

The risk of ostracism from one's family is something that many South Asian lesbians/gays/bis face; in a society that does not validate our culture, our families often become the only source of cultural asylum and resistance. The need for social mobility of "people of colour" emphasizes marriages; the importance of marriage in South Asian cultures creates a point of conflict for many lesbians, gays and bisexuals who fear "letting down" their families, as well as the rejection of a community that offers them a refuge from a racist society. This community can also be an economic cushion, as well as a source of political power for an individual otherwise marginalized. Urveshi Vaid, former head of the Gay and Lesbian Task force sends a message to South Asian lesbians and gays who fear family reaction:

One thing we have going for us Indians is that there is a very strong commitment to the family. I feel very committed to my parents and my sisters. It doesn't matter if I am gay, I know I am going to be part of their lives. Of course there are moments of awkwardness and pain, but you have to go through that. (Urveshi Vaid, *Trikone*, 1989)

While Urveshi Vaid's experience with family may speak to some of us, for many South Asian queers, lesbians in particular, arranged marriages pose a unique and volatile problem. As an unnamed contributor to *Shakti Report* states: "Great suspicions are aroused when a family member does not get married, or refuses to get married. Such an act is seen as wilful disobedience, an adoption of western values, a rejection of Asian customs." For many South Asians, maintaining their sexuality means losing connections to their family, and risking future prospects for younger siblings: one marries the family and the family's reputation. Asian lesbians often face very tough choices.

I ran away from home on the night before my wedding. I was nineteen. My parents had chosen this man from India, who I hardly knew at all. I just couldn't go through with it. I knew I was a lesbian. I ran off to live with my girlfriend. She was Asian and had also separated from her family. It was good to be with her, sharing the same background so to speak.

My family found out where I was staying a couple of months later. I don't know how. Somebody must have told them they saw me and then they must have watched me and followed me around. Anyway, they turn up to where we were staying at 1:00am. Four car loads of them. Smashed the door down, screaming and yelling at me, slapping me around and my girlfriend, shouting all sorts of bad names at us. They began dragging me out of the flat towards the car. Luckily a neighbour had called the police when she heard the noise. They were around there pretty quickly. They were really good.

Anyway in the end I had to get an injunction on them to stay away from me. My girlfriend and I had

to move away, get another job. I just kept my fingers crossed that they don't find me again.

(Anonymous, *Shakti Report*, 1992)

I think of corny love songs and the words and messages they send us. heart love deep believe never one day one day ya dream get you woman baby hip hair hey but still those love songs sometimes make the middle of my palms burn and tingle. a beautiful tiny burning sensation that starts in the centre of my hand and endearingly and slowly stretches out to my finger tips. you make me high sometimes.

Our self-definition as "settlers" must not be exoticized. We must not simply explain our differences to each other; we need to work with them. There is an overwhelming movement to reclaim history, create language, and put forth positive images that will allow us to discuss, politically and theoretically, issues with us defining the agenda. In all my debates surrounding the politics of identity, I have never been able to throw out a concept of identity that borders on essentialism. But we must be clear that there is no one South Asian "queer" identity; we must be clear as to why we are organizing together. And then we must go out and do it.

