Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru
Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, BC, Canada, 12 April–15 June 2014.

Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru is the largest art exhibition to focus on the Komagata Maru incident of 1914. Conceived and presented by the Surrey Art Gallery and curated by Jordan Strom, plans for the exhibition were initiated three years ago in response to literary discussions, symposia, film, and written works in Vancouver that examined the impact and legacies of the Komagata Maru incident not only for South Asians but for all Canadians. Missing from those conversations were the voices of artists and their practices that also addressed this history. The exhibition was initiated to fill for the first time that artistic gap in these important discussions. In the past two years the gallery has partnered with eight other institutions and organizations; Ruptures in Arrival was one in a regional series of events, programmes, and exhibitions across the Metro Vancouver area that explored the journey and living legacies of the Komagata Maru, marking the 100th anniversary of the ship’s arrival on 23 May 1914. While federal, Canadian Heritage, and municipal funding contributed to the promotion and symposium of the Komagata Maru centennial series, funding for this exhibition came from the Surrey Art Gallery.

The exhibition featured artists Roy Arden, Avantika Bawa, Ali Kazimi, Evan Lee, Ken Lum, the Mass Arrival collective (Farrah Miranda, Graciela Flores, Tings Chak, Vino Shanmuganathan, Nadia Saad), Raghavendra Rao, Haris Sheikh, Jarnail Singh, and Paul Wong. Together the works expanded on gaps and ruptures in this history and in the social fabric of Canada as well as the archive of images surrounding the event, and drew important connections with more recent incidents of transoceanic migration to Canada by ship. This exhibition is a valuable visual contribution to the creative and critical work already done by novelists, filmmakers, poets and playwrights who have been addressing the complex history of this event in recent years, leading up to—and since—the federal apology for the incident in 2008.

The 376 passengers of the Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver during a period of racial tension in Canadian history which was especially pronounced in British Columbia—race riots in 1907, limiting of civil rights for Asian and South Asian communities, and popular songs calling for a “White Canada Forever,” exemplifying the racialized oppression of the period. Forbidden to dock, the ship remained anchored in the harbour for two months, a floating prison without adequate water, food, or medical services. Despite legal appeals in court, Canadian federal laws designed to prevent South Asian immigrants from entering Canada—despite the fact they, like Canadians, were British
subjects—were enforced. A few passengers were deemed to return to Canada, but all other passengers were to be deported and on July 23 the ship departed under threat of the warship HMCS Rainbow. Nineteen passengers died in a riot with police upon its return to India. Asian and South Asian immigration to Canada would remain nearly impossible until after the Second World War.

The questioning and reimagining of archival documentation of the incident was a theme throughout much of the exhibition. Ali Kazimi, in his immersive Fair Play installation, questioned the gaps in these records and proposed a way into those irretrievable histories. The recorded cry of seagulls echoed through the installation, inviting viewers into a darkened room to encounter a stereoscopic three-dimensional film (fig. 1). This evocative work offered glimpses into ten enigmatic vignettes of everyday moments for South Asian immigrants, white officers, and others impacted by the ship’s arrival, each character lost in quiet moments and anxieties. In the same room an antique stereoscope drew viewers in with digitized stereoscopic images from colonial India. In order to experience the film or the stereoscopes, viewers must invest time and actively engage with the technology in order to see and feel the intimate moments and faces of each story represented. Without this active engagement, the work is blurred or inaccessible, much like the history of the Komagata Maru. Kazimi’s