STAY THE NIGHT:  
MEERA MARGARET SINGH AT THE GLADSTONE HOTEL

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DEFINITION OF HOTEL WOMAN

A fugitive sensibility or character, often “feminine,” reprieved from the rigors of fixed address.
—Wayne Koestenbaum, *Hotel Theory*, 70

Walking to the Gladstone Hotel to see Toronto-based artist Meera Margaret Singh’s feature solo exhibition, *Nightingale*, I recall fragments from over a decade’s worth of Gladstone memories. I remember and mourn the Gladstone of old—the grittier, dirtier, less gentrified watering hole, the Gladstone that predates its 2005 renovation. Then, I had a vague sense that there were rooms above the bar, and I passingly wondered what they looked like and who stayed there, for how long and for how much. I remember almost renting a room there one night (or, more accurately, one morning) when the prospect of a hotel bill seemed preferable to the commute home after last call. The Gladstone was and is a favoured haunt for me and my west end friends; it has been home to, among other things, birthday bashes, going-away parties, first dates, wedding receptions, welcome-home parties, last dates, and Pride celebrations. I tend to be the friend with the camera at our gatherings, and the Gladstone provides the backdrop for sundry moments still(ed) in my own photographs.

I approach the Gladstone in its capacity as an exhibition space contemplating its “then” and its “now,” the visual, functional, and reputational transformations that it has undergone in the past decade and to which I’ve been one witness among many. When I reach the Gladstone on this warm and sunny spring afternoon, another temporal shift strikes me in its unexpected and utter simplicity: the difference between night and day. The Gladstone in the bright
light of midday surprises me; it seems altogether other than the one I feel I know. I patronize the Gladstone of the night, the Gladstone that is a crowded, noisy, social space, a place full of friends and laughter and conversation and music and movement. At night, the Gladstone “itself”—its features and its architecture—is obscure, opaque, and I don’t notice its details. Today, seemingly for the first time in all of these years, I really see the building itself, its external and internal architectural character—its “meticulously restored Victorian” hand-operated elevator, for example (among the last in Toronto, according to its website). The Gladstone is so quiet today, so scarcely populated. I am at times alone in the space and with the art that I’ve come to see and that, fittingly, invites me to see otherwise.
I. Lament

To hotel is to modify, to alter, to move against habituation, against stale precedent.
—Koestenbaum, 60

Singh’s exhibition is installed on the third floor of the Gladstone Hotel. I have never been above bar level before. When I ascend the old, wide stairwells, I don’t think I’m in the right place, and I fear I’ve counted the flights incorrectly: I enter a large room where the décor and ambiance suggest that I’ve walked into someone’s living room, and I’m rather disconcerted that there are no photographs in sight. I see (but don’t hear) a film projected on a white wall in front of me, and I turn around to discover a reassuring bit of gallery convention on the wall behind me—exhibition text that announces the name of the artist, the title of the exhibition, and her statement about the work. The write-up tells me that the series focuses on the artist’s “mother as the protagonist in a narrative about human fragility and tenacity.” There might well be a narrative here, but not one with a clear beginning, middle, or ending; it is more like choose your own art venture. Where do I begin? I notice a hallway to my right, which I enter hesitantly: there are a series of hotel rooms along this corridor, and, not having rented one, I’m not at all certain that I’m supposed to be here. I spot a blue door hanger that pleads, “PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB.” I take this exhortation personally. When I see that Singh’s photographs line the hallway’s walls, however, I proceed with less uncertainty.

I almost miss the first photograph in this hallway, which hangs to my right but is tucked in a corner, just inside the entranceway and barely above the baseboard. I cast my eyes downward to see Singh’s mother posed on a rose-coloured carpet, only the lower half of her body visible. Outstretched and bare, the mother’s legs and feet appear well-traveled and hard-worked—worn down perhaps, but obviously not out; their muscles are slightly flexed and their toes are (almost) pointing upward. In order really to look at this photograph, to contemplate it at eye-level, I sit down on the hardwood floor with my back against the wall opposite it. I immediately feel child-like, sitting cross-legged and at the mother’s feet. Her skin is somewhat translucent, rendering visible and pronounced a series of superficial blue-purple veins, some seemingly varicose. The model reveals to artist and artist in turn shows us what might be
conventionally considered unsightly or even repulsive: an intricate map of retrograde veins—some swollen and twisted with pooled blood—that have succumbed to the effects of gravity. Such veins many women cover up or over or even surgically remove via vein stripping. Here, clothes rather than veins are stripped, revealing a body with character and that Singh gives character in her multiple Nightingale portraits. Together, the portraits suggest that the mother-as-model—with sundry signifiers of a life lived and living (grey hair, wrinkles, and calluses) openly on display—is a worthy and compelling subject for artistic engagement. Nightingale strikingly contrasts representations of the female body so enthusiastically idealized in our culture: young, perky, thin, smooth, seemingly perfect, and “perfectly” innocent.

