

MARINA ROY  
(VANCOUVER)

**WALLS AND TOWERS: WORKS  
BY GWENESSA LAM AND  
MATILDA ASLIZADEH**

Text commissioned by Skol for the  
exhibition *Edge State*

*“Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”*

– Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

*“The word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek roots, nostos meaning “return home” and algia “longing.” I would define it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. ... A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life.”*

– Svetlana Boym, *“Nostalgia and its Discontents”*

When is a wall a home or palace, and when does it become a barricade, a fortress, a territorial border, or prison? In talking with artists Matilda Aslizadeh and Gwenessa Lam, a similar question was revealed as the starting point for conceptualizing their exhibition, *Edge State*. In the works on display one is confronted by the image of the wall and the tower, made penetrable by historical clues pointing to the war-like foundations of our cultural heritage: the procession and the museum for Aslizadeh, and the Kaiping Diaolou for Lam.

Walls and towers – barriers to migration, defensive structures against attack, monolithic sentinels to power, demonstration of technical prowess – they have a ubiquitous presence in the media and in our lives. The Tower of Babel, the Great Wall of China, the Twin Towers, the Israel-Gaza and Mexico-United States barriers, the Berlin Wall, the Eiffel Tower, the countless crumbling wall reliefs and frescoes of ancient palaces... They serve as strong symbols for the imaginary and for identity, structures on which ideologies are constructed and myths are based. They often serve as memorial sites of patriotic pride and pain. Recently entire epochal ruptures are named after them: post-9/11, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Images of their construction, persistence, and destruction speak to the agency such monumental structures possess within our lives. The image of the tower or wall is often strongest at the moment of destruction, or in its ruined state.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin outlines how allegory as a stylistic device resonates most deeply at the threshold of historical change. A new belief system or technological

innovation can instigate the rapid decline of one era to make way for the new façade of the next. Allegorical works use picture-puzzle and hybrid-style strategies to dramatize the passing of one historical moment into another while revealing how insidious power structures continue to persist, only in a new disguise. One characteristic of such works is a pile up of paradigmatic elements, a mish-mash of styles and ornament, often so excessive, artificial, and fantastical, that one anticipates an imminent fall into ‘ruin’. A melancholy fills the framework of heteroclitite competing forces and components. One does not understand how this new feeling of loss came about, nor what was lost in the transition from one era to the next, but in the flash of the “dialectical image” offered by certain artworks – the slamming up of one style against another, or the juxtaposition of two unrelated images or objects – one may begin to get a firmer sense of the nefarious forces at foot in the play of image seduction that comes to dominate our daily lives. Benjamin pointed out how allegory works in Surrealism: in using outmoded fashions, flea market cast-offs, and street detritus in their work, Surrealists directed attention to the quick cycle of capitalist consumption, a new form of power over the people, imprisoning them and their exploited ‘others’ within a cycle of increased global exploitation.

In a nutshell, allegorical works often use obsolete forms as visual beacons to guide the contemporary viewer who might feel unmoored from history in this newly constructed landscape. Tourism and entertainment are two such insidious seductive forms that Gwenessa Lam and Matilda Aslizadeh confront head on, unmasking how the violence subtending the development of culture in the past persists in deceptive new ways in our present moment.

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Lam’s drawings reference a moment in Chinese history when a complicated hybrid identity was making itself felt through the architectural figure of the Diaolou in the Kaiping county of Guangdong province. These multi-storied tower structures dating from the end of the Qing Dynasty in the late 19th century and reaching their height in the 1920s and 30s,<sup>1</sup> served as fortresses as well as homes. These watchtowers were strategically located on the borders of villages, often on a promontory, and displayed a curious

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combination of Western and Eastern architectural styles. The reason for this unprecedented cross-fertilization of cultural styles stems from the fact that Kaiping has been “one of Guangdong province’s *qiaoxiang*, a place of overseas emigration, in which the money remitted from abroad is a major economic resource.”<sup>2</sup> During a time of increased fighting between warlords and opportunistic invasion by bandits, citizens emigrated to other countries for work (mostly Southeast Asia, Australia and North America) and sent money home to construct these fortified towers. The presence of such a tower at the entrance of a village was both defensive and prestigious – reflecting the economic power of its citizens as well as their social cohesion. The arrow slits, swallow’s nest turrets, and covered galleries all served as defensive architectural features. The integration of western ‘aristocratic’ styles and the deployment of reinforced concrete, reflect foreign cultural and economic influence during this precarious period in Kaiping’s history. The fortuitous use of ornament as façade also speaks to the grotesque in art, an anti-classical anti-traditional tendency that serves itself as a defensive measure for identity during times of upheaval and change.

