

Althea Thauberger

Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
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by Rose Bouthillier

Distant lands and recent pasts were on view during Althea Thauberger's latest exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery. Known for her engagement with people in distinct social, economic and cultural groups, such as teenage singer-songwriters, tree planters and military spouses, Thauberger has directed these individuals and groups in the production of photographs, videos, choral arrangements and public performances reflecting on the conditions of their identities. While this exhibition drew from that repertory, Thauberger's role as instigator and collaborator was either once removed or completely absent. With this step back, the focus shifts away from the encounter between artist and subject towards that between image and viewer. What emerges is the artist's studied interest in how bodies channel customs, politics and ideology—and the ability of images to transmit that presence and power.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is transported, engulfed. Spanning nearly the entire length and height of the north wall, a vivid photomural immerses viewers in a crowd of onlookers, musicians and actors



frozen in a series of gestural vignettes. Brightly coloured tunics and headdresses of orange, turquoise and magenta punctuate the grey sky, worn houses, bare earth and leafless trees. A list of cast members on the opposite wall reveals the performance as scenes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The mural's title *Who is it that can tell me who I am?* (2012), is a line from the play, spoken by a bewildered and disenfranchised Lear, a shadow of his former self.

The actors are members of a Bhand Pather troupe, part of a 2,000-year-old Kashmiri folk theatre tradition. Performances are adapted from a repertory of plots and characters to reflect on current events, often in political satire (hence, discouraged in a land of violent political strife). M.K. Raina, a prominent Kashmir-born actor and director, has been working with the Kashmir Bhagat Theatre in Akingaam—the subject of Thauberger's image—since the 80s. Raina had *King Lear* translated from a Hindi version into Kashmiri, working with the actors to break the story down to its core and re-build it using the forms of Bhand Pather. Lear's suffering after divvying up his kingdom resonates in this new context, becoming an allegory for the oppressive partitioning of Kashmir into violently contested states.

Given this context, how, then, to even hint at the cultural and political complexity, the troubled, echoing layers of meaning, in a single image? The physicality of *Who is it that can tell me who I am?* is integral. Nearly life size, the figures are to be encountered more than seen, creating a palpable urgency. The width of the gallery makes it impossible to stand far enough back to take in the image as a whole, thus fragmenting the scene. Thauberger created the panoramic mural from multiple large-format negatives spanning a 180-degree view; flattened to a wall, compound points

of view are subtly askew. Given nearly equal compositional weight to the performers, the pictured audience members are the first to be met when walking along the mural from left to right; most face out into the gallery, with gazes scattered in multiple directions. Their observation of the events—the performance, the photographing of it—feels very formal, while the actors stuck in carefully structured poses appear to be at play. While the *mise en scène* pulls viewers in, the details of it push them back; the ground appears solid but is destabilizing.

In the upstairs gallery, a selection of small black-and-white photographs concern a very different type of setting. Tranquil and leisurely, men, women and the odd child bathe, picnic, stroll and link arms. The series, titled *Recovered Gelatin Dry Plates (Unknown American Nudist Colony)* (ca. 1935/2012), was reprinted from glass negatives Thauberger bought online. Chemical decay darkens their bucolic light; the aggressive cracks and blotches contrast the soft eagerness of the bodies. Thauberger's anonymous photographer (it's easily assumed to be only one and male) is set apart from his subjects. At times, an acknowledged gaze (*no. 10*) bridges that distance; at other times, elements accentuate it (*no. 9*, where the encroaching foliage and shadowed foreground create a sense of peering). *No. 1* and *2* depict indoor lineups of bodies following exercise routines; while not as immediately compelling as the free-form arrangements, they set up important contrasts: between controlled motion and unconscious gesture; unison and solitary. As re-authored images, these works hold the vision of the original photographer, layered with Thauberger's own. The pastoral scenes are more receptive to this approach; with fewer details to fix them in time, they

are more open to being re-seen, giving the figures an attendant, relaxed assertiveness.

The powerful correlation between bodies and outdoor spaces links the disparate floors of the exhibition. Bhand Pather, traditionally an outdoor theatre, creates a public and social sphere around performances; its censorship by militant groups, which drove it indoors for much of the 90s, lends a sharpness to the open air in Thauberger's mural. At the colony, without threat, bodies still appear most powerful in the landscape, free from the cues of objects and architecture.

Size stands out as an important striking contrast in this exhibition. In the mural, figures have weight and compel a bodily relation, one that is visceral as well as visual. In the small prints, the figures appear sprite-like, emphasized by the negatives' ethereal fogging. The impact of scale in Thauberger's work was also clearly demonstrated at last year's Grange Prize Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (the nomination for which led to her time in India, and work with the Kashmir Bhagat Theatre). At the AGO, *Kandahar International Airport* (2009), a mid-sized photograph adhered to the wall, felt like a decal, with a group of Canadian officers running across the tarmac scaled to action-figure size. Also in that exhibition, *Ecce Homo* (2011), featuring actor Nicholas Campbell from *Da Vinci's Inquest* gesturing from an autopsy table, appeared unnervingly ghoulish at near to life-size. As an enormous, looming installation over Vancouver's downtown streets (commissioned by The City of Vancouver Public Art Program), the same figure became a colossal phantom. This is all to say that the Susan Hobbs exhibition further demonstrates how integral the size of a body in an image is to how that image functions—metaphorically and socially. Scale mediates the encounter, shaping the subject's presence, and placing viewers at a certain distance.

Interpretations of Thauberger's past works have often focused on emotional honesty and vulnerable self-expression, neither of which is to be found in *Who is it that can tell me who I am?* or *Recovered Gelatin Dry Plates (Unknown American Nudist Colony)*. These works present little to grab onto in terms of individuality—it seems to recede under the structure of theatre and in the absence of clothing. The focus here is on how groups of bodies do things together: claim space, articulate community and contravene societal norms.

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Althea Thauberger, *Recovered Gelatin Dry Plates (Unknown American Nudist Colony no.10)*, ca.1935/2012, archival inkjet print on bamboo paper, edition of 5, 50 cm x 56 cm.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY