

About loss but not childhood

José Lebrero Stals

If to live amongst others is to sacrifice something of one's rich sense of self, what is this innate quality that humans are said to lose when they fulfill their vital need for sociability? Or more precisely, what is the composition of this 'stuff', so easily damaged by contact? And what does contemporary art have in common with the complex and enigmatic forms of emotional outpourings so exhaustively discussed by Georges Bataille: laughter, heroism, ecstasy, sacrifice, poetry and eroticism? This question, the question of the blending of creativity and experience, is crucial to the most intricate layers of Permindar Kaur's work of the last five years.

Her works of this period suggest a kind of personal migration in which each stage corresponds to the simultaneous processes of cultural assimilation and differentiation. Kaur grew up in an Asian family environment in England. At art school, the aesthetic forms and ideas of her Sikh family culture were unfamiliar. She attempted to synthesize her cultural background with Western artistic stereotypes; a sense of community with the 'cult of the individual'. In *Glass Houses*, 1991, she used craft sources, traditionally treated with indifference in fine art teaching, in combination with sculptural formulae of minimalist orientation.



She then spent several years in the Mediterranean city of Barcelona, where she was forced to plunge into a vast ocean of self-evidently alien, aesthetic paradigms. Removed from a familiar environment (which was

complex in itself), she chose to concentrate on her emotions, particularly evident in works such as *Cot*, 1994.

Returning to England in 1995, Kaur created works that brought together the different preoccupations of the previous years. She emphasized the meanings created in the dialectical positions between objects. In the current exhibition, she focuses on the isolated object to articulate a particular way of representing the nature of perception. Her work thus recounts and reflects a constant personal shifting through different cultural models and scenarios. It is likely that none of these previous encounters have proved in the least satisfactory. In the words of the critic Homi K. Bhabha, indetermination governs her wanderings through a diasporic identity. This indetermination, this opacity, should be seen not as inadequacy, but as an existential attitude and condition: as the driving force of her art.

We should not be surprised therefore at her insistence on using her works to mark a place, to construct dwelling-places and to recreate spaces apparently intended for rest, but which nonetheless always seem disproportionately large or small. Functionally deficient, symbolic of the domestic environment, these spaces fit ill with the canonic conventions of sculpture. The figures and objects, constructed by the artist, are deliberately crude, simple representations of human beings in whom personal identity is barely extant. Yet Kaur's subject is not childhood, rather she uses childish objects to invoke vulnerability. Innocence and ingenuousness expressed by an adult can also be read as gestures of rebellion.

What she deals with here is precisely the recreation of specific emotions, first manufacturing, and then 'furnishing' these terrible, intimate, indistinct figures. For the viewer, the way in which this practice connects

with their author's childhood experience is secondary; childhood is present here not as autobiographical jottings but as a repertory of rhetorical resources and an avenue of intellectual escape.

Kaur has no use for new or manufactured objects in her work. Recourse to elements of the real, physical world is avoided lest the elements of her world become associated with things known and defined. In this way, she inhibits a factual reading of objects, avoiding the predominance of a social and political dimension. The fiction of her constructed objects allows her to stay within the personal sphere, when for example; she seeks to pose the question of fear. Recently she was asked by another artist 'What question would you like to answer?' Her reply was succinct: 'Where is home?'

In her personal universe, the idea of 'home' is associated with [one's] 'own personal space' and related to [one's] 'I own experience'. Home is security, but the manifest vulnerability in these works invites one to meditate on loss and deracination. It is a 'hearth and home', possessing neither door nor window, in which security is by no means ensured. In the very specific house of experience that concerns her, the presence of the element 'bed' has come to occupy an obsessively central place: 'my house is my bed, the bed in which I sleep'. Hers is an artistic house constructed upon the fragility and doubt that are generated by the inertia of displacement. The violent friction to which it is subjected is the agent through which inner security is lost. The work has a compensatory function. That it also contrives to testify so effectively to this existential condition makes it interesting, valuable and timely.



The basic tension that defines the nature of her language feeds precisely on the conflicting processes of cultural distancing and rapprochement. It is as if Kaur were patiently attempting to establish a self-sufficient discursive space that does not betray the mixture of individuality and inherent identity, but which simultaneously liberates her from the intellectual pressures and emotional double-binds of her biography and the cultural environment by which it is permanently assailed and assayed. I perceive the cultural dilemma, which acts as the source of her work, to be that she takes on the implications of her cultural deracination, while at the same time trying to document every new personal state that she experiences.

Observing the conceptual structure of her key works, it is noticeable how each has been built by accumulating differentiated parts. This is manifest in the disruption of the union of signified and signifier that characterizes works such as *Watching, Unseen, Unheard, 1993*, in which nothing functions as it apparently neither should, nor is anything made of what seems appropriate. Large rubber cables link four copper objects like 'speakers' or horns,, each facing a corner of the room. The metaphorical power and evocative impact of the objects transforms them for the viewer into eyes and ears that look and listen: into discreet, silent receivers.

Kaur's position is free from the problems resulting from the belief that an essence of a central self exists; this notion belongs exclusively to a single cultural space with which she feels only partial involvement. The de-centering of the self allows the configuration of a discursive space, distinct from the central role of a subject which points exclusively one way; this position becomes blurred, dispersed, and is replaced by a more expansive relationship.

The simple, formal conclusions that Kaur reaches - her silent commentaries, the strange modesty with which all her work is imbued - take as their source her quiet, but firm response to the difficulties of being 'I other', while also the uncertainty of not knowing exactly where to find the toponymy of repose that will give form to the existential effort of personal exile. In the exertions of Kaur's complex, selective negotiation through aesthetic languages, social worlds and emotional nexi, dreaming is a form of escape from reality, a way of maintaining her sanity. It is no less dreaming for the fact that it serves to keep one alert and to stimulate criticism. The dream that pervades her work is not the Freudian nocturnal dream of deformed and opaque content. It is diurnal, the 'close friend' of active silence; though tinged with sadness, it is also capable of expressing humour and optimism. It is what Ernst Bloch describes as 'open, inventive and prescient'.

(This text is an edited version of the Spanish original translated by Chris Miller.)