

Variations in Black,
Queer, and Otherwise:
Works by Abdi Osman
June 5 – July 27, 2019

Art
Museum

Curated by

Dina Georgis and Sara Matthews

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Cover: Abdi Osman,
Discover Us Series...3
(detail), 2008, photograph.
Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Abdi Osman, *Labeeb*,
2012, photograph. Courtesy
of a private collection.

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Abdi Osman is a Somali-Canadian multidisciplinary artist whose work focuses on questions of African-ness and Black-ness in the diaspora. In this multi-part exhibition *Variations in Black, Queer, and Otherwise* the artist incorporates sound, narrative, still and moving image, and fabric into his works, which offer complex iterations of subjectivity.

“To begin with otherwise,” writes Ashon Crawley, “is to presume that whatever we have is not all that is possible.”¹ The otherwise provocation opens the possibility

of what can be represented, seen and thought about African-ness and Black-ness as it intersects with Muslim, queer, and trans identities as they travel through and dwell in the diasporic location of the city we now know as Toronto. Crossing hard borders and elusive waters, landings are soft, tactile, even sensual. Beautiful fabrics gesture variations conjured in dreams, draped on bodies, and negotiated as we move through space. Always becoming, the process of discovery is an otherwise encounter—by way of the senses—and against colonial logics of looking, knowing, and controlling.

1. Ashon Crawley, “Otherwise, Ferguson,” *Interfictions Online: A Journal of Interstitial Arts* 4 (November 2014), <http://interfictions.com/otherwise-fergusonashon-crawley/>.



Abdi Osman, *Discover Us Series...2*, 2009, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Abdi Osman, *Discover Me Series...2*, 2007, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Abdi Osman, *Discover Me Series...1*, 2007, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Abdi Osman, *Gardens of the Mediterranean*, 2018, film. Courtesy of the artist.

Variations in Black, Queer, and Otherwise: Works by Abdi Osman

As a Somali-Canadian artist based primarily in Toronto, Abdi Osman's work offers visual engagements with diasporic movement, settlement, and emplacement through a nuanced documentary portraiture practice. Using the photographic, and at times, filmic, image to speak back to colonial histories of cultural mis-representation, Osman simultaneously employs and beckons a Black feminist, trans, and queer gaze in his multi-disciplinary works.

In the *Discover Me* (2007) series, where we see images of the artist as subject—posed as himself in casual contemporary clothing, in drag as a veiled Muslim woman, and in traditional Somali male attire—Osman strategically uses the triptych form to convey complex queer visualities that refute constructions of Muslim-ness with solely Brown and heterosexual bodies. Osman's work consistently complicates singular representations and readings of cultural identities such as Black, queer, trans, and Muslim subjectivities, challenging viewers to imagine other ways of seeing and relating to the world. This is especially important given photography's close relationship to racist state, criminal, and anthropological identification practices used throughout history, wherein Osman's contemporary reclamation of the photographic gaze unsettles how we approach reading photographs, as we do bodies,

as static objects with singular narratives. Osman expands on this unsettling in his related *Discover Us* (2008) series, in which he documents Black, queer, and trans individuals in similar triptych form, offering multivalent portraits that importantly belie traditional understandings of gender, queerness, and faith.

The Passport (2017) series also features portraits of the artist, alongside his passport, printed on large-scale scores of linen one must move through sequentially. Their fragmented spatiality evokes memories of checkpoints and border crossing, similar to what Osman might endure crossing a border as someone who is a Canadian citizen and who immigrated here as a Somali refugee many years ago. The immersive installation underscores the performativity of the passport to both engender as well as inhibit one's transnational movement and sense of national belonging.

Supposedly representing his citizenship and thus "belonging" to Canada, Osman's passport is notably a ten-year visa that is "affixed to a Canadian passport that enables but does not guarantee entry into the USA,"¹ explains scholar-critic Rinaldo Walcott. This is especially heightened by the States' recent implementation of the xenophobic Executive Order that targets and spectacularizes Muslims (particularly from Somalia) as "dangerous" in

spite of the fact that it is Muslim, Brown, and Black people who face real danger—that of increasingly organized white supremacy.

Surveillance technologies such as the passport or the photographic portrait have long been deployed against Black people. In fact, "surveillance is nothing new to Black folks, it is the fact of antiblackness,"² explains scholar Simone Browne. It is also, then, Islamophobic, as the recent "Muslim ban" in addition to accumulative rhetoric since 9/11 makes undeniably clear. Yet, Osman's photographs tell a different story of close human observation, revealing intimate scenes of friendship, family, community, and belonging that resist cultural and racist assumptions about Black and Muslim identities. They also complicate notions of queerness in the context of "multi-cultural" Canada, Islam, and the African diaspora, wherein works like *Labeeb* (2012) and *Plantation Futures* (2015) portray multi-faceted individuals such as the late Sumaya Dalmar as well as offer intimate glimpses into encounters of queer and trans friendship and family. These images portray "everyday love scenes," as I like to think of them, that reflect ways in which individuals partake in loving relations that importantly counteract some of the harsh realities with which they continue to be unjustly faced.

Rather than focusing on common photographic narratives of historical or contemporary oppression that fetishize trauma and pain—and that have particular relevance to representation(s) of Black life—Osman's work portrays seemingly simple yet incredibly nuanced scenes of joy, belonging, and re-discovery. His images demonstrate writer-organizer adrienne maree browne's belief that "we must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as murderers," nor as victims, "or Brown people as terrorists,"³ and so on. Instead, Osman depicts Black, Brown, queer, and trans individuals as his friends, family, colleagues, and community; and ultimately, as the co-creators of his work and of more caring worlds.