As I sit and stare at the complexly detailed geography of the mother’s superficial veins, thinking that they are only repulsive if considered superficially, a mother and her teenaged daughter round the corner, nearly tripping over my seated body. The three of us contemplate this same
photograph. “How sweet,” I think to myself, “and entirely apropos: A mother-daughter art date to see photographs of a mother by her daughter.” I’m startled from my musing when the daughter exclaims, “Groooooos! Mom, I don’t want to look at this!” (The girl’s mother and I exchange a silent smile.) Indeed, Nightingale asks me to confront what I might (want to) overlook: the wear and tear of time, the signs and scars of age, on another female body. Singh’s work, however, asserts that those veins (that complement the tones and textures of the rose carpet beneath them) should not repulse us in their imperfections: those life lines, working to return blood back to the heart, tell a story of experience beyond our tendency to fetishize the unblemished flesh of youth.

II. Do Not Disturb

Edward Hopper made paintings of hotel rooms, women alone in them. Of special interest is a painting called Excursion into Philosophy—man and woman on bed, book facedown by the woman’s naked rear end. There is a limit to how intelligent one can be in a hotel room. However, Excursion into Philosophy implies that the stupidity and deadness of hotel occupancy open the door to serious thinking.

—Koestenbaum, 54

At the end of the first of two exhibition hallways, and just before I turn around, I notice more “PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB” signs on doors in an alcove of rooms. Rather than warning me away with their repeated statements of prohibition, now the signs, hanging as they are among Singh’s hanging prints, become a part of this installation: unlike the stark and often uniformly white modernity of more conventional exhibition space, the eclectic vibrancy of the Gladstone’s well-earned character melds with and mediates Singh’s photography. Several of Singh’s

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photographs feature the mother’s body in fragments, corporeal details whose meanings multiply. On the door hanger whose bright blue hue duplicates the colour of some of the mother’s veins, and just above the imperative not to enter, is a graphic design (in solid white, matching the capitalized text below) of two sets of feet facing opposite directions, one set framing the other. To whose feet does this graphic allude? On the one hand (or foot), the “DO NOT DISTURB” door hanger is a familiarly cute and comely metonym for sex, the reason why the hotel room occupants might not want to be disturbed. Read in this way, the hanger graphic might represent the soles of feet off the floor, entwined bodies in horizontal positions of top and bottom. On the other hand, it might show two sets of feet on the ground, one pair potentially leaving and the other threatening to enter; given that the image necessarily hangs vertically, it is unclear which might be which. The feet that might represent movement in and out literally point up and down, one set towards the ceiling and the other towards the floor. The image thus figuratively moves in several directions simultaneously, jarring with rather than illustrating the clear and direct imperative below. It appears to signify comings and goings rather than “do not enter.” The graphic confounds subjectivity, directionality, even temporality: interpreted as footprints rather than feet, the graphic bears the trace of bodies in the past tense, bodies no longer present.

The hotel rooms are located on the exterior side only of this hallway. Here, two hotel room doors bookended by two photographs comprise an uncanny mirror image of the graphic feet, creating a visual echo of the door hanger’s framed and framing feet. One of these two photographs does not depict Singh’s mother; or, rather, it features Singh’s mother via her absence. This large print shows simply a section of rose-coloured carpet that bears the imprint of a body (of its hands and feet particularly) that once was—here, there—and whose trace I witness in the pressure marks in the carpet pile. Similarly, a closed hotel room door with its “DO NOT DISTURB” sign signals absence and presence simultaneously: I am denied access to the room and its dweller(s), but that door hanger announces the presence of guests inside who bid me not to see them. Like the mother’s body, the carpet wears the signs of life and, possibly, of art. I imagine those
marks as left behind after the staging of one or more of Singh’s photographs. The artist-daughter, whom we don’t see in any of these photographs, is conjured with her mother: Nightingale refers at least as much to the artist as to her subject, the nightingale long a symbol for both poet and poetry as well as for love and for loss. The Gladstone as exhibition space similarly highlights the tense connectivity of binaries: staying and going, art object and art viewer. Here, as at other art galleries, the art temporarily stays while visitors come and go. Here, however, the art has similarly and temporarily staying company: the Gladstone guests who occupy rooms on its third floor during the run of Singh’s show are drawn in as ready-made spectators and as fleeting art objects themselves. The quotidian activities of hotel living, guests’ arrivals, departures, and returns, become inextricable pieces of Singh’s site-specific installation.

