



Photo by Mark Woods

[At Owners Risk](#) - Avantika Bawa.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that when New York Magazine offered their Urbanist's Guide to Seattle last week, they presented the city as an entirely art-free zone. Far more interesting of course are how much it rains and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

It's a shame, because even if they miss everything else, urbanists headed for the northwest would find that a visit to Avantika Bawa's splendidly understated installation *At Owners Risk* which is at Suyama Space (through August 10) more than repays the time they spend there.

Suyama Space is one of Seattle's little-known gems. A beautiful late-industrial space in the midst of the offices of architects Suyama Peterson Deguchi, it has been turned over to experimental art projects since 1998. Three times a year artists are invited by George Suyama and his indefatigable curator Beth Sellars to install site-specific work that functions in relation to the location. They have had some wonderful pieces there over the years. Most recent is Ms Bawa's current installation, at first sight no more than a dry arrangement of minimalist elements, but gradually revealing itself to be a somewhat mischievous meditation on the history of the space, the building, and even the city in which it finds itself.

First clue to the work's content is obviously its somewhat mysterious title, which turns out to be a fragment of the rather longer phrase *CARS STORED AT OWNERS RISK* which is still visible picked out in hundred year-old paint along one of the space's ceiling trusses.

As the exterior of the building makes obvious, this was once an auto shop. Before that it was a livery stable, Ms Bawa discovered, but it was its automobile-age reality that most caught her imagination, and just about everything here relates to it in one way or another. The odd blue structure that takes up most of the space is a notional representation of the sort of hydraulic lift that is used to permit work on the underside of cars, the narrow, shallow silver wedge that runs through it hints at the kind of ramp that a car might drive up to reach it, and the shallow trays at the other end of the space derive from the trays used to drain a car's oil sump.

For Ms Bawa though, it seems almost more important that these components of her art are something other than the real world things that they refer to. Those blue shapes are not a hydraulic lift. In fact they are not even the forged steel towers that they seem. They are actually a wonderfully persuasive exercise in *trompe l'oeuil* woodwork fabricated by Rick Araluce, whose collaboration with Steve Peters was in fact the last installation in the space. Those trays of oil actually contain a cocktail of walnut oil, pigment, and Gum Arabic that had to be invented at the last minute when the original plan to include genuine used motor oil threatened to asphyxiate the entire staff of the building. And that ramp is a long plank of fiberboard that would never bear the weight of a car, or even a human being were we to decide to step on it.

But the ramp links us to another of *At Owners Risk*'s more intriguing references. First, around the white walls of the space there is a dead straight line – it turns out to be a layer of graphite that has been somewhat obsessively scribbled in inch by inch by Ms Bawa herself – that varies in width and tilts away from the room's perpendicular. It is difficult to make sense of at first (I thought it a remnant of a huge flat rectangle seen in perspectival space) until you're told that it refers to a series of 19th and early 20th century projects to reshape nature. These are now mostly forgotten, but when they occurred they were not only remarkable in their audacity, but actually created the location in which present day Seattle developed. Put simply, the place where Seattle now sits was much hillier than it is now, with far more of it underwater. In order to make it suitable for the sort of modern city that they imagined, its early European settlers and developers decided to level some of those hills and dump the excess dirt into areas of the Puget Sound and Lake Washington as landfill. The whole district known as SODO was built on one such landfill and the area around Suyama Space was tipped slightly sideways as part what is called the Denny Regrade.