

Chapter Eleven: Substantial Sculpture: The work of Sokari Douglas Camp, Veronica Ryan, and Permindar Kaur (extract).

Although of a slightly younger generation (having been born in Nottingham in 1965), Permindar Kaur is another British sculptor, of substantial repute. Of South Asian origin, she was born to Punjabi parents in Nottingham and emerged into visibility and practice during the course of the 1990s. She is a sculptor whose work has been featured in a significant number of solo and group exhibitions both at home and internationally. Her practice was characterised by an enigmatic use of materials, scale, and symbolism. Despite its considerable ambiguity of meaning, highly charged cultural and religious symbolism has often been a feature of Kaur's work. In 1991 she made a community of miniature, but sizeable transparent plate glass houses, for the exhibition *Four x 4* at the Arnolfini in Bristol.ⁱ The houses were filled with handmade clay domestic implements, cultural objects and religious symbols, by far the most potent of which was the Khanda, the emblem of the Sikhs that is such an instantly recognisable symbol adorning the Gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship. In the mid 1990s, Kaur's contributions to *The British Art Show* included *Innocence*, a religiously specific piece of work consisting of a child's dress made of a rich orange-coloured material - the same coloured material that swathes Gurdwara flagpoles, crowned with the Khanda. Tucked into a sash, draped across the dress, is a khanda or khanja, a double-edged sword that often symbolises the kirpan, one of the five K's of the Sikh religion.

For Kaur, who secured her MA from Glasgow School of Art, such symbolism took its place alongside other equally dramatic devices and elements central to her sculpture. Perhaps the most consistent dramatic device employed by Kaur has been her extraordinary use of scale. For the 1990 self-portrait exhibition, *Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces*,ⁱⁱ Kaur made a large oversize head, 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. Successful work on such a scale, requiring as it did copious amounts of patience and technical expertise, is rare indeed. But the head was also a cage-like construction, packed with brightly coloured wooden objects that resembled children's toys. Disconcertingly, the artist had put attractive and innocent objects within what was in effect a caged structure, notwithstanding the structure's representation, in such a painstaking way, of Kaur's own face and head. Throughout much of her practice, Kaur has continued to be fascinated with what might be regarded as disturbing and unsettling questions.

One of Kaur's most substantial British exhibitions was *Cold Comfort*, in which her ongoing interest in questions of scale was abundantly apparent.ⁱⁱⁱ The centrepiece of the exhibition was a work of three steel-framed beds, constructed to stand high above the viewer. Each bed came complete with attached ladders, enabling viewers to imagine themselves literally 'climbing into bed'. Elsewhere in the exhibition, a pair of chairs similarly dwarfed the viewer. Perhaps one of the most disconcerting things about these particular pieces was that they did not necessarily look like the eccentric or slightly odd creations of an artist. They were polished, highly finished pieces of furniture that had a showroom-like quality, making them all the more unnerving.

Perminder Kaur's work continued to be enigmatic; time and again, critics and curators picked up on Kaur's ability to use distinct and particular materials such as glass and steel to make work that resonated with no end of associations. That much, at least, was clear to Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, who wrote,

Nationality – the concept of belonging to a country or an actual geographical space – is a subject addressed by many of Britain's contemporary artists. Perminder Kaur's installation *Arrival* (1991), metaphorically references the transmission and shifting nature of ideas and culture. Sheets of glass, set atop tall metal rods with arrow-like points at the bottom, stand positioned at various points along the installation floor. Their points form map-like configurations, charting geographical points of residence and transitory movement as well as cultural reference points.^{iv}

Alongside personal or domestic narratives, Kaur's sculpture contained much in the way of references to Sikh/Indian identity and culture. Like Sokari Douglas Camp before her, Kaur was also vulnerable to the suggestion that her work 'is a synthesis of the different cultural experiences that she is simultaneously immersed in.' [...] "She may think of herself as both an Indian and a British woman".^v In many ways, a more plausible reading of Kaur's work would acknowledge that all sorts of 'cultural' influences (if one can determinedly speak of such things) are discernible within her work. As to what, if any, national identity (again, if one can determinedly speak of such things) she subscribes to, her audiences do not know, because, very simply, she has not told them - either through her sculpture or by other means.