Next to the photograph showing only carpet hangs one in which the mother is classically posed on (the same?) rose carpet, her naked back to the camera and her head turned subtly toward it. The order of my encounters with these photographs depends on whether I am coming or going: either the mother is absent and then present, or there and then gone—fort and da. Such repeated (dis)appearances emphasize the overwhelmingly elegiac quality of Singh’s work, even as they literalize the normative ebb and flow of traffic in this particular locale. The photographs anticipate the mother’s final disappearance, her eventual death, setting the stage for it in their performance of proleptic mourning. They prepare for—and perhaps attempt to defend against—the mother’s final disappearance, her last call, when she will no longer be capable of corporeal presence. What will remain of the mother when she is not here? Although her photographic representations will endure, they will signify differently after the event of her death. At the time of this installation, however, the mother/subject is still alive: how, then, is Nightingale—a body of work that features an undead body—about death and mourning? Singh suggests that the oscillations between the mother’s presence and absence, with their attendant and repeated losses, are always in motion in advance of death. Here is mourning before the so-called beginning of mourning (i.e., the death of the mother), mourning that precedes and anticipates death: there are always other losses, Singh asserts. As such, Singh offers a story of loss not only foretold but for-ever.

Singh’s photographic work in Nightingale is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s theoretical project in Camera Lucida, albeit with compelling differences: Barthes, for example, analyzes photography in the wake of his mother’s death whereas Singh’s photographs “remember” her mother while she lives. Barthes searches for (and believes he has found) the perfect picture of his dead mother, one capable of revealing her essence, her being; he wants an
image to comfort him and to compensate for her absence, her fundamental inaccessibility. Barthes aims, in Laura E. Tanner’s estimation, to rewrite absence as presence. This endeavour, despite Barthes’s profound desire for success, is bound to fail: “Neither tactile nor theoretical manipulation of the photograph, however, yields access to that missing form … the surface of the image is not the surface of his mother’s body, nor the grain of the paper her skin” (Tanner 113). Barthes’s project is an unsuccessful attempt to offset the failures of the visual image; his struggle to deny the limitations of the image exposes the very illusion of accessibility. Singh takes pictures of her living mother neither to rewrite absence as presence nor to rewrite presence as absence; instead, Singh’s work animates the space between the living body and its dead counterpart, between the corporeal body and its photographic referent. Photography, according to Barthes, “has something to do with resurrection” (82), but it also has something to do with death. Susan Sontag argues that a photograph is more than an image: it is “an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask … a material vestige of its subject in a way no painting can be” (154, my emphasis). Like that piece of carpet in Singh’s installation photograph, photography itself is remnant, always memento mori. There is a way in which Singh kills her mother’s living, breathing body by turning it into her static, yet uncannily reproducible, art object. The loved body is not only immortalized but mortalized.

I’m compelled to reconsider the graphic feet on the door hanger. As a direct stencil of the real, they might well be planted, unmoving. Seen as static rather than dynamic lovemaking or walking, the outside feet envelope those on the inside, and, in the midst of Singh’s photographic prints, I re-imagine the graphic design as mother and daughter footprints. I resist my initial impulse to read the framing feet as the mother’s—potentially embracing and/or protecting the child within and between them (although thinking this “between” returns me to the first photograph I saw and to the shadow between the mother’s legs, with its associations of sexuality and childbirth). I see Singh’s photographs as a daughter’s way of embracing the mother, an attempt to hold the mother in her gaze, via her camera lenses and their products: to hold, yes, but also to have and to give. Without ever depicting the mother and daughter together, the photographs in this installation portray an intimate mother-daughter bond that Singh subsequently shares with her public audience in a liminal exhibition space, one that is always between private and public. Both the Gladstone and Nightingale inside it blur the boundaries between intimacy and publicity, intimating that such designations are never fully fixed. Moreover, Singh’s
capacity as professional photographer potentially reframes what I might consider a usual parent-child dynamic, shifting (if only momentarily) the seat of power and care. Intriguingly, the last photograph that I will see in the exhibition is of a lamp in the mother’s house, not only unlit but unplugged. I imagine, for example, Singh’s direction of the photographic shoot(s)—her need to instruct and to position her mother; there are no candid shots here, no pictures of Singh’s mother going about the daily business of living. Singh artistically “holds” the mother who held her. But it is a holding that respects separation and difference.