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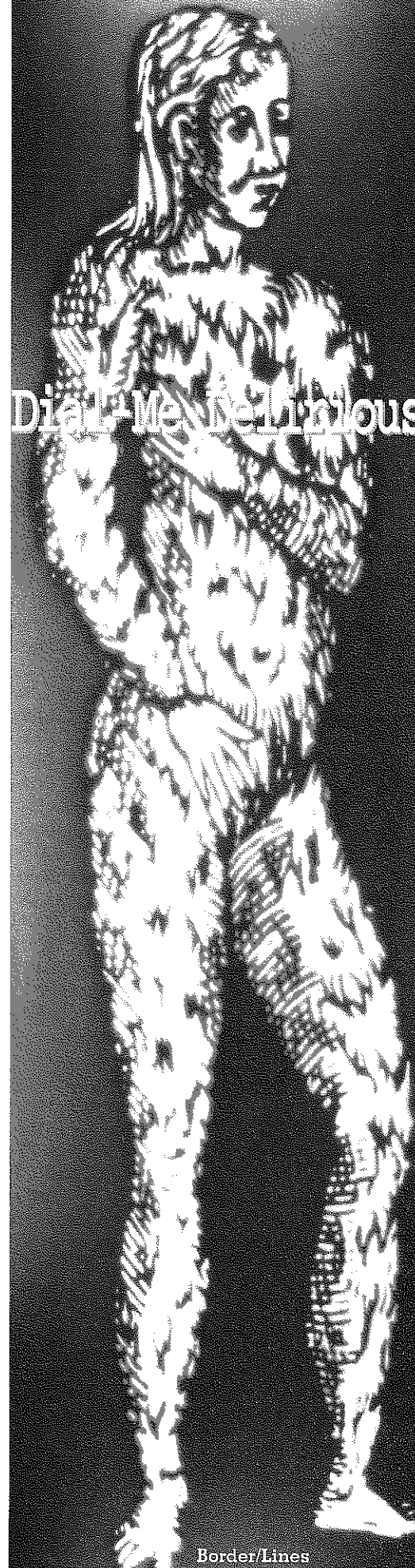
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Shonagh Adelman is a Toronto-based visual artist who has exhibited in galleries across Canada for over ten years. In other work, "Larger Than Life" and "Skin Deep," Adelman explores themes of the body, femininity, lesbian sexuality and fantasy. Her most recent project, "Tele Donna," was on view at A Space Gallery in Toronto, January 8 - February 19.

## "Tele Donna: Dial-Me-Intimous Doll-Face"

An installation of eleven enormous black light boxes (8' high) arranged in the V formation of a family portrait, *Tele Donna* features bold line drawings of female figures from diverse historical periods. Among them are a nineteenth century Italian prostitute, a Doris Day-styled woman in a 1950s bird-cage bathing suit who sports boxing gloves, and a (thickly-matted) "hairy woman" from Medieval mythology.

The darkened gallery space and the eery purple hue emanating from each box suggest secrecy and erotic intrigue more commonly associated with scenes from a house of horrors or commercial peep shows along Yonge St. ("the sin strip") in the 1970s. Mounted on the side of every phonebooth-like box is a telephone receiver. Picking it up in public, in the company of other gallery-goers, one is startled to hear a very private and very explicit, three-minute phone sex message. Quite unexpectedly, I found myself slinking surreptitiously behind the box, receiver in hand, safely out of view: I was acutely discomfitted by Adelman's crafty deconstruction of "appropriate" public and private activity. At the same time, I experienced the thrill of being both a voyeur and a (turned on) participant in a compelling range of female-centred fantasy scenarios. I wasn't alone. Viewer responses recorded in the comments book included: "Great, now we have to cancel grocery shopping and go home and fuck," "Made me hot," "I'm tingling,"



and "This show's the next best thing to being there."

At the vertex of the angled arrangement, stands an image of two women performing a ballroom waltz in 1950s garb of wide, knee-length skirts and stiffly starched blouses. They trigger my sweet memory of Miou Miou and Isabelle Hupert in Diane Kurys' homoerotic classic, "Entre Nous" (1985). The

accompanying phone sex monologue plays with the butch/femme orchestration of dominance and surrender. The unsettling image of a turn-of-the-century murderess brandishing a knife suggests a portrait of Angelina Napolitano, a 28 year old Italian Canadian mother of four who sliced up her husband in their rented quarters in Sault St. Marie, Ont., in 1911. "Angelina's" violent yet liberatory act is matched by the breathless, taped description of one woman greedily fist fucking another to loud groans, the burbling of lube, and the snapping of latex. Another box features a stocky German girl, a Gretel from the Grimms' fairy tale, in leather harness and lederhosen. On the taped phone message, a 30-something sexterp arouses her caller by pretending she's an eleven year old who likes "girl chicken," pierced pussy, getting spanked and dressing up her playmate in "little girl clothes." This show is not for the sex pessimists at large. The bold, arresting juxtapositions of visual and aural stimuli explode age-old notions of feminine passivity and propriety. In the midst of a full-blown, reactionary moral panic about gender and sexuality, Adelman's "Tele Donna" re-centres the lusty and inextinguishable female spirit. I'd love to claim each and every one of the eleven "Donnas" as coveted members of my family tree.

Becki Ross