



Ramona Ramlochand  
*Unfallen*

Ramona Ramlochand:  
Turbulence and the Diasporic Imagination

by Haema Sivanesan, Executive Director, Centre A, Vancouver

It is a hot summer day and a mid-afternoon rain shower has cooled the air. The view from Ramona Ramlochand's studio is expansive, revealing the picturesque detail of Montreal's urban landscape. I wonder how Ramlochand fits into the scheme of this city—living in it, but remaining in many ways outside of it. Sitting in her studio, the conversation is relaxed and meandering, shifting from her early work as a photographer for non-profit aid agencies in Southeast Asia, to her travels in Africa and Europe, to her family history and artistic practice. This rambling, generous and open conversation suggested the range of ideas and experiences informing Ramlochand's work.

In Ramlochand's studio, we are looking at a maquette for a new kinetic work titled *Élan Vital*. The work consists of a fish bowl of water containing an assortment of colourful miniature figures—people, animals, cars, bicycles, shopping trolleys, garbage cans—set in perpetual motion by a magnetic stirrer. I remark to Ramona that the work reminds me of the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz* that whisks the central character, Dorothy, away from the drudgery of her small town life, to the magical land of Oz. My association of the artwork with the children's story is on the one hand visual: Ramlochand's miniature tornado contained within a fishbowl is toy-like, playful and hypnotic. On the other hand, my association is allegorical: *The Wizard of Oz* is a story about twin longings, of the dream of escape and the desire to return home, and the process of finding one's self and one's relationship to the world through a journey across fantastic landscapes, shaped by encounters with a series of extraordinary characters. Dorothy's fictional journey is not unrelated to the journeys that have shaped the artist's own life, and the association suggests that the themes in Ramlochand's work are universal, even more so today as the forces of globalisation assert a significant influence over the opportunities and happenstances of our lives.

In a 2005 essay, Alice Ming Wei Jim notes Ramlochand's interest in "questioning the ways in which place is perceived, both real and imagined, in association with cultural difference, travel, displacement and the



White Desert, 2005, detail

increasing digitization of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Jim refers specifically to a photo-panorama titled *White Desert* depicting a vast Egyptian desert landscape interspersed with imagery from the lush jungles of Southeast Asia and elements from Montreal’s urban landscape. The work is dreamlike and cinematic: dreamlike for its shifting perspective and unlikely juxtaposition of visual elements, and cinematic for its scale and highly saturated colour. This desert appears barren and neutral—a no-man’s land—but it is in fact a space of crossing where diverse and unlikely elements converge. The photograph evokes a border crossing, with trucks, cars, portals. An open window suggests porosity—a gateway or threshold. In this photograph,

1 Alice Ming Wai Jim, “Ramona Ramlochand: White Desert” in *Image and Imagination*, ed. Martha Langford (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2005), 53-56.



White Desert, 2005, colour inkjet print, panorama, 731.5 x 129.3 cm

Ramlochand pictures herself within the surreal *White Desert*, behind the wheel of a car driving into the barren landscape. The expansive desert describes the landscape of a journey, where the idea of journey or travel stands as a metaphor for the processes of self-formation. Ramlochand states:

The impetus [for this work] was fuelled by a visit to the White Desert in Egypt. This surreal environment was so foreign to me that my only blanket for ‘normalcy’ was to imagine innocuous fragments from my life back home instilled into the Saharan landscape.

On re-entering my ‘normal’ life in Canada, I began to mentally collage these two worlds into a series of seamless moments.

Questioning what constitutes the space of the ‘normal’ the artist describes how she contends with the unfamiliar by mentally reintegrating fragments of the familiar into these foreign landscapes. Conversely she reintegrates aspects of her experience of foreign lands into her experience of the everyday, so that these distinctive aspects of spatial and cultural experience are carried together. Ramlochand continues:

This cyclical body of work blurs the edges of place, and, in so doing, creates a new visual/geographic reality. The fragmented pieces become echoes of a place that no longer belongs to the ‘whole’ but is at once very much part of it. In turn, these fragments become snapshots of the interior of the subject who no longer belongs to a particular space, a subject ‘un-bordered.’<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of the diasporic subject, place, or the sense of a strong identification with a geographic territory or location, is a phenomenon that becomes de-stabilised through the process of migration, so that identity is not exclusively tied to the notion of a homeland. Instead, Ramlochand proposes a sense of identity as being formed through the experience of the journey, where the landscape of the journey is the landscape within which the artist constitutes herself.<sup>3</sup>

2 Ramona Ramlochand, “White Desert” artist statement. Accessed 25 July 2011. [http://www.optica.ca/decades/expo\\_affiche\\_en.php?id\\_expo=213](http://www.optica.ca/decades/expo_affiche_en.php?id_expo=213)

3 The cultural theorist, Nikos Papastergiadis notes the need for “the cultural identity of the migrant...to be seen as being partly formed by and in the journey.” In other words, the journey is not prior to the moment of arrival, where immigrant identity may be re-constituted in the terms of the adopted homeland. Instead, the journey is intrinsic to an idea of identity formation. Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration* (Cambridge, UK and Maldon, USA: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

