

MULTI-MEDIA / This exhibit of works by 25 artists — virtually all of whom are descended from Asians and most now living in Canada — aims to contribute 'in a concrete way to the discussion around the issue of race and representation'

Tales from hidden places within a shared culture

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PUSHING all the videotapes and films on view in the travelling group show *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* is a single urgency: to tell never-told tales from the border-country where Oriental cultures and Western civilization abut and mingle. "As Asians, it is always a constant struggle to try to tell our stories," writes television producer Anthony Chan in the show's catalogue. "Telling our stories means we're alive, that we are here and that we are staying."

For us who are not Asians but who share this country with those who are, listening carefully to such stories can be a way to know we're still alive, morally and intellectually. Hence, the peculiar importance of this uneven, ramshackle exhibition to non-Asian Canadians, to whom it opens secrets and announces tales from hidden places within the culture we share. Organized by Vancouver independent curator Paul Wong, this exhibit is intended to contribute "in a concrete way to the ongoing discussion around the issue of race and representation." To that end, Wong has marshalled recent photographs, video works and films by 25 artists, virtually all descended from Asians — Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean — and most now living and working in Canada. The videotapes can be seen on request at V/Tape (183 Bathurst St., Toronto), and the photos are on view at Gallery 44 (also at 183 Bathurst St.). All films and videotapes will be shown on Nov. 29 and 30 at The Euclid (394 Euclid Ave.).

After closing in Toronto, the exhibition will travel to artist-run centres in Winnipeg, Halifax, Vancouver and Ottawa.

As set out in the catalogue, the mission of the show sounds dusty, didactic, polemical. The contents, generally speaking, are not. Television journalist Anthony Chan's *Chinese Cafés in Rural Saskatchewan*



Midi Onodera's film *The Displaced View*: a story of discovery.