These poignant references to Chinese history and architecture are complicated by a certain nostalgic approach to drawing the subject. Nostalgia has often been used as a disparaging term by historians, to the extent that they treat it as a bourgeois “guilt-free”<sup>3</sup> historical sensibility. Lam’s stylistic treatment of the floor-to-ceiling Diaolou drawing, *Shilu Tower*, with its subtle gradations of grey pastel lending a distinctly Romantic cast to the work, has a distancing effect on the viewer, as if it were being viewed through a fog. The sublime meets kitsch. Nostalgia takes on another dimension in this large drawing, in that Lam’s mother lived in the vicinity of one of these towers before moving to Canada. Lam’s relation to these towers is hence once removed, nostalgic in the sense in that she projects meaning and longing onto a history she never lived herself, but only heard about, and visited later as a Chinese-Canadian tourist. In one of the few significant contributions to the history of the Diaolou, Patricia Batto writes, “Though long neglected, [these towers] are now a major asset in promoting tourism and a factor in the competition between Chinese cities to attract visitors. Their value is enhanced by the fact that the visitors being targeted are overseas Chinese (Huaqiao) who have been the objects of solicitation by Beijing since China’s opening

in 1979.”<sup>4</sup> Commercial tourism tends to sentimentalize history as a way to appeal to the masses. The seductive and captivating quality of Lam’s dark and moody drawing plays off kitsch tastes: it skirts ever so close to the Romantic and nostalgic, flattens cultural ‘distinction’ to reveal the enchanted commercial image.

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*“The part of the procession which entered the city ahead of the triumphant’s chariot gave the spectators an idea of the victory. Not only were spoils of war carried along—weapons, gold, silver and jewellery—but also pictures of battle-scenes, of towns captured, and boards with names of the peoples subjugated. Here we find the famous *veni, vidi, vici*. The gifts of honour presented by the conquered peoples, originally laurel-wreaths, later on gold wreaths, were shown. White oxen, to be sacrificed to Iuppiter, were brought along. The procession marched to a flourish of trumpets.”*<sup>5</sup>

Kitsch is also at the heart of Aslizadeh’s video installation *Trophy*, a panoramic circular screen which depicts a processional ‘wall’ of treasures, constructed of collaged images of ancient, classical and medieval artifacts in stone and metallurgy, all from different parts of the world. In the irreverent “pile-up” of images is revealed the foundations of museum culture in war – the art that fills our museums are quite literally the spoils of war. The lack of distinction between cultures or historical context in the display of these objects, along with the animated features and garish addition of colour, cheapens the aspect of these treasures of world civilization. She brings them down to the level of the touristic trinket. The slow panning movement that reveals more and more objects before our visual field, to the point where it becomes a solid wall, speaks to the triumphal procession of trophies, the victory march after a bloody war, which would start at the Field of Mars and end at the Capitoline temple, and could last for three days or more, so slow was the pace and so vast the spoils.

Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” with her back toward the present, gazing at the piled up ruin of culture advancing higher and higher as we all move “ahead” in time, is probably the most quoted allegorical image in art history. Aslizadeh’s spectacular wall epitomizes this ruin of history served up as entertainment. It is

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no mystery why the special effects industry has come to dominate culture in our era, serving up the worst ideology-laden kitsch to the masses – all that is needed to distract the masses from what is going on are expensively produced spectacular surfaces. Aslizadeh's strategy is to use 'classical' culture – that façade of strength and stability – grotesquely, revealing how culture has come to be treated as a touristic empty vessel of amnesiac distinction rather than acting as an archive for historical memory that can guide us responsibly into the future. It is significant that Aslizadeh culled all of these art objects from digital museum databases. We have never had greater access to information and imagery to our world heritage, and yet most people treat culture as just so much data to browse through and use in a decontextualized manner, without concern for any deep understanding of any given artifact's place in history.

Aslizadeh's Armenian-Iranian diasporic identity also seems inadvertently addressed through this wall. Armenia's location meant that it was invaded by many peoples during its history: Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Persians, and so on. The appropriated objects and images in her processional wall reveal not only how cultures become hybridized through conquest, but also how, in our age of international tourism, satellite television, and instant access to digital information, culture becomes globalized – cultures losing distinctions (flattening out) on the one hand, and taking on new hybridized characteristics on the other. There is something grotesque and garish about *Trophy*, in how elements have been irreverently fragmented and recombined into new monstrous 'beings'.

