



This family photo, taken at Lake Louise, Alta., forms the centrepiece of Mona Kamal's installation. People think it was taken in the Himalayas.

An image of home

Artist Mona Kamal's installation at Harbourfront Centre uses a family memento to explore the experience of migration. **By Paola Loriggio**

An old snapshot, circa 1980. A family clustered by a shimmering lake, smiling and waving at the photographer, a pair of canoes floating peacefully in the background. In the foreground, a grave-looking matriarch stands wrapped in a sari, the draped cloth in sharp contrast to the others' puffy jackets and aviator sunglasses.

"People think the photo was taken in the Himalayas, only because there's someone wearing a sari," says artist Mona Kamal, who used the photo, a memento of her aunt's first visit to Canada, taken at Lake Louise, Alta., in her latest piece. Titled *I Stand on Guard*, the installation explores assumptions about culture and identity, and how these shift and evolve after immigration — a recurring theme in Kamal's work.

The piece is part of the Harbourfront Centre's fall exhibit. Patrick Macaulay, head of visual arts for the centre, says Kamal's work forces viewers to stop and reflect by questioning their cultural interpretations. The piece fits in perfectly with the centre's current artistic theme, "Pause," because it encourages contemplation, he says.

"People walk away with a question, not expecting to be left with a question on identity," Macaulay says, noting that the piece's location outside the main gallery adds to the surprise.

"I'm not sure I'm looking for answers," Kamal admits with a laugh.

The installation blends photography with architectural details: shards of terracotta shingles and a yellow and maroon print that brings to mind decorative tiles, all displayed in a space like a storefront window. Those elements symbolize the home, itself a symbol of how we protect our identities and our culture, says Kamal.

"My work deals with the notion of home, whether home is an actual place or an idea we carry around in our heads."

Asked why she chose to make art out of a family keepsake, Kamal says, "It's very personal, but what I'm talking about are not personal issues. Every Canadian can relate to migration . . . We're all immigrants."

The artist herself remembers being among the only visible minorities in Calgary, where she moved with her family in 1979. Visitors would

complain that the house stank from her mother's curries. And though society has grown more tolerant since then, others still ask her where she's from, purely because of her ethnicity. "It's like you're never really Canadian," she says.

It comes as no surprise, then, that *I Stand on Guard* seems tinged with disappointment and nostalgia. The muted colours and faded photograph both evoke quiet longing and confusion. "I definitely want that notion of nostalgia," Kamal says. "I want to create dialogue on multicultural society."

In her artist's statement for the exhibit, she questions whether Canadian multicultural policy educates us about other cultures or makes us more ignorant.

"I'm trying to get at what it all means — why do we migrate?" she says.

That question has inspired dozens of Kamal's pieces, from embellished saris to projections, in the past decade. It could fuel many more for the artist, now studying at Parsons, the New School for Design in New York City.

The exhibit runs until Nov. 9.

Paola Loriggio is a Toronto Star reporter. Email desilife@thestar.ca