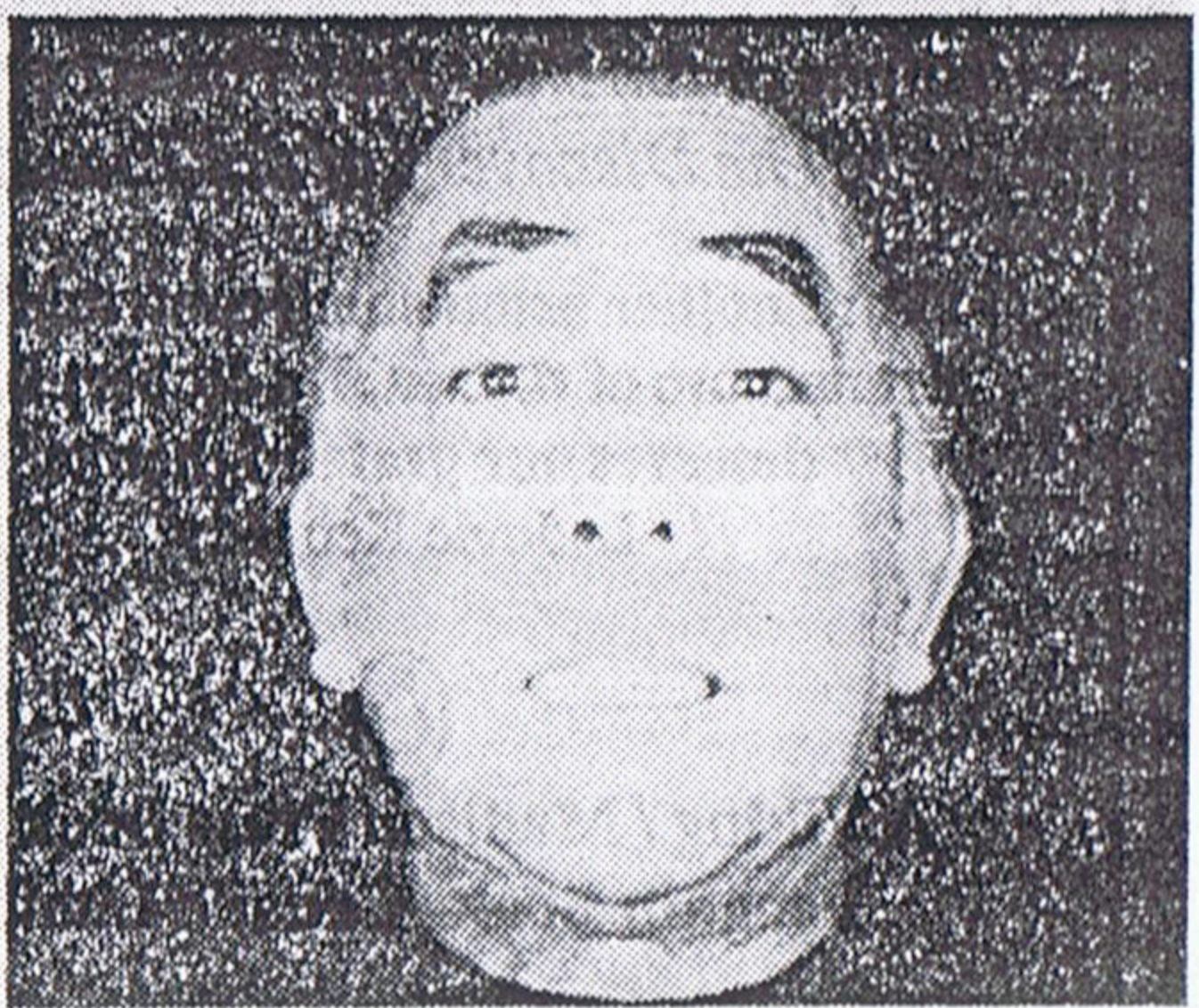
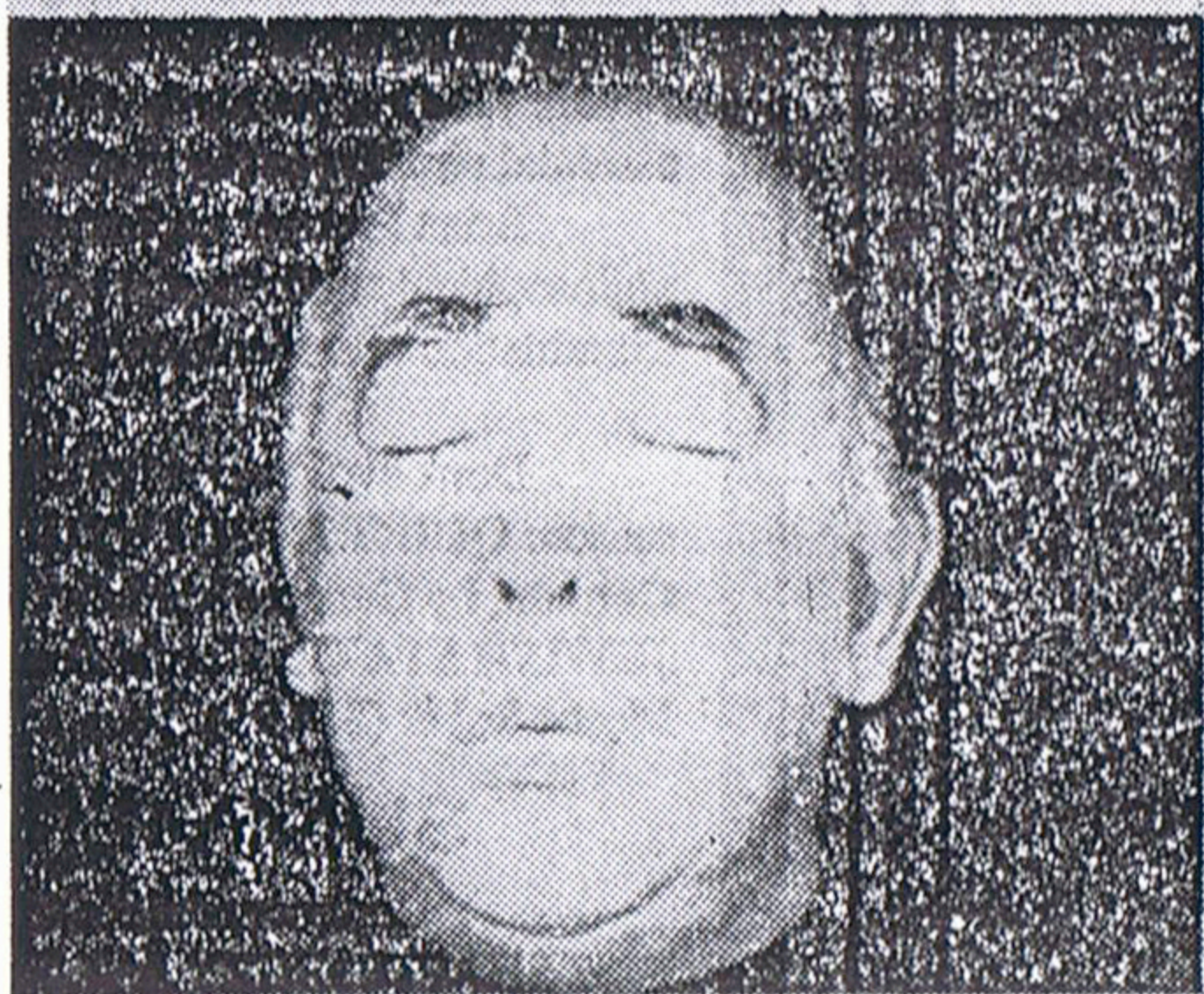
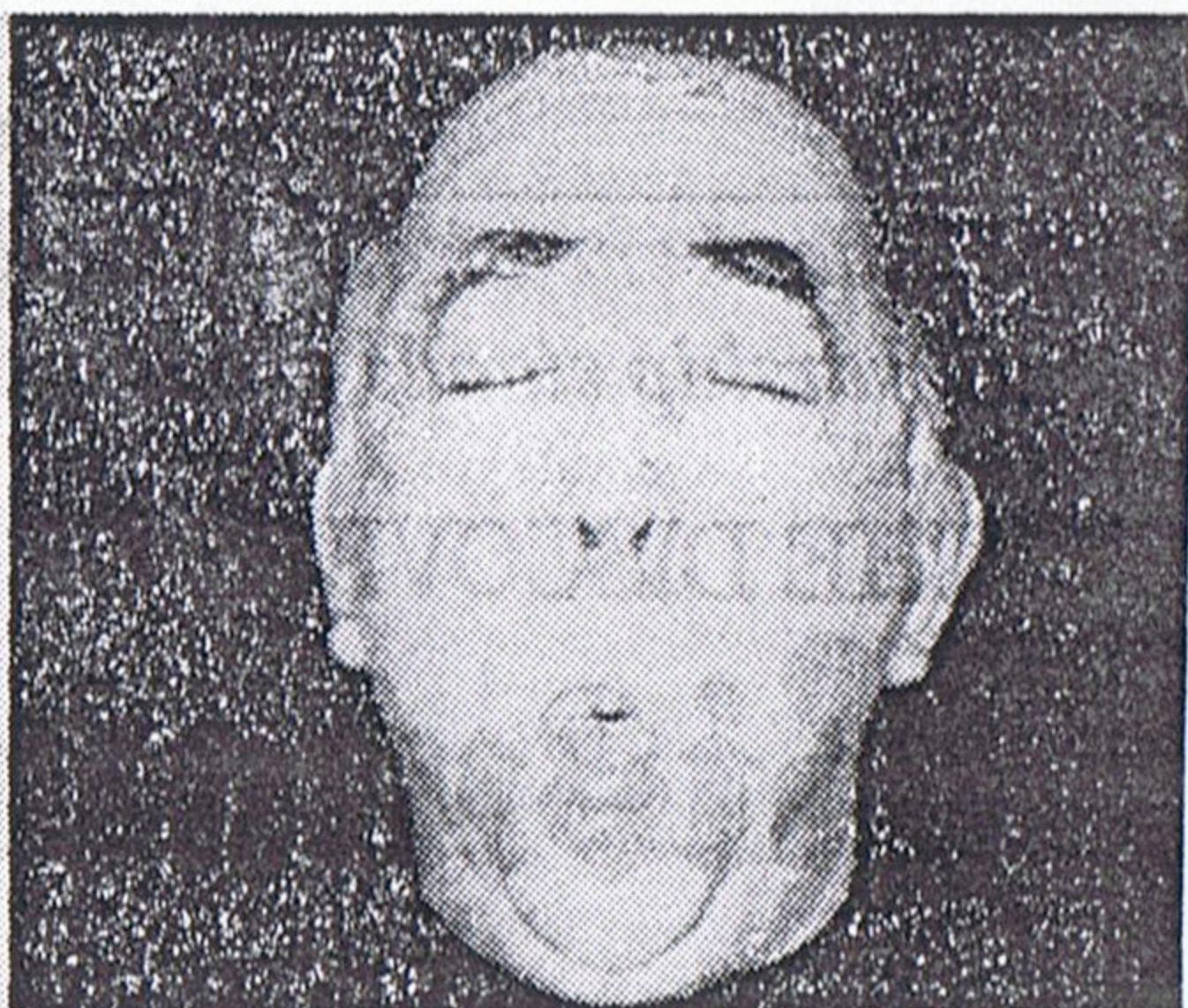
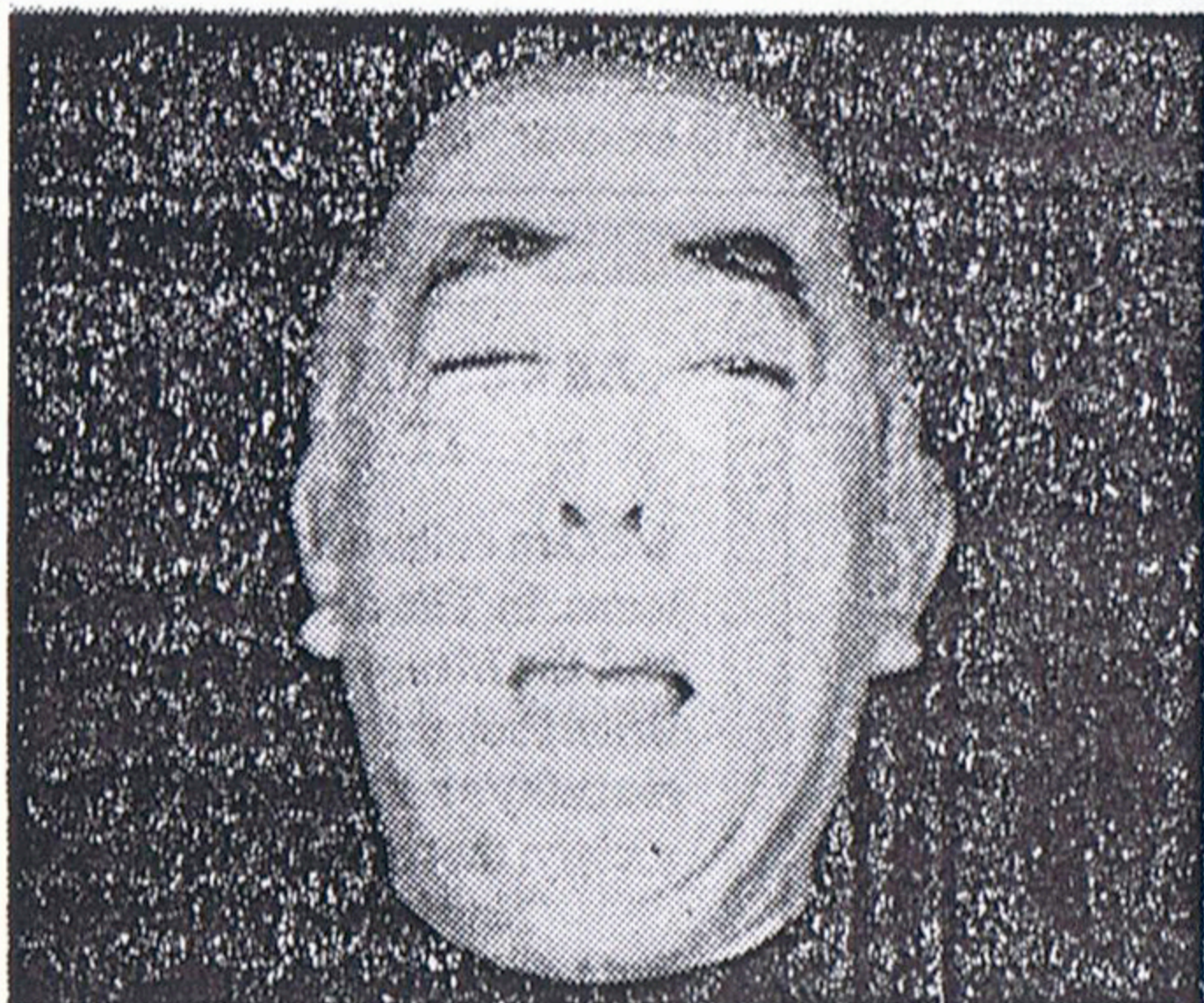
(1985), for example, is a gentle, made-for-TV look at a famous prairie phenomenon and the interesting people who have produced it, and a picture-postcard from a place Chan presents (unconvincingly) as an Arcadia of racial harmony. In a sharper, brighter key, Toronto artist Richard Fung's trenchant little videotape *Chinese Characters* (1986) is a freeform, adults-only and occasionally funny meditation on the problematic place of gay white pornography in the erotic life of homosexual Asian men.

