

Black & Blue

Permindar Kaur and Ian Hunt in conversation

Ian Hunt: *What were your first instincts about sculpture and materials?*

Permindar Kaur: That goes back to student days. Even on foundation I knew I liked making things, I hated painting. I enjoyed using fabric, and I started making things out of it. Then when I went to polytechnic in Sheffield I did a generalist course – back then the courses were painting, sculpture, printmaking and photography, but I was part of a small group who were generalists. So I could use any material I could find. Bricks, glass, wood, whatever there was. After that course I had a year out and set up a studio in Sheffield, on Blast Lane. There were lots of old steel companies around there so I could easily find steel and welding equipment, and learn how to incorporate steel into the materials I was using.

In Sheffield what conception did the work have, was it exclusively sculptural?

No, I made animations and photography, and I suppose it came together as installations. I had also tried working out in nature, and I did a lot of clay work. I also tried to bring two materials together that you wouldn't expect: wool and clay or bricks and steel. I was trying everything out, which is what you do as a student.

What was recognisable in the work? Was there anything that was a representation?

Always. Everything always was a recognisable object, so for example, I made clay furniture, a clay circular rug, or a clay chest of drawers, and lots of pots, so there were always recognisable objects. And they all seemed childlike, quite naïve. I made a seesaw, and a huge child's cart. This was back in 1989. The other day I was trying to remember when I found out about Mike Kelley, as I was hugely influenced by his work. I thought, wow! I love this guy who can work with cuddly toys. I was also interested in people who worked site-specifically and people who made installations. The tutors were really big on the performance art of the 1970s. So we were taught a lot about that work too.

After Sheffield, you moved to Glasgow, but you had already had the experience of exhibiting your work outside college.

Yes, when I had that year out Eddie Chambers got in contact and there was a huge push to exhibit Black art. Eddie put me in all these different shows. I wasn't aware of Black art at all, but he organised these large survey shows asking – what is it, and what does it mean, to be a Black artist? At that time I did make work about identity quite a bit. But it wasn't until I was at Glasgow that I was invited to show a huge glass installation by Eddie at Arnolfini, in the main downstairs gallery. The show was called *Four by Four*: me, Virginia Nimarkoh, Alistair Raphael and Vincent Stokes. I was also asked to participate in the BBC Billboard project. Eighteen artists were commissioned to put works on billboards. As I make sculpture, they let me use two billboards in a three-dimensional way. I had two billboards that faced each other in central Glasgow, that were in conversation with each other.

Was that the only sculptural billboard in the show?

Yes, I made these large copper speakers on both billboards, and then they allowed me to cut holes so there was the impression of sound coming through the billboard, like a personal conversation across the street. Very public, right by Glasgow station.

What did that moment feel like? There were many possibilities, various developments at just that point, particularly in sculpture. A lot more work being exhibited, promoted abroad, for example by the British Council. What awareness did you have of those older sculptors who worked in the 80s with images and material simultaneously?

I felt quite close to some of those artists from the 1980s, who were male white artists showing at the Lisson Gallery. Then I thought that I should move away from that, and at college we had different focuses, like conceptualism, minimalism . . . and then postmodernism and identity politics began to be discussed, which was not the case when I started studying.

You said these early works often used toys and furniture. In this exhibition there is an incredible play with scale and a subtle range of scales applied to teddies, creatures and objects.

I don't think I have ever played with scale consciously, but when I did my degree show I did make a giant cart. And I made a giant head of myself, a two-metre high head. But I just did this, without thinking of it. One of the things is that I never wanted to use found objects. Everything had to be made by me, which allowed me to play with scale: I wanted objects that didn't have a place, so you didn't know where they came from and you were not aware of their history.

I am bringing up these very careful judgments you make about scale, because many of the artists of your age and generation, who came to prominence in the 1990s relied on one-to-one scale, making a figure that is the size of a figure, and readymades. I find it interesting that you have continued to make subtle adjustments to scale: things are often smaller or slightly larger than you expect.

It is to do with my not wanting objects to have a prescribed history. You don't know what they represent, or where they came from. People always think that it must be about my childhood, but it isn't. It is not about a particular childhood.

It is also interesting to know how early on you had made that decision not to use found objects. All through the 1990s, the 'found thing' continued to be present in art, but you had rejected that. You were nourished by and working with sculpture as a strong thinking place: and grounded in the studio as a place to make and develop work, not just produce for exhibitions. It's that practical commitment that gives what you do a power beyond the images it also involves. Where did you continue to work through the 1990s, and how was your work understood?

After I finished at Glasgow I applied to go for the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and was offered a place, but I had a six month wait before I could go. Then some friends moved to Barcelona, and asked if I would join them, so I moved to Barcelona instead. That was quite an informative time because I realised that there was more and more

pressure to make work about my identity, fitting into what was 'Black arts' but I wanted to make work about other things. Being in Barcelona freed me up from that debate. I realised I had a very northern European approach to making art, compared to some of the artists I shared a studio with. The difference was that I liked to make things well, sturdy and strong, but my way was not better. I admired their lightness of touch. It felt like something I could never get, and really wanted. I guess that was me trying to adapt to the scene in Barcelona.

