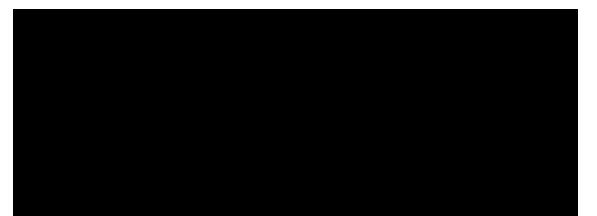
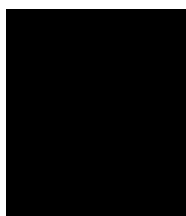
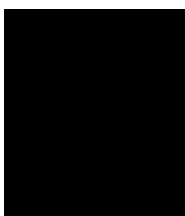




the person you see in this
image is her, Zinnia

By Nima Esmailpour

YYZ Artists' Outlet



The two short films featured in the video installation at YYZ Artists' Outlet are to be viewed as the video-graphic extension of Zinnia's photographic works. These works are often presented in various iterations of staged photography that pair the photographed event with the photographic event, creating a comparative interplay between the previously captured moments and carefully arranged frames. The incorporation of images as the primary medium for reimagining photography as a process is a distinct feature of her artistic practice. This juxtaposition challenges common assumptions about photography—or, in this case, videography—as the end result rather than a process, (re)positioning the subject to actively engage in deciphering the overall meaning-making process in relation to image-making.

The screening of the experimental documentary *The Translation is Approximate* alongside its dramatized adaptation, *Farzana*, invites the audience to delve beyond the morally induced interpretation of their shared leading narrative. Instead, it predisposes critical engagement with their (re)construction. In *The Translation is Approximate*, Zinnia addresses her experience of bearing the weight of witnessing a conversation that evokes compassion for the precarious subject, Farzana. In her effort to disassemble and reassemble the event, however, she revisits the recorded incident through the lens of the camera and interrogates her position to the very act of recording the original footage as a lens-based artist.

By adopting the self-referential title, *the person you don't see in this image is me, the camera-person*, Zinnia provokes the constraint of the four edges of the frame, placing explicit emphasis on her subjecthood beyond the screen. She expands the frame from what is primarily presented onscreen and offers additional viewpoints of what conventionally remains off-screen, inviting the audience to be attentive to the limits of viewership. The subtle shift in her position, from the viewer behind the camera in *The Translation is Approximate* to the performer of the corresponding acts in front of the camera in *Farzana*, unsettles the critical dynamics between the

observer and the observed, blurring the boundaries between passive spectatorship and active participation.

Such reciprocal dynamics are simply reversed when the recording camera is confronted with a mirror. In the establishing shot of the opening scene in *Farzana*, Zinnia seems to have encountered an abandoned mirror, which appears to be the same hand-held mirror shown in *The Translation is Approximate*. The mirror shots in the films render a cross-cut, opening a portal frame to the parallel narratives of the two films; the storyline, initially narrated over a recorded event in *The Translation is Approximate* as a documentary is reflected in *Farzana* as a narrative film.

The simple act of flipping the mirror in front of the camera in the former is a reference to a similar act performed in the latter. The high-angle frame through the subjective view of Zinnia looking down at the mirror with the camera conveys a sense of control over the frame—and comparatively the storyline—whereas the straight-on angle shot of her sitting against a plain background positions her in an interrogative mode and reaffirms the dominance of the recording camera. The seated posture and the lowered camera height correspond to her surreptitious recording act in the presence of Atia and Farzana. The gentle rotation of the mirror in this scene imitates the internal mirror descent mechanism of reflex cameras, while facing the mirror towards the unattended camera accentuates awareness of the gaze of the camera itself—or lack thereof in the case of Atia and Farzana as Zinnia points out.

In her gestural attempt to disassemble the camera to its basic elements, other visual references are made that simulate the optical mechanism of the camera. The inquiries into capturing the truth through the camera lens in *The Translation is Approximate* are imbricated by doubts raised by language barriers and a revealing side story. Similar qualities are also implemented in *Farzana*, affirmatively contributing to the process of creating a narrative film by including fictionalizing elements.

The change in aspect ratio, for instance, signals the audience that the reduced frame size scenes are recorded through Zinnia's camera lens. Witnessing her curious exploration manifested as visual ruptures in the storyline serves as a reminder of her position as a visual artist. The split-screen halfway through *The Translation is Approximate*, displays reversed shots of Atia and Farzana paired with Zinnia's hand-drawn sketches of the two, eliciting the comparative dynamics between the real and the fictional in visual representation.

Inquiry into visualization in both images is known to be foundational to the optics and the early development of the camera. The subjective shots of Zinnia's hand drawings paired with the actual scene following the mirror shots, instill the use of *camera lucida*, an optical drawing aid which allows the artist to see both the subject they are drawing and their paper or canvas simultaneously. In the same vein, the use of the darkened room and the arrangement of space for video projection replicates an augmented *camera obscura* an optical device which is a precursor to the modern camera. This device consists of a darkened room or box with a small hole on one side. Light passes through the hole, and an inverted image of the external scene is projected onto the opposite surface inside the darkened space. The separation of the films on opposite sides of the wall and the passage of the audience into each space suggest a reversive examination of the works by travelling back and forth.

In understanding the camera as an apparatus, the emancipatory approach is not to attribute agency to the camera, but to think with and against it. This is an approach that Zinnia has implemented in her practice by turning the gaze of the camera against itself, reversing the process of visualization. To follow her process, one must look at the images twice; in *the person you don't see in this image is me, the camera-person*, the viewer requires to revisit the works to notice that, *the person you see in this image is her, Zinnia*.

Nima Esmailpour (he/him) is an art historian and an emerging curator. Currently serving as the Curatorial Fellow, Exhibition, for the Toronto Biennial of Art in its third edition, his research delves into the study of artistic practice as processes of re-historicization.

Correspondingly, his curatorial approach aims to reflect on the political ontology of historiography in practice. Over the past few years, Esmailpour has been involved in several collective curatorial projects and has contributed essays to art galleries and artist-run centres.

Zinnia Naqvi (she/her) is a lens-based artist working in Toronto, Canada. Her work examines issues of colonialism, cultural translation, social class and citizenship through the use of photography, video, the written word, and archival material. Recent projects have included archival and re-staged images, experimental documentary films, video installations, graphic design, and elaborate

still-lives. Her artworks often invite the viewer to consider the position of the artist and the spectator, as well as analyze the complex social dynamics that unfold in front of the camera.

Naqvi's work has been shown across Canada and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions have been presented at Whippersnapper Gallery in Toronto, C'cap in Winnipeg, Dazibao and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain in Montreal. She is a 2022 Fall Flaherty/Colgate Filmmaker in Residence and recipient of the 2019 New Generation Photography Award organized by the National Gallery of Canada. Naqvi is member of EMILIA-AMALIA Working Group, an inter-generational feminist collective. Naqvi received a BFA in Photography Studies from Toronto Metropolitan University and an MFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University. She is currently a sessional lecturer at the University of Toronto and Toronto Metropolitan University.