Singh’s photographic absence from this incarnation of Nightingale highlights the difference and autonomy of the mother from whom she was born and with whom she remains entwined. As a photographic subject, Singh’s mother is a self apart from the familial ties that facilitate and ground her daughter’s work at every (re)turn. Similarly, the footprints of the door hanger’s graphic design are both separate and connected. Technically, the sets of feet are the “same”—mirror images identical in size and shape. Crucially, however, they face opposite directions; each goes her own way. I linger in the hallway, taking notes and moving to approach or view the photographs from various angles; a woman walks by me and enters her room. The physical space that we inhabit connects us even as it emphasizes our difference. We literally walk in each other’s footsteps, moving toward disparate destinations.
III. There’s No Place Like …

Hotel presupposes home. To speak about a hotel is an oblique way to address home problems.

Do you check into a hotel? Or does the hotel condition check into you?

—Koestenbaum, 6

I’d never noticed until today that the Gladstone’s façade bears the name “Gladstone House,” a detail that remains on the rough cut stone and brick of the Victorian building constructed in 1889. “House” strikes me as odd, and I think:

a hotel is not a house, despite its possible function as a “home away from home,” offering—at a cost, of course—some of the comforts of home: food, drink, lodging, and, perhaps, company. A hotel or bar (or hotel bar, for that matter, the “Public House”) is decidedly not home: it is a public, commercial
place in which one typically encounters strangers (thus its long association with so-called illicit sex). “Home,” on the other hand, connotes a predominantly domestic and intimate space, a refuge (if you’re lucky) from the public domain. Paradoxically, a hotel room might well offer a patron more privacy than his or her home ever could. As a name, “Gladstone House” recalls its various histories—both its Victorian era, when a hotel/bar was more likely to be named a “house” (the term now seems quaint, old-fashioned), and its more recent, but still pre-2005 era, when rooms were cheap and people lived upstairs.

The third floor of the Gladstone, functioning at once as hotel floor and exhibition, is homey, cozy, and unique, with its furnished lounge area (I can’t help but think of it as a receiving room), hardwood floors, area rugs, and original artworks; it is quite unlike the sterile, pre-fabricated, uniform environments of the chain hotels at which I’ve stayed. Nor is it like other art spaces I’ve recently visited in this city—singular-purpose galleries with stark white walls and sparse décor that offer the art itself physical and visual primacy. At the Gladstone, my curiosity about who sleeps, bathes, reads, and makes love behind these walls, about the sounds and snatches of conversation that I can’t fully hear, emphasizes how distinctive an art space the Gladstone is. At so many other galleries, I don’t think about what, about whom, lies behind the walls.

The large lounge area of the Gladstone’s third floor where Singh’s short film is projected—with its furniture (including couch, chair, chaise lounge), sprawling area rug, crystal chandelier, matching end tables, and fresh cut flowers—creates an ambiance that complements the domestic settings of Singh’s portraits, all of which were taken inside her mother’s home. Strangely, the mise en scène of some of Singh’s photographs, the colour of rugs, the shade of hardwood, for example, resembles the mise en scène of the exhibition space that they inhabit. It seems as though the photographs could have been taken here. I hear a fellow exhibition-goer wonder out loud if Nightingale is “hotel mise en abyme.” I revisit this eerily prescient description months later, when I discover that Singh staged these photographs at the house in which she grew up, a house that was and is her mother’s bed and breakfast (B&B). The setting of Singh’s photographs, then, is simultaneously home and hotel, one and the other, once again reinforcing the instability, the permeability, of the borders between things, between private memories and public histories, at work (and play) throughout Nightingale and its host.

The current Gladstone Hotel ownership works hard to market its fusion of the old with the new, its historic authenticity and its current originality, its past with its present—and its future; a subsection of their press kit is entitled “The Gladstone … Past, Present, and Future.” The management team insists on the continuities and connections between the hotel’s different incarnations and its changing clientele (“from Labatt 50 to Stella Artois,” as a friend succinctly summarized the transformation). The Gladstone is at once a part of Toronto’s history, of its heritage, and a self-fashioned inventor of its future. Having transitioned from rough around the edges (and at its core) to cutting edge (with, for example, its future-oriented environmental initiatives, its thirty-seven one-of-a-kind, “artist-designed” rooms, its art studios available for lease), the multi-purpose Gladstone has the distinction of being “the oldest continuously operating hotel in Toronto”—a claim often emphasized in press material.

Gladstone’s ownership takes immense pride in the absence of a gap or break in the Gladstone’s operations even in the midst of renovations and accompanying lawsuits: the Gladstone might have been on life support for a time, but it survived. During the Gladstone’s 2005 overhaul, they took great “care to preserve the original details and flavour of the hotel.” Like the ornate elevator, the “original wood windows, doors and trim were restored by professional preservationists.”

