

POST-CAMP (SHELLY BAHL AND BEN DARRAH)



Following Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964), the exhibition *Post-Camp* tentatively establishes connections between the work of Shelly Bahl and Ben Darrah, and proposes that they be considered in terms of the sensibility "Post-Camp." Shelly Bahl's new series of photographs of a group of South Asian women at an international airport and Ben Darrah's suite of paintings and assemblages are both underpinned by similar concerns that arise through their individual explorations of what might be called a National identity, while practicing a form of citation that dislocates their subject matter.

Artists Bios:

Shelly Bahl is a visual and media artist born in Benares, India, and based in Toronto and New York City. She received her B.F.A. (Visual Art and Art History) from York University, Toronto and her M.A. (Studio Art) from New York University. Bahl is a founding artist member of SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective) and ZEN-MIX 2000: Pan-Asian Visual Arts Network in Toronto. Born in London, England in 1965,

Ben Darrah immigrated to Canada with his family in 1968. He graduated with a BFA from the University of Alberta in 1987 and received his Masters of Fine Art at the University of Windsor in 1995. He lives in Kingston, Ontario and currently teaches at St. Lawrence College. As well as teaching, Darrah curates and writes about art.

Images of the exhibition can be found [here](#)

Images of the exhibition reception can be found [here](#)

Exhibition Essay

Notes on Post-Camp "*Camp is (to repeat) the relation to style in a time in which the adoption of style—as such—has become altogether questionable.*" (53rd note on Camp.) These notes are for Susan Sontag, who, in her essay "Notes on Camp" (1964) found a form adequate for the tentative description of a sensibility, the sensibility of an era, even, without being prescriptive to a degree that would do it injustice. Sontag identified Camp as a sensibility in order to emphasize that, rather than the stated goal of an artist, it is more of a subjective

response elicited in the viewer by a work, a kind of exercise in taste, questionable in the queer way that it flouted societal norms. It is with a deep sympathy mixed with revulsion that I wish to attempt a similar feat and tentatively describe a sensibility that I discern, if not as the hallmark of an era (The Age of Post-Camp), then at least to a great degree evident in the superficially dissimilar work by **Shelly Bahl** and **Ben Darrah** on display at Modern Fuel this summer.

At first glance, the work of the two artists does not look at all alike. Shelly Bahl's series of photographs, entitled "A Day in the Life," which feature a number of South Asian women in various incongruous tableaux at an international airport (where a glamorously attired woman mops a bathroom floor, for instance), bears little resemblance to Darrah's large scale paintings and assemblages that reference a contemporary experience of the great outdoors, where fields of camouflage evoke landscapes stenciled with images of camping equipment. Both artists' works, however, are underpinned by similar concerns that arise through their individual explorations of what might be called a National identity.

Though hesitant to propose any strict categorization, particularly since both artists would not have foreseen such a thing and in fact defy it, I do not think it is too insensitive to view their work through the sensibility of "Post-Camp." Just as the Post-Modern has been understood as both a disruption and a continuation of the Modern, Post-Camp should be understood as both a disruption and a continuation of the Campy. How well is Camp remembered? For Sontag, Camp was a tender feeling, a mode of appreciation that took pleasure in works that, exaggerated and excessive in style, ultimately failed in their bid to be taken seriously as art: the choreography of Busby Berkeley, for example.

Camp is a kind of gay savoir-faire, both Nietzschean and queer, that enables the dissolution of traditional values and morals, and allows for a cheerful enjoyment without judgment. The proposition of the category of "Post-Camp" asks if the Camp relation to style is still tenable today, in an age where the questionable is subjected to an even closer scrutiny. My question is meant to imply not that Camp is outmoded, as it appears to be in the recent musical version of *The Producers*, but that the Camp mode is even more suspect Post-9/11, an event that inaugurated, if only briefly, "The End of Irony" if not the end of Camp. The strategies of Bahl and Darrah's work fall somewhere between irony and Camp, and if they fail, it is not as a bid for seriousness that is to be tenderly appreciated, but rather as a deliberately avant-garde tactic whose only aim is to heighten suspicion.

Post-Camp work does not appear innocently, and it is thereby distant from Sontag's claims that because the work is honestly though outlandishly serious, excessive in its single-mindedness, "**Camp rests on innocence.**" (21st note on Camp.) It is not possible today to view the figures in Bahl's airport photographs (who have an air somewhere between idlers and detainees) without the insecurities attendant to their location. And the very support upon which Darrah's images rest, camouflage-printed fabric, calls attention to the concealment of its baselessness: a ground with a false-bottom. These works are excessive in terms of the multiple shifty readings they allow. "**Camp sees everything in quotation marks.**" (10th note on Camp.)

Both Bahl and Darrah practice a form of citation that dislocates their subject matter. The pairing of Bahl and Darrah's work telescopes as conventional an experience of the nation today that is both regional and global in scope, where airports can be the new outposts of Empire as base camps once were (O pioneers!). Both artists convey a sensibility and sophistication that Sontag, quoting Empson in the 7th note on Camp, would describe as the "urban pastoral." Shelly Bahl has pursued throughout her career a Post-Colonial interrogation of the issues of cultural displacement and appropriation by highlighting the hybrid and stereotypical nature of orientalist fantasies, colonialist histories, and multi-culturalism.

Focusing on the lives of women who lead trans-cultural lives, Bahl produces playful and surreal scenarios, where what exactly transpires is not so easily defined. "A Day in the Life" displays this experimentation, but not in an exaggerated or excessive style. The photos of the women seem unremarkable, everyday, generic, and yet they are in no way naturalistic. Each woman wears an instantly recognizable uniform, be it the garb of a security guard, flight attendant, or business woman, but their roles in the photographs don't necessarily suit them. They seem to be arbitrarily

reshuffled into new arrangements, more blasé than carnivalesque, effectively calling into question notions of gender, race, class, even caste, through their deadpan demeanour.

Questions arise as a sneaking suspicion grows in the viewer that exactly what is going on in these photographs is not readily apparent. Ben Darrah, on the other hand, foregrounds suspicion as a theme both conceptually and formally by attempting through painting to set the viewer off-balance, creating an optical buzzing that both reveals and obscures its figurative content. Darrah refashions the representation of the Canadian landscape by setting it afloat, thereby disconnecting nature from an unexamined ground and pinpointing its status as a cultural construct. The camouflage in his work can be read as an attempt at cultural assimilation, another process of colonization, but the attempt is darkened by the sense that the resulting screen acts more like a blockade, signifying alienation and disaffection. There can be no innocent return to the woods. Each individual venture carries with it its own cultural baggage.

The duplicitous nature of Bahl and Darrah's images suggests that they should be read ironically. Irony is a rhetorical strategy that asks an audience to engage in the simultaneous perception of more than one meaning, often contradictory, in order to create a composite third, ironic and deeper, meaning. Like Camp, irony too is a response, one that an audience has to make according to their own perceptions and predilections. The rhetorical strategies of Post-Camp appear to be closer to Camp, however, in that the simultaneous perception does not evoke two meanings, but rather, one meaning and its flipside existence as mere sign. As Sontag writes, ***"It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice."*** (15th note on Camp.) For Sontag, Camp was a private code or an identification badge for urban sophisticates. Those who "got" Camp were those who saw through the content of Camp in order to relish its style. Post-Camp has a different emphasis. Those who would "get" Post-Camp are those who realize they have no access to an inner knowledge of it, but see the maintenance of the ironic disjunction between ideas and things as a necessity in an age that too readily equates politics with morality.

Michael Davidge, Artistic Director