

## FrameWork 3/24

### Lodoe Laura on Zinnia Naqvi and Althea Thauberger

One of the first jobs I worked when I moved to Toronto was at the CN Tower. Ostensibly, I had moved to the city to go to University, but really, I mostly just wanted to leave the smaller city I came from, where the well-known joke was that everything shuts down at 6 pm – after the government workers went home. As a young adult living on my own, I was excited by the lights and buzz of the big city, and everything felt new. There was an energy about this place, and, to me, the CN Tower was the most recognizable symbol of the city. I felt excited to work at a place so impressive and iconic.

On some shifts, I would sit at the admissions booth on the ground floor of the tower, working for minimum wage. The tickets were expensive. I remember having to tell families of the total and watching them respond with surprise, “Oh,” shuffling through their cards or money, “how much?” Sometimes they would ask me to itemise the total, and I would list out how much each ticket was, how much tax added, and then the total. Often, when this happened, another member of their group would tell the person paying it was too expensive, that they could go do something else instead. Sometimes they would leave, but most of the time, they would say, “No, it’s fine,” paying for the tickets and getting in the line for the elevator.

Shifts in the elevator were my favourite because I didn’t have to deal with money or tickets. Instead, I would stand for an eight hour shift in the lift, and explain to guests that we were currently in a high-speed elevator, travelling at a rate of 22 kilometres per hour – that’s 15 miles per hour – to a height of 346 metres – that’s 1136 feet. Following the script I was taught, I would reiterate to tourists that they might notice their ears popping as we travelled so quickly through the air, and would reassure them that this was normal. It was normal, too, for their hearts to race as we sped up in the air, the ground getting further and further away. We stood shoulder-to-shoulder as visitors gazed out the thin slit of a window, many snapping photographs of the land as we sped upwards. The ground increasingly became abstracted, like we were viewing a little miniature town. The entire ride in the elevator would take 58 seconds. Then the doors opened, and the sightseers would ramble out, one by one.

On the way down, I would cheerily ask the guests how their visit was. Did they get to go higher, to the Skypod? Did they dare walk on the glass floor? Did they notice, if it was a clear day, that they could see all the way past the border to the United States? And over there, to Niagara Falls? I would remind them again that their ears may pop, and reassure them again that this was normal, as we would be travelling back down at a high rate of speed. After another 58 seconds, the doors would reopen, and we’d be on the ground floor. Once the group stepped out, I would welcome a new one in, and press the elevator button to the top, explaining that we were currently in a high-speed elevator, travelling at a rate of 22 kilometres per hour – that’s 15 miles per hour – to a height of 346 metres – that’s 1136 feet. I would reassure them that the popping they might experience in their ears was normal as they gazed out the thin slit of a window.

I spent an entire summer riding up and down the high-speed elevator, wearing a stiff red polyester button-down shirt and an overly-friendly grin. Sometimes a group of visitors who didn't speak English would ride my elevator. "Français?" I was taught to ask. Mostly I would get blank stares back. So I would launch into my pre-scribed monologue, about the rate of the elevator, the height of the tower, the ears popping, the metres, the feet, the ground speeding away. Even if the guests didn't speak English, I was supposed to give them the CN Tower experience.

Growing up, I don't remember our family touring around Canada very much. In the summers, we would go back to Nepal to spend time with Pala's relatives and the Tibetan community that lived there in exile. But I do remember once, my Pala's Japanese foster family came to visit Canada and we went to Niagara Falls. I remember wearing the translucent blue plastic hooded cape raincoats that they gave out at the Maid of the Mist boat that circled towards the falls. I remember the feeling of the mist hitting my face on the cold and cloudy day. I can remember the elegant women of my dad's foster family tightly holding their hoods over their hair, protecting it from the mist.

I don't know how they felt about our tourist outing. I was too young to ask or to really notice their reactions. Plus, I was too busy giggling and playing with my younger sister, enthralled by the sensory experience of the cold water and excited to be on a boat on a school day. I do remember that later, we drove to Toronto, and stayed in a hotel room that overlooked the baseball field of the Sky Dome, next to the CN Tower. I couldn't imagine that we could stay in such a fancy place, with baseball players right there! I remember feeling that we were really acting rich. I think we were trying to impress my Pala's foster family, in a way reassuring them that we were doing well here in Canada.

As a child, Zinnia Naqvi's family visited the same sites we did. In *Another Desi with a camera* (2020), Naqvi returns to photographs from her family albums made at Niagara Falls – a site which they would tour each time a faraway relative would make a trip to Canada. Arranged as a two by three grid, the artist pairs photographs from her family album with images restaged contemporarily. Naqvi and her boyfriend reenact the interexchange of two strangers at the tourist destination. In the recreated images, the pair embodies the gestures of the Brown woman and the white man, their movements creating a bodily semiotic. In a vinyl text adhered to the gallery's concrete floor, the artist conjures the voices of many involved in the image-making and meaning-making process, mulling over the tensions and comprehensions of being noticed and of being watched, and of being the noticer and the watcher.

Zinnia often uses her family photographs of tourist destinations as a point of departure. *On Being Included* (2024) pulls apart an image from her family's albums, literally separating it into three pieces, and reconstructing it into an image-structure. In the two sections of the foreground, we see a miniature fair, including a blue-and-white-stripped big top tent, carnival rides, and tens of little white figures enjoying the festivities. In the back one-third of the image-structure, we see the artist's family looking towards the miniature attraction.