Fascinatingly, the B&B in which Singh was raised is a government-protected, designated historic structure whose history strikingly parallels the Gladstone’s. Built just four years before the Gladstone, the B&B is a brick and stone Victorian structure that has, over the past fifteen years, undergone
massive renovations in an attempt to reconstruct original details and architecture. The reconstructions were, in part, based on photographic evidence from 1907. Both the Gladstone’s and the B&B’s owners brought their respective “houses” back to what they both describe as “original splendour,” an objective that underscores an understanding of and appreciation for architecture and interior design as artistic endeavours. Each “house” is intimately engaged with other visual arts on a continuum of art and art space that refuses the exclusivity and singularity of art gallery and chain hotel alike.

Seemingly temporally “everywhere,” the Gladstone also claims to cater to “every” demographic—from an artistic/queer/avant-garde crowd to corporate customers (ironically, most of the artistic clientele of which they boast and to which they claim to cater cannot afford actually to stay there). The Gladstone, which has always operated as a family business, is marketed as a kind matriarch or ur-mother, a regenerative maternal body that can accommodate and care for all of her diverse children. Significantly, the original owner of the hotel was a widow, Susanna Robinson, who lived at the Gladstone with her thirteen children; at that time, her position was called “housemother.” As an inimitable character in Toronto’s west end, the Gladstone is yet gendered and personified by those familiar with it: “The Gladstone Hotel may be the oldest continuously running hotel in Toronto, but its gentrified, artsy neighbourhood has forced it to reinvent itself. Thankfully, this old girl has a few tricks up her sleeve yet” (Julie Rosien qtd. in Gladstone Hotel). Gendered female, the Gladstone is imagined to be an immortal, quintessential maternal body that nurtures and sustains any and all who come to her. In the metaphors of this fantasy, the Gladstone is the mother who will never leave us; “she” is an undying body with agency and, importantly, staying power. She will survive.

Like the Gladstone, Singh’s mother is a testament to endurance, longevity, and tenacity—though she cannot, unlike the Gladstone, survive indefinitely. Nightingale rethinks traditional and ubiquitous images of “the mother” that often consider and show her only in relation to, and often caring for, others, that depict her as modest, asexual, self-sacrificing. (I’ll admit that the exhibition’s title first conjured Florence Nightingale for me.) Far from self-effacing object, Singh’s mother often faces the camera directly and unabashedly, her aged and aging body no less fitting an artistic subject than the Gladstone’s beautifully worn wooden stairs or visibly aged pipe works. Both Singh and the Gladstone’s owners seem to suggest that the denial of or turning away from the maturity of aged bodies is a viewer’s loss. If we see the age and character of the Gladstone as integral to, and augmenting, its value, why not the age and character of the female body?
IV. Living Room

[A] hotel room can never entirely banish fears of surveillance.

—Koestenbaum, 56

In order to watch the short film that is a part of Singh’s exhibition, I return to the third floor lounge area. I sit alone on the couch and put on the headphones that await me on the end table. As I watch the film while listening to its ambient sound, the experience is both utterly private and completely public. It strikes me that I’m in a hotel room but not a hotel room: here, I have no door to close, no sign to request that no one disturb me. The film plays on a loop, and on my first viewing I catch it in medias res. Hotel guests apologize to me as they walk between the couch and the wall-screen, blocking my view and sometimes casting their shadows on the film as they come and go. This hotel and this art installation may be public, but I feel like both guest and intruder in others’ temporary home. I’m compelled to apologize to guests who take a short detour to their rooms because of my presence. Need any one of us apologize?

I start to consider the others as part of the exhibition, this film screening as improvised performance art, and I decide to make it participatory. I push my headphones back so that I may exchange pleasantries with maintenance staff and porters, for whom this is a place of work, as they pass by me with their cleaning carts and luggage trolleys (one of them informs me that there’s a wedding party on this floor). Strangers sharing a living room, we offer no
introductions, extend no hands to shake, yet there is an awkwardly friendly acknowledgement that we are together despite our contrasting motives for being here. I ask a member of the cleaning staff what she thinks of the exhibition. She pauses, smiles, and tells me that she likes working among art, except when pieces scare her and she’s forced to look at them everyday. I ask her if this exhibition scares her. “No,” she says, “but it makes me a little sad. I miss my mother.” Unlike more traditional gallery spaces, which tend to be entirely about the art, the Gladstone fuses the business of living and working, the quotidian merging not quite seamlessly with the art that it surrounds and by which it is surrounded.