How much did you become part of that scene?

I was showing quite a bit, but as I was not a Catalan Artist, I could only go so far. There were some competitions and I did take part and even won some. Once I won first prize.

Did you feel like you were losing touch with British culture, did you keep up?

I lost touch totally. We didn't have the internet, we didn't have mobiles, and we didn't have cheap flights. I got totally immersed and I wasn't aware of what was going on in the UK that much. It was a fascinating time, just after Barcelona had hosted the Olympics. There were amazing public sculptures and commissions: James Turrell, and then Rebecca Horn had a sculpture on the beach. And lots of Arte Povera, which I loved, especially Kounellis,

How long were you in Barcelona?

I stayed there on and off for about six years. I came back and forth to London, and it was about that time that I was included in the British Art Show (1995). I didn't really know what the British Art Show was. Suddenly I had an invitation to take part in it, and a solo show at Ikon Gallery. I didn't realise what a big deal it all was.

Did the reception of your work connect with your own interests, did it feel peculiar showing here?

Not really, but I just felt like a bit of an outsider going into that show. I arrived from Barcelona and found all the other artists knew each other. The new stars were in it, Damien Hirst and so on, but I didn't have many expectations.

The artist I think about most at that time in relation to your work, and who was in that show, is Lucia Nogueira.

I love her work.

She always used found objects but there is a deeper level where I see connections with what you do. You both use situations and a tension that is quite hard to interpret, a set of feelings that can go either way.

And she has that amazing lightness of touch, that thing I always wanted to get!

Let's talk about this group of sculptures, some of which have already been seen in Hatfield. This group has been developed over about a five-year period?

I had a gap when I stopped making work for ten years, I didn't look at any shows, I didn't make any work, I didn't respond to invitations to shows, as I thought: if I am not going to make any work then I don't want to take part in the art world.

When I finally did go back to the studio the first work I made was *We Are All Animals*, using my favourite materials, fabric and metal, and combining the two. Before I had made figures as cut-outs, but this time I integrated the copper and fabric, and made 3D figures. I spent a period of two to three years in the studio making new works, thinking about where it was going and seeing how it would develop. After my break I really didn't know how things would translate, or if I had anything to say in the work. There is a subtle but important difference between the work before and the work I make now. Some people have said the work has got darker but that the meanings are less obvious, a bit more hidden. I think I am better at reading my own work, whereas before I couldn't control the meaning to the same extent.

The question of showing or revealing is built into the work: that sense of what could be hidden and what emerges, what can be controlled, or not.

People want to be told what the work is about a lot of the time, but I don't. Then they go off on a journey and start thinking it is about this or about that and I don't say anything, but I am thinking NO . . . that's not me, that is your issues not mine maybe!

You are absolutely entitled to send them, or me, back to the work! Can you describe your studio: what regular materials you have access to? In We Are All Animals, apart from the delicate scale, the way the copper elements emerge from the fabric is very subtle. You are protecting the mystery of the join between the two materials.

The join is all-important, trying to get two materials that you don't think should go together to join seamlessly. In the studio I have my sewing machine and I have my welding kit. When I was at Glasgow I learnt how to work with copper. I spent a lot of time in their jewellery department, where I worked on things that were very big and very noisy! I think they were pleased when I went away. I also learnt about other materials, how to work with glass in the stained glass window department, which I don't think exists anymore. When I see other work that people have made, I think about how I would have made it, and I look closely at details like the joins or the poor welds, as I think those things are really important.

In this exhibition, it is worth saying that you have made each link of the copper chains by hand. Can you talk about copper in particular as a metal? It's one that is familiar, as most people have seen it used in plumbing, and know it has a kind of softness. It is also a metal with a longer human history.

I started using copper because in each thing I do with the furniture, the tables, the chairs, there is some kind of symbolic meaning or implication. For me, copper has always represented the other: it's exotic, while steel represents the West – but I think in my recent work it no longer has to mean that.

For the chair of Classroom, the two metals are actually fused together. I am also thinking about the traces of heat and manufacture in these works.

In the past I used to have them painted out, which I did to remove the human touch but now I like to keep them in, to leave visible the touch of the human.

A strong association most of the audience will bring to the work is Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are. When I see your work I assume that you are aware that this is an association people are going to make.

When I made *We Are All Animals*, the first thing I thought of was Maurice Sendak, but I wasn't trying to do something about that story. I was worried that it was too close, but in the end I'm fine with that, because I love that book. I read it as a child and it had quite an influence. That book introduced risk, which other children's books didn't.

Children's stories at their best work to acknowledge the contradictory feelings children inhabit. They work hard to give children ways to think about what they experience. Your work is incredibly eloquent about feelings that are hard to reach. Resentment, for example, is very hard to get at – it is probably made up of hurt or pain that has been crumpled up, then turned into a defence that can lash out. Let's look at Ten Teddies. These figures, that you have made and placed in the room, seem to be aged four or under. Toddler age.

