

The Comfort of Little Places

Eddie Chambers

Quite possibly, this particular showing of Perminder Kaur's work offers us a unique and fascinating exhibition opportunity. 'The Comfort of Little Places' is being shown at Fabrica - a magnificent shell of a redundant and deconsecrated Victorian church. Though the building has been given over for use as an art gallery, much of what makes a church a place of Christian/religious worship still remains. There is the wonderfully imposing pulpit - itself reminiscent of the *minbars* that were traditionally used by imams to call the faithful to prayer from mosques across countries such as Egypt and Turkey. There are the stained-glass windows, the wooden paneling, and the physical evidence of removed pews. But most of all, within Fabrica, there is the *feeling* of the building itself. There is no escaping the extent to which it feels like a former place of worship. And it is precisely this sense, this feeling that offers us a range of near-literal reference points from which to consider Kaur's work. Of course, were Kaur's work simply located in a modernist 'white cube' type of gallery - as it has been many times previously - such is the power of these pieces that we could still enter into much meaningful dialogue with them. But within the context of Fabrica, these pieces somehow feel at home and work extremely well.

The instinct of many artists exhibiting within Fabrica might be to fight against the space, to try, in some or other desperate way, to dominate or ignore the overwhelming nature and resonance of the structure. But Kaur has no time for such knee-jerk strategies. Coming from a Sikh background, she has an outsider's view of Christianity. And yet, she

has no desire for her work to dominate or defeat the space. She seeks instead to present a carefully selected body of work that quietly compliments and quietly respects the architectural and spiritual sensibilities of the building.

Setting formal replies to one side, what is a church? It is a place of sanctuary, a place of safety, a site of comfort and solace and nurturing. And with its pews and its exquisite font built into an alcove, the very building - this particular building - offers the comfort of little places and intimate spaces. In many, many ways, these readings (and a concurrent questioning of them) flow unhindered from Kaur's work. After all, we cannot deny that much of Kaur's work is about defining and giving form to notions of sanctuary, safety, solace and comfort, in a variety of ways that wholly and emphatically refuse to acknowledge sentimentality. *Fabrica* is, quite possibly, a perfect setting for Kaur's work.

But 'The Comfort of Little Places' is in no way an uncritical or merely celebratory body of work. We might derive some comfort from Kaur's work, but we may also find it unsettling and disconcerting. The last time I wrote about Kaur's work I offered the suggestion that "Kaur's work relentlessly plays on our feelings of vulnerability, and effectively questions our attitudes towards power. She obliges us to reconsider our notions of childhood and adulthood, of the protector and the protected, what is safety, where are demons, what calamities or we safe might overwhelm us? What protects, but might also harm us? She obliges us to consider these questions by re-presenting domestic objects that we have learnt to identify with 'home' and the protection afforded by 'family'. Within any home, the bedroom is not just a room

to which we retire at the end of the day. It is a safe and cozy sanctuary. Likewise, the bed is not just something we sleep in - it nurtures and protects us. Kaur's beds however...do nothing to dispel disturbing thoughts. Instead, all they offer is cold comfort." (1) Nearly two years on, such sentiments have an enduring application.

It seems that in recent years *scale* has become a dominant theme in Kaur's practice. For the past several years, some of her sculptures she has made impossibly big, other things she has made improbably small. These manifestations of scale, together with her darker concerns with issues of childhood and vulnerability, make Kaur one of the most gifted and engaging sculptors of her generation.

When I first worked with Permindar some eight years ago, she created a monumental head for an exhibition of self-portraiture that I was curating (2) Well over two meters high, the head was made from short metal rods, painstakingly welded together to form a work that successfully referenced the artist's own distinctive facial features. But the head was also a cage-like construction, packed with brightly colored wooden objects that resembled children's toys. Why would the artist want to put such attractive and innocent objects within a caged structure? And, equally as disconcertingly, why should that structure represent, in such a painstaking way, her own face and head? Eight years on, Kaur is still fascinated with such disturbing and unsettling questions.



Within this exhibition, those intent on frenzied gallery dashes will do themselves a disservice, because Kaur has deliberately placed less

conspicuous work in the more intimate corners of the gallery. Like comfort itself, these pieces are there to be chanced upon, to be *found*. Take for example Kaur's small, wall mounted wooden box. A hinged door to this smallest of cupboards opens to reveal a diminutive metal-framed bed, complete with mattress. This piece of work, like one or two others in this exhibition, acts as a focal point for our anxieties and how we might deal with them. The bed in the box operates as a kind of shrine - that most religious, and yet most desperate of constructions. Though a small bed such as this may well be intended for a small doll, we can well imagine ourselves using this bed to safe keep those small, irrational things that nevertheless sustain or reassure us. And were I to use this bed to store an ageing photograph of a dear relative, or a lock of my lover's hair, or a cheesy good-luck charm, I have no doubt that every morning, after sleep, I would check the bed, just to make sure that its precious contents were safe and sound.

This minuscule bed, doubly protected by its wooden box, exists in marked contrast to Kaur's Tall Beds, located, as they are several meters off the floor. The beds suggest that, by climbing the ladders and lying on or sleeping in the beds we could escape or avoid some ground level calamity or danger. But the beds, lacking protective



sides, look as though they might leave us exposed to greater calamities or a heightened sense of insecurity. Cold comfort indeed. Elsewhere in this exhibition, we cannot physically lie on her undersized bed or sit on her minuscule, seat-less chair. But we can, in engaging with this work, animate and question our own ideas about security and

insecurity. Kaur's work can do no more than this, and we can ask no more of it.

After all, in undertaking this process, we must make ourselves vulnerable. As Kaur herself has noted "When I take part in discussions or give talks, [about my work] I find that the audience want to know more about the personal nature of the work, but to do this they have to reveal something of themselves, which they are far more reluctant to do. The fact that the work can be intimate while at the same time reticent is unnerving." (3)

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(1) Permindar Kaur Cold Comfort. A review Third Text Autumn 1996

(2) Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces. Organised in collaboration with Herbert Art Gallery. April 14 - May 29 1990 and touring.

(3) Permindar Kaur Cold Comfort Interview: Claire Doherty Transcript Volume 2 Issue 2