V. Still Life

Is a hotel maternal?

—Koestenbaum 16

Given that Singh’s film is projected on a wall in the passage connecting two corridors and that it plays repeatedly, I encounter and re-encounter the film as I move between the perpendicular corridors where Singh’s photographs hang. I watch the film from various vantage points—standing, sitting, or moving past it. I watch others watching it. I experience it alternately as a sound and as a silent film. Shot in the interior of a predominantly white bathroom, Singh’s hand-held camera begins by filming the empty room itself—its plumbing, pipes, hardware, and tub. The camera follows the path of the pipes from ceiling to bathtub; later I see shots of the water that travels through and exits from them, subsequently soaked up by tissue lying on the tiled floor. Tears? The camera work is slow, contemplative, lingering lovingly, like a long caress. At the same time, however, the film is not entirely smooth: there are multiple takes edited together that render the film a series of jarring minute jump cuts. The film’s soundtrack is similarly jarring, comprised of sounds of dripping water and a layer of ambient sound like a drone beneath the water drops.

The film is a fragmented, fragmentary, surprising meditation. The tub is empty and then suddenly, magically, the mother appears lying in it. The palimpsestic sounds and subtle jump cuts highlight Singh’s play with spatial and temporal (dis)placement—with rupture—throughout the installation. Ironically, it is in Singh’s moving images that her mother appears least life-like. Watching her mother’s unmoving body in the bath, I think she looks dead—like a naked corpse—and this feels like a rehearsal of the funereal open casket with body laid out for viewing. But then I see her eyes blink and her right hand, with
its full, “live” veins, move slightly. The veins of the mother’s hand remind me of the pipes in the bathroom, both holding and transporting vital fluids. In the typically private bathroom space, the film reveals Singh’s mother at her most naked, vulnerable, and, seemingly, still. That this film is shown in a public room of a public house, a room perhaps living or receiving, renders it all the more provocative and poignant. At a peak of vulnerability and stillness, this film of a bathroom presumably not unlike those behind closed doors on this floor, signifies an intrusion. I notice more than one guest avert her eyes from the screen, as if she had just opened another’s door without permission. The clash of action and stillness resonates with projected exposure: literally, this film on the wall; figuratively, the temporary inhabitants of this hotel who cannot quite count on the privacy of home. This is just one of the ways in which Singh plays with the concept of still life. Singh stills her mother’s life for and in the (very moving) pictures, mementos, art that will remain when the mother does not. So, too, has and will the Gladstone remain after its art, its viewers, and its guests have moved onward, toward or away from their own stillnesses.

In Nightingale, Meera Margaret Singh represents and honours a body that bears (and here I invoke the rich and varied meanings of the verb “to bear”), a body nearer its end than its beginning. Here is certainly what Freud calls a “foretaste of mourning” (217) a grappling with what will be but is not yet the death of the mother (Singh’s own and “mother” more symbolically), that first object that we lose from the moment we leave the womb and for which we endlessly long. Nightingale astutely, gorgeously, proposes that we don’t “work through” mourning: mourning is never completed, never past tense, but is, instead, a perpetual way of being in the present. This is not, however, to argue that Nightingale’s mode of engagement is therefore melancholic. Instead I invoke a conception of mourning that rethinks Freud’s assumption in his classic “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) that mourning should follow a rather smooth, linear trajectory and must always come to an end. For Freud, healthy mourning entails a “getting over” the loss; failing to do so results in pathological melancholia, which he sees as a denial of the reality of loss. Singh wonders about, and wanders in, the space between Freudian mourning and melancholia, offering an alternate epistemology of loss in which mourning is never overcome but does not therefore overcome the mourner herself.

