

Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru

Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, BC, Canada, 12 April–15 June 2014.

Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru is the largest art exhibition to focus on the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914. Conceived and presented by the Surrey Art Gallery and curated by Jordan Strom, plans for the exhibition were initiated three years ago in response to literary discussions, symposia, film, and written works in Vancouver that examined the impact and legacies of the *Komagata Maru* incident not only for South Asians but for all Canadians. Missing from those conversations were the voices of artists and their practices that also addressed this history. The exhibition was initiated to fill for the first time that artistic gap in these important discussions. In the past two years the gallery has partnered with eight other institutions and organizations; *Ruptures in Arrival* was one in a regional series of events, programmes, and exhibitions across the Metro Vancouver area that explored the journey and living legacies of the *Komagata Maru*, marking the 100th anniversary of the ship's arrival on 23 May 1914. While federal, Canadian Heritage, and municipal funding contributed to the promotion and symposium of the *Komagata Maru* centennial series, funding for this exhibition came from the Surrey Art Gallery.

The exhibition featured artists Roy Arden, Avantika Bawa, Ali Kazimi, Evan Lee, Ken Lum, the Mass Arrival collective (Farrah Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan, Nadia Saad), Raghavendra Rao, Haris Sheikh, Jarnail Singh, and Paul Wong. Together the works expanded on gaps and ruptures in this history and in the social fabric of Canada as well as the archive of images surrounding the event, and drew important connections with more recent incidents of transoceanic migration to Canada by ship. This exhibition is a valuable visual contribution to the creative and critical work already done by novelists, filmmakers, poets and playwrights who have been addressing the complex history of this event in recent years, leading up to—and since—the federal apology for the incident in 2008.

The 376 passengers of the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver during a period of racial tension in Canadian history which was especially pronounced in British Columbia—race riots in 1907, limiting of civil rights for Asian and South Asian communities, and popular songs calling for a “White Canada Forever,” exemplifying the racialized oppression of the period. Forbidden to dock, the ship remained anchored in the harbour for two months, a floating prison without adequate water, food, or medical services. Despite legal appeals in court, Canadian federal laws designed to prevent South Asian immigrants from entering Canada—despite the fact they, like Canadians, were British



FIGURE 1 Installation view of Ali Kazimi's *Fair Play*, 2014. *S3D video, wooden stereoscopic viewer, iPad, active shutter glasses, flags.*

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT MASSEY.

subjects—were enforced. A few passengers were deemed to return to Canada, but all other passengers were to be deported and on July 23 the ship departed under threat of the warship HMCS *Rainbow*. Nineteen passengers died in a riot with police upon its return to India. Asian and South Asian immigration to Canada would remain nearly impossible until after the Second World War.

The questioning and reimagining of archival documentation of the incident was a theme throughout much of the exhibition. Ali Kazimi, in his immersive *Fair Play* installation, questioned the gaps in these records and proposed a way into those irretrievable histories. The recorded cry of seagulls echoed through the installation, inviting viewers into a darkened room to encounter a stereoscopic three-dimensional film (fig. 1). This evocative work offered glimpses into ten enigmatic vignettes of everyday moments for South Asian immigrants, white officers, and others impacted by the ship's arrival, each character lost in quiet moments and anxieties. In the same room an antique stereoscope drew viewers in with digitized stereoscopic images from colonial India. In order to experience the film or the stereoscopes, viewers must invest time and actively engage with the technology in order to see and feel the intimate moments and faces of each story represented. Without this active engagement, the work is blurred or inaccessible, much like the history of the *Komagata Maru*. Kazimi's

intimate work focused on perspectives largely absent from the historical accounts, suggesting ways of understanding what has not been visually documented or recorded in archives, potentially filling those historical gaps.

Meanwhile, a number of works drew directly from archival photographs and news stories that shaped public and political opinion. Roy Arden's work *Komagata Maru* reproduced eighteen historic photos of the event from the Vancouver Public Library archives, including their vastly varied accession numbers. The work underlines the gaps in knowledge and selective narratives, and questions the authority of historical and archival documents. In Jarnail Singh's *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, a four-panelled painting incorporated scenes from archival photographs and legal decrees used to deny passengers entry, alongside scenes from accounts of the event. The xenophobic rhetoric in the news media of the era is evident in painted newspaper clippings and headlines throughout the work. By making viewers aware of this overtly racial oppression in 1914, the work obliquely drew connections between this event 100 years ago and the similar language and xenophobia that continues in more recent migration disputes along Canada's coast.

The works by Evan Lee, Ken Lum, and the Mass Arrival collective provided a rich critique of the frequently discomfiting political questions surrounding migration by ship to Canada and enduring racial oppression that remains part of Canadian society despite its multicultural values. For instance, a maquette of Ken Lum's *Four Boats Stranded Red and Yellow Black and White* refers to his permanent installation on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery, once the provincial courthouse in 1912. Each ship on the historic courthouse represents a vessel associated with the region's colonial past: a First Nations longboat, Captain Vancouver's ship *Discovery*, the *Komagata Maru*, and the merchant vessel that brought Chinese migrants to the province's shores in 1999. Evan Lee created three-dimensional renderings of widely circulated media photographs of passengers on this—and other—migrant ships in his *Migrant Ship Project*, reinterpreting the faceless photos and transforming them through other media (fig. 2). Finally, *Mass Arrival, Queen Street* was a public performance protest in Toronto that re-enacted the arrival of 492 Tamil migrants in a cargo ship off the coast of British Columbia in 2010. The performance involved hundreds of participants dressed in white, forming a ship by walking en masse in the streets of Toronto and thereby drawing attention to the histories and political fears of mass arrivals of the racialized "Other" to Canada (fig. 3).

Together, the works in this exhibition led the viewer from past to present, drawing connections with similar events in recent years, effectively denying the viewer the chance to dismiss the *Komagata Maru* as an isolated event of racism in Canadian history. Rather, it forced the viewer to recognize how this



FIGURE 2 *Installation view of Evan Lee's Migrant Ship Project, 2009-present. 3D printed plastic, display case, crate, and archival pigment prints on paper.*
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT MASSEY.



FIGURE 3 *Installation view of Mass Arrival's Mass Arrival, Queen Street, 2013. Video and photocopied texts and images.*
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT MASSEY.

incident emerged from complex economic and xenophobic politics that can still be seen today. The media portrayal, political responses and fear surrounding the *Komagata Maru* in 1914 continue in current Canadian society, and works in this show—including those of Lee and Mass Arrival—make clear the similar national responses to more recent incidents of migration disputes involving the arrival of Chinese and Tamil passengers on Canadian shores. The issues, fears, and politics at the heart of the *Komagata Maru* incident still inform the social and political climate of Canadian society, and the works in this exhibition offer possible ways to negotiate these difficult and important lessons in a contemporary context.

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