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Andil Gosine: Coolie, Coolie, Viens

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

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Andil Gosine's practice explores the imbrications of migration, ecology and desire. *Coolie Coolie Viens* speaks in particular to his ancestors' crossing from India to the Caribbean, where they laboured under the system of indentureship; to Gosine's own movement from rural Trinidad to suburban Canada; and to the subsequent cities around the world in which he has lived and, as he often declares in this work, loved. Throughout, Gosine insists that personal experience is neither apart from nor derivative of social history. His practice is led, he says, by a search for truths about the human condition. "I am telling and interrogating the particularities of my own story, but the subjects I investigate through them—pleasure, violence, isolation, nationalism, consumption—are universal human matters."¹

This exhibition's title references a derogatory expression eliciting hurt; however, through Gosine's work it has become a stimulus for linking intimate and public space, and investigating history. Through media such as photography, sculpture, and illustration, Gosine explores the indentured labour experience; efforts to make "home"; the experience of cultural displacement; and a resulting sense of loss. Still, in this pointed and often tender examination of difficult subject matter, viewers can discover narratives of hope and renewal. Gosine's recent body of work appears to be caught in a liminal state somewhere between India, Trinidad, and Canada, yet it's always already unsettled by the ghosts of Europe. The continent's hegemonic influence over visual representation in settled lands—what Stuart Hall calls "*Présence Européenne*"²—demonstrates the ways that colonialism impresses itself upon the ideology and socio-cultural identity of subjugated peoples.

The constants of movement and desire are central facets of Gosine's autobiography and, because he is deeply invested in conjuring gentle, even whimsical, points of entry for audiences, to know Gosine's work is to know Gosine himself. This intimacy is evidenced by the contributors' responses included in this collection. Writing from a variety of perspectives—fellow artist, cultural critic, scholar—they offer poignant meditations about Gosine's work and provide both historical and contemporary

theorization of the legacy of indentureship. Many of them are descendants of indentured workers and make sense of their own stories through his work. Led by art critic Marsha Pearce's remarkable essay "Chanting Down Indenture," each of the sixteen essays functions as a brief but meditative response rather than an exhaustive academic rumination. With this aim in mind, the writers often employ personal anecdotes and moments from their personal histories, which in turn provide source material and context to their observations and analysis. The result is a series of penetrating, close readings that fits comfortably within concepts of sharing, exchange, and reciprocity present in the work itself.

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NOTES

1. Interview with the artist, 2017.
2. See Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Cultural Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 230.