The image was taken at Cullen Gardens Miniature Village, a popular tourist attraction in Whitby, Ontario. At the exhibition opening at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Zinnia points out her sister to me in the photograph. Unable to get direct access to the miniature-world, the young girl stands earnestly behind a chain-link fence, her small hands clasped along the barrier, peering into the fabricated world of someone else's imagination. The pulling-apart of the photograph that Naqvi employs

reveals the construction of the image and the systems it contains. The familiar white-and-grey grid pattern used to remove sections of the foreground evokes a digital transparency layer. In the absence, we can imagine a space where other worlds could be transposed.

Upstairs, Althea Thauberger also engages with family photographs. Using images taken by herself as a child, and by her father, John Thauberger, while he trained her to use a camera, the artist manipulates the photographs with ink, pencil and other formal interventions. The images the artist employs depict landscapes around the town of Holdfast, Saskatchewan, where her family were colonial settlers. *Sunrise in Field near the village of Holdfast, photographed by Althea Thauberger, while being instructed by John Thauberger, December 1982* (2024) depicts a grid formation reminiscent of drafting paper in the spaces omitted between a single frame. In *Thauberger farm house, December 1986* (2024), Althea draws formal patterns over the images, altering the landscape with a grid-like format, at times precise and at others, imprecise. The interventions are reminiscent of blueprints or map-making. Like photography, these are very orderly ways to view, understand and control space. A conversation between Althea, her father John, and the generations of landowners before them, the photo-collages can be seen as a highly collaborative work. Devoid of human figures, the image-objects have a somehow ghostly presence, evoking a history of their settlement of the land.

Zinnia's *Solar Impression 1* and *Solar Impression 2* (2024) also contain ghostly images. To create the large-scale prints, Zinnia scanned the backing paper of two frames containing family photographs. Having absorbed the markings of time, a set of spectral shadows have left their imprint on the paper over their period of temporal sheltering in its glass encasement. Blown up by the artist to many times their original size, we can perceive the texture of the backings, flecked with paper fibres. Rendered in various tones of tan and brown, it appears the image must have shifted over time, as the ghostly after-image has repeated itself several times over.

Zinnia's image *Marx, Engles, Lenin on India* (2024) layers a well-worn copy of the hardcover book with an unassuming 4 x 6 inch photograph held in between its pages. The photograph within Naqvi's image shows the inside of the artist's parents' home. On the beige wall next to a staircase is a printout of the national anthems of Canada and Pakistan. At the Susan Hobbs exhibition, the print is presented next to the framed and mounted printout. Something about the object is so familiar to me. The burgundy mat paper surrounds the yellowing paper of the flyer. The frame has a crackled gold paint enclosed by a brown and burgundy abstracted floral pattern.

Sometimes, at home, my Pala will sing the national anthem on repeat. "Ohhhh Chaaaanadaaa!" Pala's version of the anthem has become a background soundtrack to life at home with him. Even when he's not here, when it gets too quiet, I imagine the sound of him belting out the song.

I asked Pala why he sings the national anthem that way – I know he can say Canada, so why does he intentionally mispronounce it when he sings the anthem? He tells me that when he was young, he would hear people call a specific gun "*Chanada rifle*." This was around 1959, during the invasion of his land. He thought that the maker of the gun must be *Chanada*, since there were many *Chanada rifles* around during that time. He explains that eventually, as he grew up, he learned that people were actually saying "Canada rifle," but it had, either through a game of telephone, or through his own misunderstanding, been changed to *Chanada*. The guns had been made in Canada, and that's how they got their local nickname.

In Naqvi's *The Border Guards Were Friendly* (2019), we are again transported into a miniature world of someone's imagination. The backdrop from Cullen Gardens shows a mini-suburbia, complete with homes with long driveways, large cut grass lawns, streetlamps, and a police presence. Layered on top of the image, Zinnia adds in books with titles discussing the social and cultural fabric of our nation, a toy police cruiser, and little red and blue monopoly houses – alluding to colonial structures of power, control, privilege and dominance in this place.

In Althea's *Railway crossing at the village of Holdfast* (2024), we stare down the path of a region railway, built by Canadian Pacific. The rail is reminiscent of the trans-Canadian railway, which was conceived of as an icon of confederation. A way to connect disparate settlements through the transportation of goods and passengers across the land, the railway encouraged colonisation across the new nation. Under contract with the Canadian government, the group of businessmen that formed Canadian Pacific were granted 25 million acres of land. The company then sold the land to immigrants through an intense campaign to settle the west. The company developed a large fleet of “colonist cars,” low-budget sleeper trains that transported migrants westward from eastern seaports. Spanning across the large land mass of so-called Canada, the railway razed a path through the terrain, at the expense of Indigenous communities and treaties.

Almost a hundred years later, in the city of Toronto, a company closely associated with Canadian Pacific, the Canadian National, started to build upwards towards the sky. The CN Tower was completed in 1976 as a symbol of Canadian modernism and might, once again creating an iconic image of Canada for the rest of the world and encouraging travel to the region. Looking at Thauberger's image of the railway, I imagine the rush of the train speeding by, and I'm reminded again of the elevator of the CN Tower – the feeling of rushing up into the sky, familiar lands speeding further and further away.