

RE/CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

SHELDON ART GALLERIES

Artworks by Zlatko Ćosić (Yugoslavian), José Guadalupe Garza and Miriam Ruiz (Mexican-American), Priya Kambli (Indian) and Rachel Youn (Korean-American) in the Bellwether Gallery of the Sheldon Art Galleries join with several other complementary exhibits within the building that focus on the immigrant experience. Ćosić, Garza, Ruiz, Kambli and Youn each work through their very fraught personal histories to bring together a group message of generational struggle that those of us with less recent immigration stories will find relatable.

What objects do we carry with us through life, repeatedly refusing to discard them despite moves and the accumulation of new experiences, new memories, more relics and tokens? The artworks that make up *Re/Constructing Identity* are built of ephemera, an aptly esoteric word for that which is wrenched from its time, place and purpose.

Zlatko Ćosić is best known for his art filmmaking. Here, he digs into discomfort to deliver his record of war and forced immigration. What emerges in his videos is a fervent need to communicate. He must convey the horrors of his past to those of us without the experiences that might prevent us from recreating the violence he remembers through the foggy glass of time. Three videos tell powerful stories, each employing brilliantly communicative devices to convey more than words or images alone can express.

José Guadalupe Garza and Miriam Ruiz's splitscreen video, *Anhelo [longing]*, is dreamlike in its confusing presentation of ambiguous

scenes and enigmatic text. Dancing women are shown, one after another, moving the action forward as they disinterestedly twirl their traditional skirts while various images pass behind them. The past, here, is a bit like a psychedelic hallucination. It is confusing, with so many possible meanings. Text projected on one of the video panels denies the credulity of memory.

Priya Kambli alters family photographs to decipher her childhood from their cloudy record. Her *Kitchen Gods* series contains prints of beautifully obscured ancestors, made more immediate, more curious by intricate overlays of delicate designs. Flower petals and lace-like embossment frame the faces of Kambli's then-young parents and grandparents. Within her *Suitcase* series, she arranges life souvenirs inside small sturdy travel boxes, open for display. Kambli shows us that the past, heavily edited by the rememberer, provides what we make of it. Shall we put that troublesome episode against a soft silk scarf to relieve the associated pain? Which of the moments left behind will we elevate to a status of importance worthy of framing our present?

Rachel Youn used the internet to make virtual "tours" of South Korea, quite consciously employing the "dislocated lens" of Google Street View. Youn's contributions to this exhibition provide a lighter, sometimes mildly tongue-in-cheek reflection on the transference of inherited identity to the children of immigrants. For Youn, South Korea is a built compilation of objects and passed-on symbols that exist outside of experience and memory.

The act of memory encapsulation that these artists endeavor to represent is universally understood. Each of us looks backward with shame, loss, longing, pride to interpret our current position on the fine point of our existence. But for the immigrant who has left the sights and smells that trigger childhood memories and reaffirm identity, the reflections take more effort.

There is a sharper break between their then and now. Dipping into the memories of the world they have left is like looking in from a faraway planet. That layer of otherness that these artists feel between their present and former selves is made manifest in their obfuscation of the art objects they have made. Each of these immigrant artists' personal histories is displayed within strata of intrigue and artifact that provide opportunity for connection. We know what it is to be bound by our past, to be confused by breaks in our life trajectories and to feel the need to find and tell our own stories.

-Sarah Hermes Griesbach

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Zlatko Ćosić, *Re-Birth*, video still, (image courtesy of the artist and the Sheldon)



Priya Kambli, *Dada Aajooba*, (image courtesy of the artist and the Sheldon)



Rachel Youn, *The View from Jeju Island*, (image courtesy of the artist and the Sheldon)