While the tapes and films tend to embody one or the other of these artistic strategies — Chan's straightforward documentary or Fung's kind of sophisticated play of images and verbal codes — a number of the artists presented here prefer fiction to both fact and fantasy. Brenda Joy Lem's *The Compact* (1990) is a well-wrought scrapbook of episodes from the culturally star-crossed love affair of a Chinese-Canadian woman and her white boy friend, while *Silence into Silence* (1989), the handiwork of the Montreal collective L'Amité Chinoise, is a brief kitchen-sink drama about a girl who decides to stay behind in Quebec when her close-

knit Chinese family moves to Edmonton.

At 52 minutes the longest work here, Toronto filmmaker Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View* (1988) blends documentary and personal reverie into a sensitive recounting of the discovery by an assimilated Japanese-Canadian — Onodera herself — of her Japanese grandmother, and the old lady's tales of the great internment and other ordeals in days not so very long past. But not everything here tells stories. The most brilliant tape in the show, Nobuo Kubota's 14-minute opera for one face and one voice (the artist's own), is a highly abstract play of gestures clipped from traditions as diverse as Chinese opera and scat singing; and Daisy Lee's *The Morning Zoo* (1989) is nothing other than a delightful visit to the tumultuously multicultural Ontario Food Terminal in west-end Toronto.

Now if you're wondering what scat singing has to do with being Oriental in Canada — the flip answer surely is: not much. Yet virtually everything else in this show has arisen from an experience common enough among Asians in Canada



Nobuo Kubota at the Western Front: in this scintillating video opera, the artist's face becomes a wonderfully active site animated less by a single inner soul (Japanese, for instance) than by many spirits from diverse quarters.

(and not just Asians): the ambiguous experience of being relieved of the burdens of the past, as traditional groundings and verities are dissolved by the radiant acid of mass culture.

In the face of Nobuo Kubota, as we see it in his scintillating video opera, this event of dissolving has run its course. Kubota's face is no longer simply Japanese. As he contorts it and sings his perfectly stylized speech, this mature face becomes a wonderfully active site animated less by a single inner soul (Japanese, for instance) than by many spirits from diverse quarters — European avant-garde, ancient Oriental, jazz and the noh drama.

For most of the filmmakers and video artists assembled here, however, this lightening of tradition's weight, the weakening of loyalties and identities, is still very much under way; and their art is largely a monitoring of this process, moment by moment. An elderly Chinese lady in Montreal trying to get her grandchildren to stop watching TV long enough to receive a traditional bles-

sing, a young Chinese-Canadian homosexual musing about his inability to make love in any language other than English, the obsession of a young woman with Hollywood images of "Oriental beauty" — in these and many similar passages, the sometimes-funny, sometimes-bitter ironies of being bright, young and Asian in Canada are made plain, held up for scrutiny, puzzled over.

Such experiences are part of the post-modern experience itself; and surely the resulting weightlessness is something that no one (Asian, white or otherwise) who lives in the culture of mass-mediated imagery and information can be insulated against. Indeed, these artists almost never frame their issues politically, and only rarely historically, preferring instead to seek the meanings of their dilemmas in language, imagery, the mechanisms of desire. Yet it would be false to the revelations in these tapes and films to reduce them to mere examples of the ungrounding under way everywhere in the advanced technological societies. To what extent are Asian Canadians actors in a unique historical drama?

To what extent, and in what ways, are they players in the larger pageant of the declining West?

The exhibition catalogue is the reasonable place to look for some fresh, critical thought on such questions — or it should be. Turning to this show's illustrated book, we are treated to a blast of anti-white windbagery from curator Paul Wong, and a predictable trotting-out of Canada's well-known and utterly lamentable record of official anti-Orientalism, this time by Monika Kin Gagnon.

But, to be fair, there are interesting notes on their works by Anthony Chan and Midi Onodera. And in his brief text, the Trinidad-born, Toronto-based artist Richard Fung (*Chinese Characters*) smartly tosses off several seedling-insights from which he could have grown a sizeable patch of rigorous prose — though seedlings they remain. It would have been interesting to know where this sophisticated artist and writer might have gone, for example, had he bothered to explain in detail his bright, withering dismissal of multiculturalism.