- Ellyn Walker



Abdi Osman, *Discover Us Series...3* (detail), 2008, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

1. Rinaldo Walcott, "The Works of Contemporary Art (In Black)," in *Archi-feministes: Art contemporain, théories féministes/Contemporary Art, Feminist Theories*, eds. Marie-Eve Charron, Marie-Josée Lafortune, Thérèse St-Gelais (Montreal: OPTICA, centre d'art contemporain, 2019), 90.
2. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.
3. adrienne maree browne, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 19.

Opening Event

Reception

Wednesday, June 5, 2019, 6–8pm
University of Toronto Art Centre

Public Programs

Artist Talk

Christina Sharpe in conversation
with Abdi Osman
Wednesday, July 17, 6:30–8pm

Weekly Drop-In Tours

Exhibition Tours
Tuesdays, 2pm
Meet at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Malcove Collection Tour
Last Wednesday of each month, 12 noon
University of Toronto Art Centre

Hart House Collection Tour
Last Wednesday of each month, 2pm
Meet at the Hart House information desk

For program details visit
artmuseum.utoronto.ca

Staff

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Sarah Robayo Sheridan, Curator
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Esther Simmonds-MacAdam, Exhibition
Coordinator
Chiara Cavaliere, Gallery Attendant
Sam Mogelonsky, Communications Assistant
Theresa Wang, Curatorial Assistant
Dax Morrison, Exhibition Technician

Underline Studio, Brand Design
Flash Reproductions, Printing
Ruth Jones, Copy Editor

About the Curators


Sara Matthews is writer, researcher, and educator based in southern Ontario. Working primarily in the field of research-creation, her projects explore the relations between visual culture, nation-building, colonialism, and martial politics. Her critical art writing has appeared in *PUBLIC*, *FUSE Magazine*, and in exhibition essays for the Robert Langen Gallery, Circuit Gallery, the Ottawa Art Gallery, the Doris McCarthy Gallery, and as a blog for Gallery TPW.

Dina Georgis is an Associate Professor at the Women & Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. Her work, which is situated in the fields of postcolonial studies and queer theory, explores how aesthetic and cultural expressions are affective responses to political and social urgencies. Her writing appears in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, and *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*.

About the Writer

Ellyn Walker is a writer-curator based in the place currently known as Toronto. Her writing has been widely published and can be found in *The Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *PUBLIC*, *Fuse*, *C Magazine*, *Inuit Art Quarterly*, among others; and in such anthologies as *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), *Sonny Assu: A Selective History* (Heritage House, 2018), and forthcoming in *Craft On Demand: The New Politics of the Handmade* (Bloomberg 2020). In 2016, Ellyn's curatorial work was recognized by the Ontario Association of Art Galleries with the Thematic Exhibition of the Year Award for the project *CANADIAN BELONGING(s)* presented by the Art Gallery of Mississauga in 2015. Ellyn is currently a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University where her research explores the shifting politics of curatorial practice and museological inclusion in the arts in Canada.

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery 
7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416.978.8398

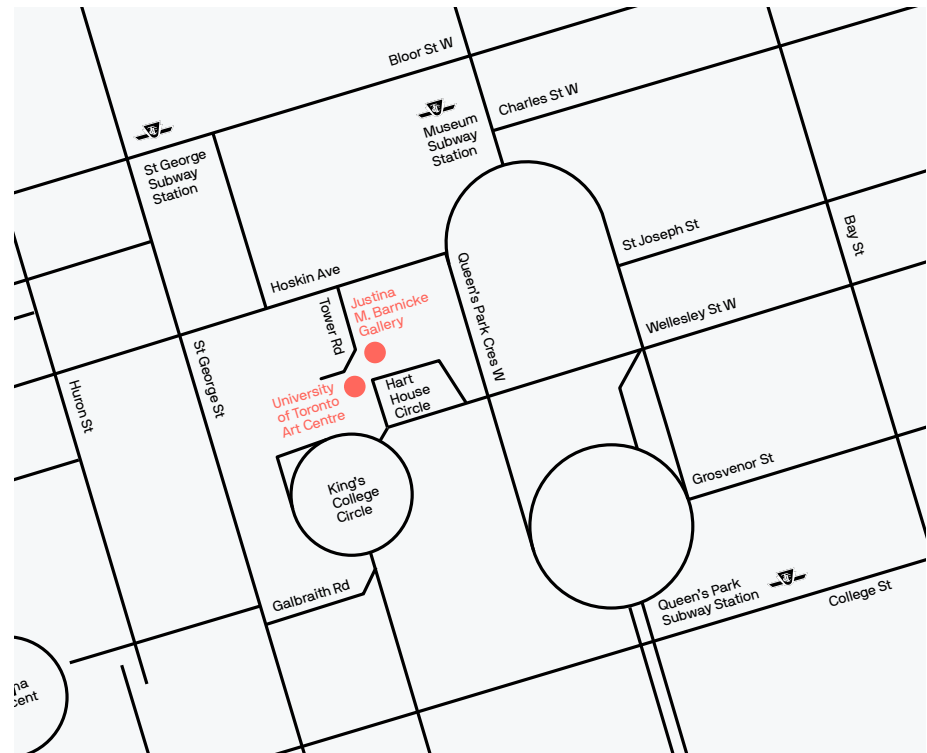
University of Toronto Art Centre
15 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
416.978.1838

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. Class tours
and group bookings by appointment.
Admission is FREE.

artmuseum@utoronto.ca
artmuseum.utoronto.ca
[@artmuseumuoft](https://www.instagram.com/artmuseumuoft)

Wheelchair access to University College, and therefore the Art Museum's University of Toronto Art Centre location, will be closed due to University College building revitalization. Accommodations for accessibility are available upon request.



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