This liminal space and interim abode is the perfect setting for Singh to stage her necessarily temporary installation with all that it has to say about infinite arrivals and departures. Reinforcing the notion of transience that Singh’s installation and its location evoke are what seem to me, at least initially, like missing pieces that I’ve come to expect when I see a show: titles and dimensions for the individual photographs, for example. Of course, these
perceived absences might not be absences at all and point instead to a difference between exhibition and installation; the installation’s component parts comprise an aesthetic whole under one name. Still, though, I want to name the disparate parts that comprise the “whole”: by what name should I refer to the film? Why this impetus to name? And what, I wonder, is Singh’s mother’s name? I link the titles or labels I miss to one of the themes of the whole show: our obsession with labelling and sizing the female form. I am no more aware of the titles of these images, indeed of the subject herself, than I am of the people living behind the doors around me. In addition, each of the photographs remains unframed. Intriguingly, Singh includes a photograph of a framed picture that, defying expectation, lies on a tile floor rather than hangs on a wall. From a distance, the picture within the picture appears to be a painting of a bird and bee among flowers; it is only when I move closer to the picture that I see that it is actually a puzzle that someone (Singh’s mother?) completed and framed. That picture-puzzle might well be complete, but only by linking hundreds of discrete pieces together, fitting each in its proper place. Singh’s picture of the picture, however, shows the whole thing out of place; the framed puzzle that should be on the wall is instead lying on the floor, displaced and photographed to emphasize its frame and the edges that both separate and connect the various pieces that make up the ostensible whole. The disparate pieces of the puzzle, like the individual pieces of the installation, like the different subjects that form a mother-daughter dyad, exist separately and together.
In contrast to the picture-puzzle, the disparate pieces of Nightingale do not connect to make one whole: perhaps nothing (especially not a life) is ever complete, but is, instead, inexorably fragmentary and ongoing. Some of Singh’s portraits are dry mounted; others are printed with a white border and hung with nails. The prints buckle and sag, not unlike the aging body, casting shadows on the hotel walls that echo the play of light and dark in so many of Singh’s portraits—especially the ones in the second corridor that I explore; in two, Singh’s mother appears in narrow columns of bright, white sunlight,
enveloped by umbrage. It occurs to me that, without protective glass covering, the photographs, like the mother displayed within them, are vulnerable, open: I could touch the pictures, could leave my trace (a fingerprint, perhaps) on the photographic body (though propriety tells me, impels me, to resist), just as time marks the mother’s body and the mother’s body marks the rose carpet. Each physical encounter becomes a Sontagian “interpretation of the real,” and each spectator subject also to the traces left behind. Singh’s pictures, bearing the weight of the photographic paper, succumb to the gravity they nonetheless defy. They remain unfallen, unlike the leaf that the mother offers in her outstretched hand in an earlier photographic encounter.

VI. Last Call

And yet, in hotel, we pray that there remains a “futural” atmosphere, some hint of a tomorrow we can “shatter” ourselves upon.

—Koestenbaum, 42

The Gladstone is a “public house” of which I have sundry and putatively private memories; it is a major player in the history of Toronto and in the archives of my own history. As a place from which people endlessly come and go—but never really stay—the Gladstone raises a number of questions. What does this “house” hold of its fleeting inhabitants? What remains of these endless comings and goings? The Gladstone Hotel and Nightingale animate the multiple and opposing meanings of “to stay”: “to stay” means to stop permanently or temporarily, to pause briefly or to remain. “To stay” also means to suspend or to delay: for example, one may attempt to stay the aging process, to stay death. The various meanings of “to stay” resonate in both the story of the Gladstone Hotel and in the exhibition that enjoys a stay therein. I imagine the seemingly infinite hotel guests that have opened and will close the doors that I see framed by and framing Singh’s photographs. Many such guests will have only stayed at the Gladstone for a single visit; similarly, Nightingale is a temporary installation. It, too, has one stay at the Gladstone. No longer housed at the Gladstone, Nightingale is now a part of its history—part of the archive of its memories. This is/was an encounter of maternal bodies, and bodies carry (the memory of) other bodies—this is part of their work. What will the Gladstone recall? Will it recall, at all?
In the fourteen photographs and one short film that comprise *Nightingale*, the mother’s body is the site for an evocative, elegiac, intimate rumination: the pictures are also sites within which the mother’s body stays—suspended in time and place even as the photographic paper ages, deteriorates. The pictures “themselves,” as well as the mother’s “real” body, will, of course, age and change, as will relationships to the pictures. Nothing, it seems, stays. Or, everything stays. Although this installation, mounted at the Gladstone Hotel (or House) in May 2010, is over (I saw it on its last day), my work with it is not—it has stayed with me, just as my encounters with the Gladstone as a social and artistic venue are still intricately bound up with/in my Toronto sojourn.

Before I leave the Gladstone, I watch a young newlywed couple check into their room to begin, I presume, their honeymoon. On the verge of a new future together, I doubt they are pondering their own mortality—their ultimate check-out time. They are sweetly wrapped up in themselves, in each other, and
they don’t seem to notice the photographs surrounding their room. As the newlyweds enter their room, I notice two sets of feet emerge from the room next door; glancing up, I see that they belong to a middle-aged man and woman, baggage in hands, who appear to be checking out. They remove their “PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB” door hanger, and, before exiting the corridor, pause briefly in front of Singh’s photo cluster. I overhear the woman say, in a disturbed pitch, that she does not want her body to age; changing her tone from worried to flirtatious, she then asks her partner: “Will you still love me tomorrow?”
Works Cited


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1 This piece is for BR and for BAL: for(e)mourning.