This idea of self-formation emerging through the negotiation of distinctive experiences of place and culture was addressed in a compelling way in an early work titled *In Conversation* (2000), where Ramlochand explores the idea of the subjective self as being constructed through journeys and relationships developed across space and time. This series consists of photographs of slide projections drawn from Ramlochand's travels to Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Africa, cast into the furnished living spaces of her Montreal apartment. The projections comprise a series of touristic images depicting specific people and evoking the urban character of cities that Ramlochand spent time in during her various travels. Each projection reveals certain elements and vistas of her apartment—a Cambodian billboard projected over the mirrors and lampshades of a bedroom, or two Cao Dai clerics projected into a lounge room featuring a red velvet Victorian couch, and tall palm trees along a Nigerian beach projected onto a wall with a window framing a view out onto a tree across from Ramlochand's apartment. These layered and shadowy yet playful photographs are at once compositionally fluid although spatially discontinuous, collapsing time, space and memory into a single image.<sup>4</sup> They play with perspective and the dimensions of space to conflate distant and familiar places. Once again,

4 Andrea Kunard, *Shifting Sites* exhibition brochure (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography 2000), not paginated.



*In Conversation Cao Dai*, 2000



*Crawling Out of Limbo (Nigerian Beach)*, 1994

Ramlochand inserts herself into these projections depicting herself in silhouettes often near the centre of each photograph and typically in some relation to the people depicted in each projected image.

The images, projected into the various rooms and spaces of Ramlochand's apartment, complicate the notion of home. The idea of home or place that the artist explores is not a nostalgic search for lost origins, but one that accounts for the restlessness inherent to a peripatetic experience of migration. Home is not described as a physical place, but as a mental landscape constructed through the accumulation and convergence of multiple and discrete yet fragmented experiences that inform one's sense of place in the world.

The cultural theorist Scott McQuire acknowledges the significance of photography and digital technologies in recording migrant or diasporic experiences with relation to the idea of place and home. McQuire proposes that insofar that the camera has participated in producing society's estrangement, or 'existential homelessness,' so too it has afforded a re-imagining of the world. He states:

Home in all its senses—from physical shelter to existential dwelling place—is no longer inextricably bound to a particular place, synonymous with a single language, homogenous people



or unified culture. Under pressure of new forms of circulation and new demands for social mobility, home has increasingly become a relation one must seek to establish wherever one finds oneself, amongst a crowd of others at the juncture of a diversity of cultures.<sup>5</sup>

In the modern world, where migration is described as “the quintessential experience of our time,”<sup>6</sup> home is no longer a fixed and stable idea, but is described as a ‘relation’—across time and space, and amongst diverse communities of people. Accordingly, in her photographs, Ramlochand describes space as an active field of identity formation, where subjectivity is understood as complex, layered and multi-dimensional.

Using techniques of layering, juxtaposition, collage and the manipulation of scale, Ramlochand re-orders pictorial space and explores new spatial, compositional and relational possibilities. Through this manipulation of space, Ramlochand explores an experience of belonging nowhere and everywhere, of identifying with multiple geographic, ethnic and/or cultural sites, and of inhabiting a dynamic, globalised terrain. It is a notion of place that is inherently tied to notions of self, and is constituted within a tension between domestic space and landscapes of travel; the mundane and the fantastic; the familiar and the exotic, and so on, so that the idea of place as an ontological ground is one which is shifting, contingent and always in process.

If Ramlochand’s earlier works describe the landscape of self-formation, then *Élan Vital* describes its velocity. In the gallery, *Élan Vital* is to be rendered in two formats: as a sculptural work and as a projection. The projection records the spinning of the twister from above, “render[ing] the tornado as a roulette wheel—a game of chance as a metaphor for life,”<sup>7</sup> deriving from Henri Bergson’s idea of *élan vital* as a life-force or driving impetus. However, the perpetual motion of the work also recalls Nikos Papastergiadis’ use of the term ‘turbulence’ to describe the patterns and effects of modern migration. Papastergiadis writes:

5 Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Time and Space in the Age of Cinema* (London, California, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 6.

6 John Berger, cited by McQuire, 5.

7 Ramona Ramlochand, “unfallen”, unpublished artist statement.



Turbulence is not just a useful noun for describing the unsettling effect of an unexpected force that alters your course of movement; it is also a metaphor for the broader levels of interconnection and interdependency between the various forces that are in play in the modern world.<sup>8</sup>



In *Élan Vital*, the overall flow of movement is steady, hypnotic and unending. However, the movement of the various internal elements is turbulent, chaotic and unpredictable. The miniature elements within the bowl have no point of anchorage or centre, but are caught in a series of eddies and vortices that sustain a perpetual flow. For Bergson this unpredictability is the essential element in creative evolution. In Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, this unpredictability ensures pluralism. For Papastergiadis this perpetual state of displacement describes the essential condition of modernity. Taken in the context of Ramlochand’s practice, *Élan Vital* schematises the perpetual condition of