The choices I make as an artist are quite close. With the large teddies, making them all black, and giving them ears – by changing something quite subtly, the potential meaning alters. By leaving the eyes out, they become removed from immediate familiarity, but not too far away that you do not know what they are. While I am closing the objects off in certain ways I am leaving them totally open to interpretation.

So you want to prevent a too direct narrative interpretation?

Yes, but often people tell me that they are reminded of stories or nursery rhymes, and I welcome that.

This exhibition includes two large works against the wall. Shadow Play has a narrative strangeness, in that you cannot whether the teddies are going up or going down. In that room you also have the single teddy on the chair, which you have given the name Classroom. Together they become evocative of the school gym, the classroom, and particular kinds of hierarchy in group situations.

I did a residency in the University of Hertfordshire and just being in a university environment meant that some of the works started to be about school. I was thrust right back, and I thought about what my school was like. People always think all my work is about my childhood, which it isn't. But that piece *Classroom* is, and so is the table piece, *Grey Skirt*. But even though these recent works have autobiographical elements, I still think they can be understood in other ways – without knowing about me, or who I am.

Well, it is only you who would be aware of all the things you have drawn on.

And it is intuitive. With *Classroom*, I made a soft teddy, and he is sitting on a hard steel chair, and that wasn't enough. It was when I added the tag that I pushed it in a

new direction. The tag came about as I was looking at the very first production of teddy bears, by Steiff, in Germany: all the bears had a tagged ear and were numbered. I decided to give my teddy a copper tag, which isn't numbered. It makes you feel as though he has been singled out. When I showed these works at the university, the students were making quite bizarre stories about what the teddies were doing and they had worked out roles for each one. I found it fascinating that when people see the teddies they form an immediate relationship with them. The overriding response was that they wanted to protect them and to take them home, much more than they found them disturbing, which I found really interesting.

Each work seems to have its own concerns, within the overall coherence of this group. The gender of the teddies is among the assumptions people make about them. In one piece, Red Dress, gender is indicated unambiguously.

Yes, I was trying to make it more human, as I thought that the three claws were a bit harsh. So I thought I'd brighten it up and give her a red dress, to create a balance. I thought she looked naked with just her claws.

The companion piece is Sloth, the figure on the plinth in the next room with the copper spikes coming out of his back.

Yes, he is definitely male. I changed the pattern so he is chunkier on the waist and his head is bigger. The female teddies have a smaller head and are slender. As I make all my own patterns and do everything by hand, I can make subtle differences. It is the same with the teddies on the wall piece, *Shadow Play*. Originally I had them with their arms down, holding the chains, and it looked too much like a hung teddy: too brutal. Re-sewing the arms, so they went up to hold the chains, was a small but important change.

These decisions about shape and position do the work of communicating with you, before you can quite see how they are communicating.

If I talk about this work, *Black Curtain*, I am reminded of an earlier series of works about camouflage. In this work I am trying to camouflage the teddies against the black curtain. That is another theme that is always running through my work, protection and defence. In the past I have dressed figures in armour, in copper helmets and copper boots, and holding copper spears, but more recently the armour has been replaced by something more animal-like, these claws.

That theme also goes back to the barrier I made to go with the ten large black teddies. You do not know if this barrier is designed to protect the teddies and give them their own space or if it is designed to contain them. I tend to think it is protecting them so that becomes their space that you are entering.

The teddies take different roles. Two here are taking responsibility for the door like sentries, proud of what they are doing. One is looking on, with you don't know what feeling, at a teddy lying on the floor. A group of three are enjoying a bit of circle time, which they have either learnt to do or been encouraged to do, but one of them isn't joining in.

I'm making a whole different range of scenarios and possibilities. I have set the scene and it is up to the viewer to interpret what's going on. It connects with a much earlier installation called *You and Me*, made as part of the exhibition *Krishna the Divine Lover*. I was asked by Hayward Touring exhibitions for a show at the Whitechapel, to make a piece in response to these beautiful miniatures. I had 52 pairs of figures, cut-outs, and all in different relationships with each other. They could be joined with snap fasteners, and could change position. Some were happy and dancing, some were not so nice to each other. For me *Ten Teddies*, with *Barrier*, is a response to the site. You come down the stairs to the basement and meet the barrier and you are not sure quite what is going on. The difference now is that the work is more controlled.

It all works very effectively with the stairs, the space and the doors. It also exemplifies a moral peculiarity about the work. You are in a situation where you are wondering who is in charge of these creatures, or whether they going to take charge of their own feelings and relationships.

But are they adults or are they children, do they need protecting or can they look after themselves? Do they need our help?

And the strangeness about the scale: they feel slightly larger than you expect them to be. The shape suggests something younger than the size does, so they seem to me like rather over grown children, or devils in training.

Yes. That's another element to them. People respond to their pointy ears, but for me the most important thing was making them black in colour, a black that seems to absorb light. I think these larger figures are more disturbing, or at least uncertain, than the smaller ones. With the smaller camouflaged ones in the curtain, you don't know if they are hiding so they will not be eaten, or waiting to pounce, or are the friends: but then of course they are all friends, because they are teddies.

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