

SAXENA, GARIMA, M.F.A. *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish*. (2008)
Directed by Amy Lixl-Purcell. 11pp.

The Gathering is a four-channel video installation where each channel represents one of four subjects (Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish) respectively from left to right in a horizontal format. Language, interpersonal relationships, materiality, polyphony, and system are my key concerns in this project. I used appropriated and fragmented text for the Tiger and Fish channels, and original video footage for the Rice and Orange. The audience is invited to discover poetic syntax in the simultaneous text and image sequences. Eight digital video stills accompany the thesis.

THE GATHERING—TIGER, RICE, ORANGE, FISH

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2008

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It was a joy to collaborate with my thesis committee—Amy Lixl-Purcell, Barbara Campbell Thomas, Christopher Cassidy, George Dimock, and Seth Ellis. My warmest appreciation goes out to them for their affection and guidance.

I sincerely thank Pat Wasserboehr for her mentoring, and the UNCG Department of Art for a sense of community.

Best wishes for the future to my wonderful colleagues in graduate school—Jeff Bell, Katie Claiborne, Peter Goff, and Kelly Queener.

My love to my family who send me their never-ending support from miles away.

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CHAPTER I

THE GATHERING—TIGER, RICE, ORANGE, FISH

The Gathering is a four channel video installation. The channels project one next to the other in a horizontal format. They represent the Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish respectively from left to right. The Tiger and Fish channels flash fragments of text in English, while the Rice and Orange channels are continuous sequences of imagery. Each channel is a loop of varying duration, which means that no combination of imagery is easily repeatable.

My key interests in *The Gathering* are language, interpersonal relationships, and materiality. As the project took shape these evolved to incorporate polyphony and system. I intuitively gathered the Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish to be my surrogate family. The concept of a family easily inherits the conceptual interests of the entire project.

Intuition subconsciously draws on own banks of experience to come up with solutions successful in ways random solutions are not. Selection by intuition may, however, initially appear just as arbitrary as the random. The diversity and similarity within *The Gathering* suggest a family resemblance, both hereditary and environmental. The Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish are two animal and two plant forms. They all belong to nature intervened with by humans. They share an affinity for water (as the tiger is the only big cat that enjoys to swim). Although a western interpretation dominates *The Gathering*, they contain an eastern flavor. These fundamental connections lend credibility to the invented poetic relationships that follow. I still don't know the complete significance of the individual subjects, but they emerge with characters of their own. I am averse to using the word 'symbol' in this context. Andrei Tarkovsky says—

Symbol is too narrow a concept for me in the sense that symbols exist in order to be deciphered. An artistic image on the other hand is not to be deciphered; it is an equivalent of the world around us.

...

The conflict between materiality and immateriality is present in *The Gathering*. In that context, the physical presence of a tiger, for me, resists the notion of *maya*, an illusionary world. This affirmation of the physical is a cherished significance of the Tiger. My specific concerns within the Tiger are—territory, communication, death, and the tigress. These concepts begin to relate to how an individual deals with society, identity, and the unknown.

I drew the Tiger text from three sources-- Stephen Mills' *Tiger*, Joseph Fayrer's *The Royal Tiger of Bengal: His Life and Death*, and Leigh Elizabeth Pitsko's MSc thesis *Wild Tigers in Captivity: A Study of the Effects of the Captive Environment on Tiger Behavior*. Text, however, only serves as a filtered concept of the Tiger. Jorge Luis Borges writes in *The Other Tiger*—

It strikes me now as evening fills my soul
That the tiger addressed in my poem
Is a shadowy beast, a tiger of symbols
And scraps picked up at random out of books [...]. (21-24)

Borges' sentiments match my own. Stephen Mills is a professional naturalist and published *Tiger* in 2004. Leigh Elizabeth Pitsko wrote her thesis in 2003. Joseph Fayrer published his treatise on tiger hunting in 1875. Their collaged thinking, in the Tiger channel, quietly traces the fragmented history of human intervention on tigers.

...

Rice is my staple diet, and comes to me from my mother and grandmother, both of whom are Nepali. This subject pierces my memory with femininity and domesticity. The internal strength of rice is an example of something wrapped in tradition and system, while maintaining its own sense of

material. Grain, heat, ground, and absent are the four ways in which I categorized the related imagery. These concepts refer mainly to the physical forms of rice I am familiar with. Reinvention of form seemed unnecessary, as rice brims with an internal dignity. Its modularity, color, and rounded cylindrical shape lend it monumentality, and especially so when that detailing appears larger than life. The sounds in *The Gathering* are sparse but mostly attributable to rice. Heard on their own, the grains have a lyrical quality.

...

An orange is sensual, but retains the innocence of childhood. This past winter I peeled an orange for a four-year-old girl named Saloni. I removed the inner film of the hearts as I remembered it was done for me in my childhood. After eating a fruit and a half, Saloni asked me, “Why do you, *hajoor*, peel everything away? Is it not right to eat the peel?” Something is lost in that translation from Nepali to English. This contrary naiveté of sensuality and childhood became a part of the images I collected. It was important to re-see the form of an orange to get to the core of this idea. The individual pulp, or sac, of the orange on needles was the most striking imagery I invented in this respect.

An orange lends itself to association with the Tiger and Fish because of its unusual forms and color. For instance, the wind blown surface of the orange juice becomes “the sea perfectly smooth” mentioned in the Fish channel. Visually, the modularity of its pulp is an attribute the Orange shares with Rice. I was interested in imagery for oranges that were related to whole, inside, outside, and liquid. There is some sound associated with this channel as well—the splashing of an orange in water, and the peeling of its rind.

...

The allure of the Fish is its subsistence in water. Their way of life is mysterious and inaccessible. The life of a flying fish is even more fantastic, as it propels itself out of water and into the air above. I identified with the constant translating that would occur in such an existence. My hunt

for text to appropriate for the Fish channel ended when I found the article *Do Flying Fish Fly?* by C. O. Whitman. In this article written in 1880, Whitman defends the Exocoetus's flying abilities against the opinions of the other naturalists of his time. I was particularly interested in sections where Whitman related myth and narrative. Those sections suggest make believe and I enjoyed fragmenting them into poetic phrases. Whitman writes and I fragment—

[...] the water only a few feet from the steamer [...] flew outward and backward [...] then suddenly turning [...] striking the crest of a wave [...] dipping its caudal lobe in the water [...] plunged into the ocean. (647).

...

Life is unfolding for me across multiple cultures and languages—Hindi, English, and Nepali. The routine use of these languages makes me think of the intrinsic quality of communication. Language is a tool of logic used to convey the subjective experience. Within a dialect, the interpretation of the subjective into logic becomes an approximation. When two languages meet, as the Rice might the Fish, translation becomes another form of approximation. These approximations can be considered both dysfunctional and poetic. I am interested in this spontaneous formation of dysfunction and poetry in a group of characters that are simultaneously speaking. The different languages at work in *The Gathering*—imagery, sound, English text, and the space of the physical installation itself—are fertile grounds to observe the formation of poetry.

Language and the interpersonal relation share a symbiotic relation; they both exist for the other and because of the other. The invented relations between the Tiger, Rice, Orange and Fish are both the source and subject of my work. When these interrelationships emerge, they are similar to the syntax of poetry—harmonious, ambivalent, or detached. “They were not less numerous on such occasion than when there was a moderate wind”, may flash just as the image of wind blown rice grains disappears. As the oranges knock each other about, the text “... a pattern of movement such as

spacing and head bobbing that is performed repeatedly...” may appear. The fragment, “he seemed quietly preoccupied—”, may pair with the phrase, “serving as a store-house of oxygen” or “in respect to the time required to execute a muscular contraction.”

The overlapping concerns of the subjects are, for the most part, patterns created by the mind, outside the separate channels. In *The Gathering*, I work close to each subject on its own. By encouraging the character of each subject, I satisfy my instinct to be hospitable and search for internal truth. Materiality tries to counteract the humiliation of failing words. The curling dried up orange rind is a classic gesture. The sound of a rice grain against metal is succinct and complete when contrasted to incomplete and open language. Physical access to rice and oranges, coupled with my personal memories of them, naturally resulted in intimate images.

The physical materiality of a tiger and fish, however, was not something I have ever had access to. I maintained this restraint while working on *The Gathering*. In this space my understanding of the Tiger and Fish was not internal and image based, but became external and appropriated text. This appropriation became an analogy for the anti-material and make-believe, the erudite and the fantastic. Knowledge, like language, filters material experience. Make-believe on the other hand, takes our material experiences and applies them to unfamiliar concepts. In this way the curling of the orange rind is contaminated with, “A specimen of *Exocoetus* shriveled, distorted and stiffened by long soaking in alcohol” in the same way the materiality of the flying fish is examined and reinterpreted in *Do Flying Fish Fly?* by C. O. Whitman. This mediation is to materiality what a mask is to an interpersonal relationship—mystery and frustration. The search for materiality parallels a search for true identity in the partially masked voices of the Tiger and Fish.

In the context of a video installation, polyphony—simultaneous voices—refers to media saturation. The analogy of polyphony to life sits close to me, especially in relation to my experiences with language and society while growing up. My most visceral memories from childhood are of being immersed in groups, whose moderate auditory volume and conversation, seemed cacophonous and

inaccessible to me. This occurred in spite of my technical knowledge of the language spoken by my family and friends. As these experiences continued, I grew secure in not hearing or understanding. Instead of participating in the group, I remained content with owning the mundane, incidental, and intimate. This experience of engagement and disengagement continues to repeat itself when I travel between cultures. Neither the western nor eastern is wholly unfamiliar to me, but from time-to-time, they appear vast and inaccessible just the same.

In *The Gathering* I see some of these behavioral patterns repeating. Each subject is unaware of the other but continues to play out its role. But as they belong to the same family, they start to develop sympathies unknown to themselves, in the mind of the viewers. As the editor, I admit to lengthening the duration of text, adding empty spaces, and pauses, to make room for the four voices. These adjustments give the channels an appearance of accommodating one another. This is the self-awareness of the individual subjects or at least an illusion of it. Harmony between the projections is created from symmetry and a common aesthetic sensibility. The text based/animal/knowledge channels secure the outer ends. The image based/plant/intuitive channels subsist in the private midsection.

The family is a system of emotional and biological relationships. A system is a form of discipline. In an ideal democratic version of itself, it allows everyone a private physical and psychological space to live in, while offering the larger community as a resource. By limiting the infinite ways to live life, a sense of security and creative freedom kicks into place. The physical installation of *The Gathering* is a system where each subject gets its own symmetrical territory next to the other. Within each subject, I evolved a series of constraints. The use of text and imagery are the most apparent ones. Also, individual subjects were categorized uniquely within themselves, as I mentioned earlier.

Putting so many languages in proximity to each other, I both empower the viewer and take control away from them. They are free to choose what they want to hear or see, the order they

experience the work in, and in turn become creators of a new syntax. This syntax may be poetic, neutral, or dysfunctional. Initially the viewer may find that the text and imagery distract from one another. Though both are de-contextualized, imagery is immediate while reading text requires a separate cerebral focus. With practice, this switching between languages becomes easier and the work unfolds itself over the course of time.

In *The Gathering*'s completed form, each channel's relation with the others remains in flux. Pacing at one moment, splashing the next, modular and spread out—the Orange converses with the Tiger, Fish, and Rice by turn. The overlapping and invented relationships that form between text and imagery strive to create a new syntax. This new language retains only a partial association to my own relationships to the subjects. Instead, *The Gathering* becomes an independent and poetic collaboration between the viewer and the Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish.

CHAPTER II

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Poetry and performance hold a deep connection to my life. I remember sitting next to my grandmother, our hands pickling and preserving fruit and lentils. Anne Hamilton's work reminds me of the serenity of such memories. She arranges performances and installations in large spaces and aestheticizes their ritual qualities by slowing down time. I am always struck by the displaced yet graceful relationship that exists between the material and the performer in her work. Similar affectionate and aggressive relations exist in hospitality. Rikrit Tiravanija's performances are interesting to me in the context of hospitality, as I often cook and sing for my own audience as a detour from language.

Janine Antoni works with created ritual and physical materials to think about the surreal quality of her interpersonal relationships. Even though her final imagery retains a strong remnant of her poetic processes, their personal logic is not always immediate to the viewer. This internal world is key to my work, as I find it is in Joseph Cornell's. Resisting reason and remaining largely impenetrable, he appropriates existing imagery as personal motifs. I find the poetic beauty and toy-like quality encapsulating his box assemblages very compelling.

In *The House*, video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila uses repeated performance, color, and dialogue to examine the inner world of her protagonist. The protagonist within the video struggles to understand the nature of the mediated imagery that surrounds her. *The House* thus constitutes a reflection on video art itself. Andrei Tarkovsky also engages cinematic language to deliberate on metaphysics. Tarkovsky's superb imagery never fails to move me and his pitting of language against the unknowable is similar to my own doubts concerning communication. A six-year-old boy speaks the last line in his film *The Sacrifice*—"In the beginning there was the word... Why Papa?"

I value old Hindi movie songs for their melody, poetic lyrics, and multi-layered self-awareness. *Maya*—the world of illusion—in this case is a world of screen-based fiction. The disillusioned idealistic poets in Guru Dutt’s films such as *Pyaasa* (The Thirsty One) and *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (Flowers of Paper) are a few of the most moving protagonists in Hindi cinema. When I try to translate portions of these films, I fail in communicating the subtle nuances of specific Hindi phrases with English counterparts. For instance, “...*phool hi phool the daaman mein...*” can translate to “...there were infinite flowers in our veil...” or “...flower upon flower existed in our lap...” or “...our share had flowers unlimited...”

I am an intermedia artist working with video, performance, and interactivity. My video work invents personal rituals and dialogue while translating appropriated Hindi songs to sketch an irrational inner world. Though these gestures strive to bypass language, they purposefully plant seeds of misunderstanding as a parallel to fallible communication.

In *The Gathering*, I was challenged to bring together specific aspects of my interest in performance, translation, and poetry. The performance, embedded in the video, is present in the final form of the installation itself—continually looped yet non-repeating. The viewer acts as a translator between the sourced text and the original footage. These four simultaneous and internally fragmented voices of the Tiger, Rice, Orange, and Fish, can only be related to each other through poetic association.

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CATALOGUE

1. Digital Video Still from Channel#1 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
2. Digital Video Still from Channel#2 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
3. Digital Video Still from Channel#3 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
4. Digital Video Still from Channel#4 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
5. Digital Video Still from Channel#1 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
6. Digital Video Still from Channel#2 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
7. Digital Video Still from Channel#3 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
DV NTSC format; Projection Size 4' x 2.7' (approx)
8. Digital Video Still from Channel#4 of *The Gathering—Tiger, Rice, Orange, Fish* (2008)
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