8 Papastergiadis, op.cit.4-5.



change and flux inherent to an 'unbordered' or de-territorialised state of being.<sup>9</sup>

*Élan Vital* forms part of a larger installation titled *unfallen* which includes drawings and photographs. The title is a wordplay drawing on a biblical reference to 'The Fall'—Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the event in the Book of Genesis that sets in motion the theatre of life. The notion of the unfallen evokes a suspended state—between heaven and hell, innocence and shame, naivety and disaffection. The installation itself, however, is more playful, evoking the world as a site of contingency and unexpected interaction. In the installation, clusters of drawings and photographs expand on the themes of *Élan Vital* appearing as vignettes that reflect on notions of order and disorder, the randomness, opportunity, happenstance and unexpected beauty of everyday life.

The drawings, which comprise the artist's initial conceptual sketches for *Élan Vital*, are clustered alongside an eclectic array of photographs: the criss-crossed lines of highway overpasses in Vancouver, roadside stalls in Ghana, the upside-down image of a palm tree-lined median strip in Mexico, autumnal leaves reflected in a lake in Parc La Fontaine, Montreal, various aerial views of landscapes in Mexico, Turkey and Argentina, describing the surfaces of places. The images are drawn from Ramlochand's extensive archive of photographs, collected over a long period of work and travel. However, the images are not intended to refer to or describe a particular place or journey, instead suggesting movement, space, displacement and trajectory, extending the metaphor of the tornado. The clusters of images are still informed by the possibility of collapsing or re-ordering space, but describe a world fundamentally in motion.

A number of photographs in this installation depict scenes reflected in puddles and lakes which Ramlochand displays upside-down to reveal a series of beguiling images. She states:

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9 Nikos Papastergiadis defines the idea of the deterritorialisation of culture as the way in which "people now feel they belong to various communities despite the fact that they do not share a common territory..." Anthropologists use the term to describe the "disjunctures" of the ties between culture and place. See for example Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27-48.



*unfallen (boys)*, 2008

By the simple act of turning reality askew, I hope to examine varied notions of perceptions. In an installation context, *unfallen* creates a world gone awry yet stilled in reflections. This allows us, for a brief moment, to perhaps stand outside of our small cyclonic lives and see the big picture of the madness we have created.<sup>10</sup>

In a number of the photographs autumnal trees are reflected in puddles or lakes. The golden glow of the trees contrast with the steely grey of the muddy ground, transforming a representation of ordinary life into a fantastic image of possibility. The simple act of inverting the photograph shifts the spatial order, creating new associations, new categories of belonging and possible new narratives.

A leading image, *unfallen (boys)*, depicts two young black boys attempting to do headstands on the beach. It is an image of spontaneous, youthful exuberance, but turned upside-down, it appears as though the two boys are holding up the world. Re-orienting these photographs reinforces the ambiguity of the image, challenging both the 'truth' of the photographic image and the accepted order of the world. The gesture re-frames the representation of the ordinary or mundane, providing vistas onto new possibilities.

<sup>10</sup> Ramona Ramlochand, "Unfallen," unpublished artist statement.

Cover Images: (Front) detail of *Élan Vital*, 2010-2011, fishbowl, found objects, water and motor.  
(Back) *Tornado drawing*: charcoal and soft pencils on vellum, scanned and printed as a digital image.

The temporary contemporary program at the McMaster Museum of Art offers opportunities for mid-career and senior artists to present solo exhibitions and projects within the context of a research-based humanities environment at McMaster University, and the Museum's on-going cultural research as it is applied to art history and resonant museological issues. Montreal-based artist Ramona Ramlochand was invited to develop and present her new photographic and media work *unfallen*, as a site-responsive installation.

*Unfallen* opens up a broad discussion of "place" for Ramlochand—the discourse that has circulated through the terms "globalization" and "glocality" over the past 20 years—and is thoughtfully examined in Haema Sivanesan's essay. This discussion is in part fuelled by the rapidly changing environment and technologically enhanced world we live in. Ramlochand wrote, "*unfallen* digs deeper into the recesses of time, and raises questions around how the past is constantly reinvented and relived in the present." There is, however, a sense of hope, and echoed in Curator Yigal Zalmona's commentary for the exhibition *Routes of Wandering* (Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1991)—"a yearning for a crystallization of a distinctive collective identity and a condition of floating identity."

Ihor Holubizky  
Senior Curator, McMaster Museum of Art

**Ramona Ramlochand** was born in Guyana, and grew up in England and Cyprus before moving to Canada. She received her BFA at the University of Ottawa in 1990, and her MFA from Concordia University in 2004. Ramlochand has shown in solo exhibitions over the past 15 years, in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Windsor, Oakville and Buenos Aires, and her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions across Canada, in the United States, Europe and Africa since the early 1990s. In 2010, Ramlochand was included in the World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures in Dakar, Senegal. Her works are represented in the collections of The Canada Council Art Bank, Musée du Québec, The City of Ottawa, The Ottawa Art Gallery, and the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton.

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