still? curated by Jaclyn Quaresma, is a new solo exhibition by Toronto-based artist, Pamila Matharu. Comprised of seven constellations of over 40 works and collected objects, the artist explores how we reconsider familiar notions of our past to contemplate our worldview while existing on Turtle Island.

In this iteration of the recent award-winning 2019 installation *One of These Things is Not Like the Other* at A Space Gallery (Toronto), Matharu explores feminist (sub) cultural resistance through institutional critique, decolonial aesthetics, counter-hegemonic exhibition-making, and collecting-as-medium through her new and recent collage, photography and collected objects.

Since the arrival of members of the Panjabi-Sikh community 117 years ago in 1903, not much historical evidence exists in the public consciousness outside of stereotypical tropes or within Canadian art history altogether. *What Haven't We Learnt Yet, Still?* thus examines the relationship (or non-relationship) and lived-experience as the artist as a recorder of art history.

A commissioned companion text by writer Sarah-Tai Black, *What Haven't They Learnt Yet, Still?* accompanies the exhibition. Black's personal essay becomes a space for intergenerational and cross-cultural dialogue and names Matharu's adjacencies to Black feminist cultural production that helped establish her as an emerging artist in the early 1990s.

Pamila Matharu (b. 1973, Birmingham, England). An immigrant-settler of Panjabi descent, Pamila primarily practices in visual arts (collage, installation, new media, social practice), arts education, and arts advocacy. A graduate of the Visual Arts and the Fine Arts B.Ed programs from York University, recently she was awarded the 2019 Images Festival Homebrew Award for her critically acclaimed first solo exhibition *One of These Things Is Not Like The Other* at A Space Gallery, Toronto and the Ontario Association of Art Galleries' Best Exhibit Award (2019). Matharu lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

Sarah-Tai Black is an arts curator, film programmer, and writer from Toronto, Ontario. Her work largely focuses on the affective and functional capacities of Black life in screen images and visual media.

Curator's Note |

The title of this exhibition emerged from a conversation between the exhibiting artist and myself over a year ago. We discussed Pamila's award-winning exhibition, *One of These Things Is Not Like the Other*, at the artist-run centre, A Space (Toronto), where Pamila responded to found videotapes that were discarded by a major Canadian art institution.

The tapes held recordings of an auxiliary literary symposium (*Identity in A Foreign Place*, October 1993) that was part of *Perspective '93*, a contemporary art series featuring Micah Lexier and Lani Maestro. At the symposium, Lakshmi Gill, a Vancouver based Filipina- Panjabi writer, shared her journey as an academic and creative writer coming to Canada. Twenty-five years later, her narrative still resonated with Pamila's own experience. These discarded videos are then material evidence of the systems of erasure that threatens cultural safety and security.

What may seem like an insignificant act, a simple clearing of space, is an active culling of the significant influence non-white practitioners have on our collective cultural history. An archive is a carrier bag, a holding tank of the preselected for the purpose of cultural memory keeping and knowledge production. The removal of some can quickly become the erasure of many.

She paused on the phone after sharing the story of the rejected records, took a breath and said "Really Jac! What haven't we learnt yet... still?!" What does it mean for entire populations to be ejected from the archive of Canadian art?

Central to her response at A Space are two questions: *How do we survive in archives? And how are we erased?* 'We' in this case does not refer to the great Canadian imaginary, but to QTBIPOC creative practitioners on Turtle Island.

This exhibition asks the audience to consider the artist's own archive-as-artwork presented here in the gallery in relation to dominant archives that act as vehicles for systemic racism and cultural exclusion. In this analogy, 'we' are the children riding in a car/vehicle asking for the umpteenth time: Are we there yet? Humbly, cheekily, exasperated, exhausted and with more patience than we deserve, the exhibition responds: there is still a long, long way to go.

This time, however, the 'we' refers to the settler audience. The exhibition presents the collective us with the work we haven't yet done, the work that has been and is still being asked of us.

—Jaclyn Quaresma

Companion Piece |

What Haven't They Learnt Yet, Still?

by Sarah-Tai Black

I've been thinking a lot this past while about what care might look like for those of us who are exhausted. There are so many of us, as there always has been, that live within this experience of urgency, where exhaustion has reached such emotional and physiological peaks within our bodies that we exist in a sustained moment of harm. I should be clear that by "those of us," I mean Black people. The specificity of the exhaustion I'm speaking of does not exist for non-Black people. This exhaustion is in no way borne of us, rather, it is a function of whiteness. And its machinations are to wear us out.

I've been thinking a lot about how it is the fundamental purpose of the institutions which supposedly shape our cultural landscape to exhaust us and then erase our efforts. There have always been concerted efforts on the part of Black folks to convey the harm we are subjected to once we find ourselves within the sights of the institution. There have often been shallow efforts on the part of institutions to respond to these calls with the stunted rhetoric of "diversity," or, as has now become more commonplace, hollow language appropriated from radical community care and transformative justice. This cycle of call and response has repeated itself without fault over the decades. These institutions (and the white and non-Black individuals within them) have been able to use their staff-mandated single anti-oppression workshop, their newest "diversity hire," to signal their supposed literacies, their supposed learning. They have twisted the languages that we have fought for and so generously shared into pandering acts of public image rehabilitation which take place at the cost of Black wellbeing. And what's worse, their responses are most often structured largely without informed efforts to consider what happens once the chosen few are invited in. I think of Christina Battle's words: "How to change what is thinkable when those in positions of power are incapable of thinking otherwise?"¹

The racial makeup of these institutions, these boards, these non-profit arts organizations is no coincidence. The unofficial histories of these spaces are easy to find if your literacies render them legible to you. While we are rarely on the record, we are vast in number. These institutions rely on making their histories inaccessible in order to disavow the reality of institutionalized anti-blackness. They deny structural anti-black harm and instead offer the vague explanation of personal conflict, a matter reducible to the level of the individual, as their public record. The lived history of harm leaves with this individual, continuing its work of exhaustion. This cycle continues because this cycle is the work of the institution, the methods through which they have continued to maintain their power by way of elided institutional memory. Future initiatives underlie that we are necessary, even welcomed, only to render us replaceable. At best, a sacrifice for their learning; at worst, unacknowledged.

Of course this removal of our histories is nothing new. One of white supremacy's most exhausting methods of violence is to erase and deny our histories, despite the fact that they live on in us, where they remain anything but hidden. More often than not, we live counter to the archive. To quote adrienne maree brown, we are in an imagination battle, and we "must engage in [our own] imaginations in order to break free."² The work of exhaustion predicates that we must be secluded from affirmations of what we know to be true. We are subject to narratives and images of ourselves as figured within the white supremacist imagination and its self-fashioned structures, but we must hold onto what we know.

In many ways, my thinking has, of course, been a way to grapple with my role within these environments. It's also been a form of care—a salve I return to when words and actions of institutions, to varying degrees of success, disappear the truth of our experience. It is, perhaps, an extended, personal project of affirmation. Alongside this, I've been trying to trace the histories of our elders in doing this thinking, through archives collected personally and with care. The kind of archives which can inherently only exist within community. Archives which require kinship to be read. Archives whose legibility is bound intimately to experience and lived histories. In these archival practices, I have found material reminders of our histories. I have become interested not only in what has been passed on, but how it has been passed on. I see the ways in which whiteness replicates itself. It has been both a humbling and frustrating undertaking: to see the experience of harm echo through each generation; to see how white supremacy attempts to stunt our work, our lives by prompting us to re-establish and re-center ourselves with every movement of time; to have us exist in an interminable state of reaction and response; to see ourselves be exhausted by the work of visibility because the records of our previous work (visible or not) are partial, if extant at all; to see the end game be representation within institutions whose core function is to assert cultural authority by authorial erasure.

Within this, I've been thinking a lot about the kinds of work we chose (or, perhaps more accurately, are positioned) to curate, to write about, to make a priority within our access to resources from these institutions. For many of us, what we are looking for in our efforts overall is witness work and healing. To hold space for an experience which doesn't need to be qualified by a re-hashing of our histories and livedness—this being the work of exhaustion, the work of whiteness. I remember the words of Saidiya Hartman: "Poetics is the possession of opaqueness. The key to producing otherwise. Poetics as a way to think critically about making. A theory. A form itself. The reformation of form."³ I know that I have witnessed such spaces that, through our own extended, communal efforts, hold internally in this way.

More often than not, we leave this work, even in its shared successes, heavy. To protect our work from the institutions that make it possible is often the most laborious part of our efforts. To preserve ourselves from the expectation of organizational visibility—how we are expected to perform as a people purportedly indebted to the resources and infrastructure such institutions give us access to—is what underlies much of our work, often before the material processes of it even begin (and, even more often than that, in the duration following its realization). We speak of our strategies of refusal, but we recuperate from these radical methods in less visible ways. It is the perverse nature of white supremacy's work of exhaustion that even our efforts at noncompliance—our rejection of the roles we're asked to take on, our strength in instead choosing rest—can empower its effects on us. I know that our freedom won't be found in any ongoing effort to explain or make visible. We must protect our energies.