2 By chance, I encountered Wayne Koestenbaum’s *Hotel Theory* in the last days of writing this article and promptly checked it out. What Heidegger is for Koestenbaum, Koestenbaum became for me: a concierge of the mind.

3 Singh’s *Nightingale* was part of the CONTACT Photography Festival (May 1–31, 2010), installed on the third floor of the Gladstone Hotel (1214 Queen Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada).
The Gladstone’s website includes sections describing its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “History” as well as the details of its “Recent Social History.” The Gladstone began as a “stylish hostelry” but deteriorated (my summation, not theirs) into what was, when I first started going there in the late 1990s, a run-down but lovable dive. In 2005, the hotel underwent a massive overhaul; it was “restored and revitalized” by new ownership (the Zeidler family) who claim to have returned it to its “original” glory.

The 2007 documentary, *Last Call at the Gladstone Hotel* (whose poster features and whose tagline quotes Maryanne Akulick, a long-time Gladstone resident, “A lot of people live in hotels”), witnesses the transformation of this iconic Toronto locale. Shot over a five-year interval, writers/directors Derreck Roemer and Neil Graham document the transformation of their once favourite bar from a disintegrating inner-city flop house to a contemporary, avant-garde, and artistic hotspot. Developers who bought the Gladstone in 2000 were surprised to discover that the decrepit hotel was not, in fact, empty, and the filmmakers turn the inhabitants into protagonists for their narrative: a kind and talkative chambermaid, an aging hoarder, and a disagreeable front-desk clerk. After an ugly ownership battle, new owners outline an ambitious plan for gradual renovations that will allow the staff and residents to remain in place. The plan, of course, is derailed: city officials demand the buildings’ complete rewiring, the boiler explodes, and ceilings and walls begin to fall. Christina Zeidler (an experimental filmmaker herself) is faced with the daunting task of rebuilding, and, despite her efforts to create “a business model that includes social change,” everyone who calls the Gladstone “home” is forced to depart. The film, as its publicity blurb announces, is shot in a “cinema direct style” and offers “an intimate and compelling portrait of the effects of urban renewal upon the poor, exposing a pattern of displacement repeated in cities worldwide, and revealing the unintentional roles we often play in the process of gentrification.” For *Last Call’s* poster, description, trailer, film stills, screening history, and list of awards garnered, see the film’s Myspace page.

I should note that this installation of *Nightingale* is one incarnation among others, as one discovers upon visiting Singh’s website. There, several of the photographs included under the heading *Nightingale* feature mother and daughter together. As a title, *Nightingale* is rich with symbolic connotations and animates binary tensions beyond mother (subject) and daughter (artist). In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (3.5), for example, the nightingale is famously contrasted with the lark: the former suggests the encroaching darkness and the
possibility of the lovers’ embrace while the lark suggests the rising sun and the necessity of the lovers’ parting. If Romeo and Juliet follow the lark, they will save their lives but must separate; if they heed the nightingale, they may stay together but in danger of death—hence the long and powerful association of the nightingale with lament, embodying as it does the inextricable link between love and death. The epigraph to Singh’s artist statement highlights this connection by citing Oscar Wilde’s “The Nightingale and the Rose”: “So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter, was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death.” The nightingale has long been a symbol for the poet because of its beautiful, entralling song; it represents a “natural” voice and powerful creative force—even a muse—for Romantic poets such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley. In his “Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats imagines the bird as an idealized poet capable of staying death via its song, and its immortality is contrasted with humankind’s mortality.

According to the OED, a “public house” is “a building whose principal business is the sale of alcoholic drinks to be consumed on the premises; a pub, a tavern” (2a). The origin of the public house is also connected to illicit sex (and not simply because of the tendency to pair off after last call); the term used to connote brothel, although the OED notes that contemporary usage of this association is now rare. That the Gladstone House is at once public house and hotel intimates the symbolic connections between the two physical spaces. The origin of hotel lies in its reference to French accommodations: there, a hotel signified “a large private residence, a town mansion” (1). Shortly on the heels of a British encounter with the French hotel, however, came the appropriation of the term to replace the public house: its now dominant (and English) meaning is a “building or establishment where travellers or tourists are provided with overnight accommodation, meals, and other services” (2). Unlike the “public house,” whose early keepers or proprietors lived above their bars and offered travellers food and lodging, the hotel seems to exist purely on a commercial level.