



**ESMOND LEE'S
GODS AMONG US:
HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT
SARAH RATZLAFF**



Esmond Lee, *Masjid Bilal*, 2019, from the series *Gods Among Us*.

Esmond Lee works in the in between. His photographs explore the liminal spaces in Scarborough, focusing on buildings and sites layered with different histories and functions. In his ongoing work *Gods Among Us*, Lee has undertaken the momentous task of identifying and photographing the disparate places of worship that populate Scarborough. In partnership with the Doris McCarthy Gallery and Contact Photography Festival, a select few of these images have been affixed to an emerald green arch located outside the Malvern Town Centre, a mall that acts as a gathering place for local residents. Lee's images span the width of the arch's beams, creating an enclosure that mimics the steeple of a church. With an opening on either side, passersby are invited to enter this makeshift temple and look upon the photographs that constitute their temporary shelter.

Many of Lee's images capture places of worship that occupy warehouses or squat, one-story commercial buildings. The unassuming, discreet nature of these sites allows them to meld into the Scarborough landscape; a mosque is situated between a pizza joint and a dry-cleaners; a Hindu temple occupies a former warehouse marked with white and red candy stripes, and a New Testament Church sports a single, thin white cross on a brown-brick exterior. For Lee, these places of worship are emblematic of the experience

undergone by newcomers to Canada. As has been well documented, a significant portion of Scarborough's population is constituted by immigrants, many of whom are people of colour.¹ Scarborough's churches, temples, and mosques demonstrate the creative and persistent work of immigrants to foster a sense of home and community in unfamiliar and at times unwelcoming settings. Indeed, the nature of this experience is evoked in the vinyl material used to display the photographs. "Vinyl mesh is seen as a very cheap, disposable material, yet very durable," says Lee. While this material is suggestive of the ways racialized immigrants are treated as inexpensive and expendable labour in the Canadian economy, it also signifies the resilience of this demographic in the face of tenuous and speedily shifting circumstances.

In his work, it is Lee's goal to magnify the beauty of these incongruous and yet often inconspicuous places of worship. "In my photography, I try to create beauty within what is typically seen as uninspiring and ugly. I want to capture the suburban spirit, which is this beautiful vastness." Lee achieves this effect through the delicate treatment of his subject matter and his close attention to detail. His background as a practicing architect, and his status as a long-term resident of Scarborough, enables Lee to identify the unimposing yet arresting quality



Esmond Lee, *Gods Among Us*, 2021, installation view at Malvern Town Centre.



Esmond Lee, *Thirupathi Venkatachalapathi Temple*, 2019, from the series *Gods Among Us*.

of these structures. This appeal can be found in the warm hue of Lee's photographs and the thin, subtle stretches of shadows that mark many of his images, the combination of which creates a sense of peaceful solitude. This quiet remoteness has the potential to create a haunting beauty. One photograph of a former church-turned-mosque, with its boarded-up, cross-shaped windows and surprisingly rural-looking backdrop, is reminiscent of the southern gothic imagery of the 20th century (perhaps 'suburban gothic' is a more apt designation).

The mystique surrounding these images is magnified by the fact that people are largely absent from Lee's photographs. For Lee, this aesthetic decision has a political and moral thrust. According to Lee (and others),² Scarborough is often erased from Toronto's imagining and representation of itself, treating this eastern area of the city as a separate enclave. "In Scarborough," says Lee, "we are already unseen and hidden, so I wanted to continue that idea of how we respect that spirit of anonymity." While this anonymity has largely been thrust upon the residents of Scarborough as a means of erasure, Lee has treated the resulting privacy as something positive and alluring. In Lee's images, the onlooker never gets too close to any of the photographed places of worship. We remain at a distance, forced to look from afar at

the beautifully expansive buildings and vistas. This dynamic takes the power that is usually wielded by the viewer and photographer and puts it into the hands of the unseen worshippers and residents of Scarborough. We cannot look in, but can merely look upon these places of worship, forced to wonder at the events and happenings that transpire within them.

As one steps closer to the photographs mounted in front of the Malvern Town Centre, it becomes apparent that the vinyl mesh has rendered these images slightly transparent, allowing viewers to see through the photographs and out into the scenes unfolding around the populated shopping mall. The events at the town centre and the settings captured in Lee's photographs are remarkably similar. As is the case in Lee's images, one is confronted by stretches of parking lots and expansive, low-rise commercial buildings. By perfectly blending into the rest of the immediately surrounding area, the photographs seem to disappear into the ether. This effect is in keeping with the more general motif of seemingly out-of-place yet simultaneously out-of-sight places of worship. While these places of worship are noticeable through the strange juxtaposition that is generated by, for example, placing a mosque next to a fast-food chain, this setting also allows the mosque to disappear into the other commercial buildings it is surrounded by. Lee's



Esmond Lee, *Usman Gousi Mosque*, 2021, from the series *Gods Among Us*.

images, like their subject matter, move in and out of our conscious perception. Their quiet charm makes their presence all the more powerful and pronounced once noticed.

In *Gods Among Us*, Lee has sought to walk the fine line between spotlighting the beauty of Scarborough while preserving the privacy that he considers characteristic of its appeal. Such a feat has been delicately achieved in his intimate yet distanced portrait of these places of worship. *Gods Among Us* makes manifest that which is hidden in plain sight. While it may recede from view every now and again, its beauty will be that much more captivating when it comes back into focus.

ENDNOTES

1. In a 2016 census, it was reported that 57% of Scarborough's residents were immigrants, City of Toronto Community Council Area Profiles, https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/8f80-City_Planning_2016_Census_Profile_2014_Wards_CCA_Scarborough.pdf
2. See, for example, Shawn Micallef's article in the *Toronto Star* from 2012 entitled "Scarborough: Toronto's Forgotten Cultural Hub", https://www.thestar.com/life/2012/08/24/scarborough_torontos_forgotten_cultural_hub.html

This essay accompanies *Gods Among Us*, works by Esmond Lee, at Malvern Town Centre from June 1 - October 15, 2021. Presented by the Doris McCarthy Gallery in partnership with CONTACT Photography Festival.

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COVER IMAGE: Esmond Lee, *Gods Among Us*, 2021, installation view at Malvern Town Centre.

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