We've found resistance in questioning the limits of criticality, in denying institutional audiences the right to access our ways of healing and our histories. We are often punished for prioritizing our self-preservation in these ways, because to refuse to engage in the work of exhaustion is to be antithetical to the white supremacist objectives of the institution itself.

This refusal is the questioning of professionalism, of "tone," and "optics." It places whiteness in the present and names its faces and exact moments, rather than speaking of it as a supposedly distant history or theoretical directive outside of present action and space. It directly asks white people in these institutions (and those people of colour who enjoy a proximity to whiteness) why they continue to ask us to exist in relief to the presumed naturalism of their positions, why, due to the cultural capital they hold, the work they speak of supporting, they have presupposed they are outside of causing harm, why they have uncritically positioned themselves to dole out access to their intergenerationally stolen riches, institutionally inherited or otherwise. Why their learning must come at our expense.

It takes a toll on our bodies and minds, reminding us in the most immediate way that these structures have been raised in our absence and work to ensure our absence through outright exclusion and the insidious nature of the work of exhaustion. It's obvious to us that the work we wish to do cannot be sustained within these spaces, because our work imagines other ways of being. This work itself often exists as a fraught aggregation of effort and privilege. To combine that with the desire for a liberated futurity is something that should be interrogated with informed care, but is no less true an urgent need.

I think often about the cruel ironies at play in doing work which affirms our lives while reducing our quality of it in its undertaking. I resist the urge to list off studies to non-Black people which show how our hearts are working harder to sustain our stress, how our telomeres are shortening, how our genes are literally

mutating from the harm of this work and this world. How the trauma (and joy) of our ancestors live within us. I resist the urge to argue in the empirical, an understandable defence mechanism for those of us who, within these spaces, struggle to find even reluctant witnesses to the violence we've experienced. Because I know that these spaces are working on us exactly as they are meant to.

I try instead to think of our regenerative ecosystems; our systems of living that have sprung forth from worlds that were never intended to give Black life—or, perhaps more accurately, were present before these worlds themselves. Our shared work toward our futures. I remind myself of the questions we must ask ourselves: How we might begin to heal, or at least reduce the harm of the work of exhaustion's methods of consumption? How do we not replicate the violence that the work of whiteness sets us within? How do we trust in community to shape our knowledge and methods? How do we reinscribe care into our own work? How do we undertake our own work mindfully, rather than extractively? How can we support ourselves in opting out of access? In prioritizing our well-being over the constant undertaking of the freedom work that we have long showed up for while others feigned ignorance to its necessity? Whose work is this really?

Those questions stand in tension with another: Where do the needs of our own subjectivity push against those of collective experience? I sit with the words a dear friend recently shared with me: "Our pain is too precious for any level of uncaring consumption." I sit with questions of our responsibility in, as with this writing here itself, adding my pain to a public chorus. I sit with the knowledge that, in these spaces, our comforts and pleasures are less sought after than our wounds. I know that, for myself, what I desire here is what may be considered a deeply individualistic need for testimony as a modal of healing, and I know that that desire is born from the work of exhaustion. I know that I don't want to position this writing as a productive or functional text that presupposes its ability to "call to action." This is not that. I want these words to be found by those in search of them. I want these words to live within the context of their history; to exist as a part of the remembering and reliving that must take place in order for us to heal. These words are not meant to be didactic or singular, but rather, communal. I suppose that, most of all, I want to share these words in a space that is able to hold us as we feel in full.

Endnotes:

¹ "Thoughts of Liberation," Nataleah Hunter-Young and Sarah Mason-Case, *Canadian Art*, June 17, 2020 (online).

² *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown, AK Press, 2017.

³ "Poetry is Not a Luxury: The Poetics of Abolition," panel discussion with Saidiya Hartman, Canisia Lubrin, Nat Raha and Christina Sharpe, chaired by Nydia A. Swaby, *Silver Press*, August 10, 2020 (online).

September 5 – December 5, 2020

Opening: Saturday September 5 | 1–4pm

D/A

Durham Art Gallery | Is a non-profit, exhibition-driven space for contemporary art and visual culture in so-called West Grey, Ontario.

Durham Art Gallery rests on the traditional land of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, which is represented by the communities of Saugeen First Nation and Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation. We thank them. We also thank of the Métis Nation of Ontario, whose history and people are well represented in what are now Bruce and Grey Counties.

From our earliest incarnation in the local Carnegie library to our current purpose-built home, the Gallery's evolution is marked by an engaged community and a diversifying landscape.

Rural Reading Riot (RRR) is a new literary and visual arts festival that combines performance, spoken, visual and written practices of artists and writers.



Durham Art Gallery is supported by the Ontario Arts Council.



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