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The Renaissance witnessed the re-evaluation of classical Greco-Roman culture, resulting in the integration of Classical styles into a new humanist culture. Also during this era, a less classical tradition was discovered with the excavation of Emperor Nero's palace, which had lay buried for hundreds of years. When archeologists first unearthed the palace, they thought it was an underground grotto, hence the term 'grotesque.' On the walls of the grotto could be found a painted arabesque filagree of morphing architectural details, flora, fauna and human bodies.

It seems therefore appropriate to call Aslizadeh's wall grotesque, as it heavily references this Roman past and its many conquests: not only do fragments of architecture, human bodies, animals and floral motifs conjoin awkwardly, but distinct historical styles from distant civilizations – European, Islamic, Middle Eastern, Asian, and African—also come together to form new hybrid creatures. Objects become empty vessels of meaning, much in the same way that our obsessive sifting through information on the worldwide web loses much of its depth due to distracted consumption. Our globalized culture serves increasingly as a barricade, a defense against deep thinking or political action. One is unsure whether *Trophy's* procession of objects is on its way to becoming a permanent wall, or on its way to the trash heap (the fate of all cheap trinkets). Lam's drawings of Kaiping Diaolou are grotesque in a different way. During the 20th century, these awkward hybrid structures risked falling into ruin, as they were seen as an historically inauthentic architecture within the Chinese landscape. The morphing of eastern and western styles, the superfluity of architectural ornament, and the height achieved through use of imported, affordable new architectural techniques, made these towers stick out like monstrous stalwart creatures in a landscape otherwise dominated by low buildings. Often one of the towers could be seen poking its head up out of a patch of forest, enchanting in its strangeness.

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While Aslizadeh's video installation *Trophy* speaks to the formation of museums out of war, the descent of cult value into exhibition value, an allegorical twist occurs in the kitschification of these treasures in an age of information bytes and special-effects dominated entertainment. In contrast, Lam's drawings are mournful of a time never directly lived, only now experienced through tourism. *Shilu Tower* is imbued with a quasi-nostalgia, conveying the realities of a Chinese identity that has been hybridizing at least since the construction of these Diaolou towers in the late 19th century. In casting a light on tourism, museums and world heritage sites, lived culture is shown to cede increasingly to an appropriated culture, accessed through a distanced browsing. The works in the exhibition do not reflect all doom and gloom however. *Edge State* demands a greater historical consciousness of its viewers, and it does so

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by offering up images of so many hybrid identities formed from territorial struggles of the past. These in turn point to the many possibilities for resistant subjectivities in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> As many as 3000 were constructed.

<sup>2</sup> <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/1033>

<sup>3</sup> Nostalgia...is essentially history without guilt." Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 688.

<sup>4</sup> <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/1033>

<sup>5</sup> H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus: an Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970, p. 95



*When a line becomes a wall and a circle becomes a fortress  
What is the shape of an edge?*

In architectural drawing, a line demarcates a space that can separate or enclose a body. A simple boundary line can guide or constrict the movement of entire communities. However, within every wall there are cracks, fissures, and trespasses. The works of Matilda Aslizadeh and Gwenessa Lam inhabit such boundary spaces as “edge states.” Their images question the resiliency of defensive structures, as they exist between the spectrum of triumph and ruin, deterioration and transformation. Walls and towers have historically marked the borders of a nation’s territory and sovereignty. Aslizadeh and Lam revisit such barriers as mutable spaces.

**The exhibition is composed of a video installation by Matilda Aslizadeh, and paintings and drawings by Gwenessa Lam.**

#### **Matilda Aslizadeh**

Aslizadeh’s video installation features a circular screen that depicts a slowly moving wall constituted by fragments of material culture. Drawing from the totality of human history, the spoils of a sacked museum are repurposed to construct a threshold between inclusion and exclusion. Equal parts national border, barricade, ruin, and spectacle, the piece asserts a relationship between defense, historical culture and entertainment. Its slow rotation invites viewers to contemplate the space, time, and function of this imagined demarcation.

#### **Gwenessa Lam**

Lam’s large-scale drawings and paintings depict free-floating towers, based on the architecture of the Kaiping Diaolou. The diaolou are late 19th century multi-storey homes located in Kaiping county, Guangdong, China. Constructed like a fortress or watchtower, these defensive buildings were designed to protect against theft and banditry. Listed on the UNESCO’s World Heritage List, the diaolou are significant for their distinct fusion of architectural styles, exemplifying the impact of emigration in regions such as South Asia, Australasia, and North America. Inspired by the architecture of the diaolou, the drawings depict silhouettes or faded renderings of the buildings. Their hybridized forms attempt to ‘decapitate’ the model of these towers, to reconfigure their efficacy as vessels of power or escape.

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