Like several other artists referenced in this study, Kaur was able to wrestle herself free of the sometimes constraining ways in which she was regarded, and her work perceived, simply by relocating to another country – in her case, to Spain, and Barcelona, in the early 1990s. Though the writers of the following text were somehow able to conjoin British-born Kaur to ‘non-Western artists’, they nevertheless offered a useful summary of the benefits of Kaur’s temporary international relocation.

On completing her M.A. in 1992 she spent several years in Barcelona. This presented her with more cultural and aesthetic complications in her daily life – another language, another culture, another place to get to know. The experience has been a positive force in her work.

Working in Britain the artist felt a pressure to make work referring specifically to her Indian culture, and the struggles that many non-Western artists face, when working in this country.

One of the many foreign artists in Barcelona, she felt that these expectations were lifted and her work began to develop in other directions. As a result Kaur has felt freer to make more emotional work and experiment with various themes.^{vi}

Permindar Kaur was one of a relatively select number of British artists of African or Asian origin to be included in *The British Art Show*, the National Touring Exhibition organised every five years by the Hayward Gallery for Arts Council England, which sets out to survey British Art. It was *The British Art Show 4*, of 1995/1996 that included Kaur’s *Innocence*.

Art critic Richard Cork, writing in *The British Art Show* catalogue, discussed Kaur’s work in the following terms:

Remembrance of childhood fuels the art of Permindar Kaur, but these recollections have the capacity to haunt it as well. Her finest work seems to have been made by a woman who ruminates, time and again, on the insecurities in a child’s mind. The objects she produces often resemble toys and they are notable for their vulnerability. There is nothing playful about them. Rather do they appear ominous, as if gifted with the power to foresee the future. In *Untitled*, 1995, a costume made of green fabric dangles from the wall. Its legs terminate in copper boots, while an equally burnished crown beaten from

the same material caps the head. But the costume remains empty. Loose folds run down its surface and the owner's absence seems fateful. Although it could simply be an item in a child's dressing-up cupboard, this inert form also says something about the ultimate futility of an adult's lust for aggrandisement.^{vii}

Kaur's work relentlessly played on feelings of vulnerability, and effectively questioned societal attitudes towards childhood and adulthood. A particularly revealing comment by Kaur appeared in an interview Claire Doherty conducted with her. Kaur commented:

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.^{viii}

The complex tensions that Kaur alluded to in this statement were similarly present in the work of a range of practitioners who emerged during the course of the 1990s.

ⁱ *Four X 4* was described in its catalogue as 'an innovative exhibition project that brings together sixteen artists creating installations in four different gallery spaces'. Venues and dates as follows: Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, 8 September - 17 October 1991, Shaheen Merali, Houria Niati, Sher Rajah, and Lesley Sanderson; Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 21 September - 2 November 1991, Oso Audu, Val Brown, Stephen Forde, and Rita Keegan; The City Gallery, Leicester, 9 October - 16 November 1991, Medina Hammad, Richard Hylton, Tony Phillips, and Folake Shoga; Arnolfini, 12 October - 24 November 1991, Permindar Kaur, Virginia Nimarkoh, Alistair Raphael, and Vincent Stokes. A fifth exhibition, featuring several installations presented at the Preston, Wolverhampton, Leicester and Bristol venues, titled *The Four X Retrospective* was shown at the Castle Museum Nottingham, 18 January - 1 March 1992.

ⁱⁱ *Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces*. Organised by Eddie Chambers in collaboration with Herbert Art Gallery. April 14 - May 29

1990 and touring.

- iii *Cold Comfort* was first shown, in two parts, at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Mead Gallery, Coventry, before touring to several galleries, including Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 27 July - 31 August 1996
- iv Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, 'London Bridge: Late 20th Century British Art', p. 26.
- v Roger Palmer 'Permindar Kaur' a short essay on the artist contained in *Four x 4* (exhibition catalogue, unpaginated), *Four x 4* was 'an innovative exhibition project that brings together sixteen artists creating installations in four different gallery spaces.' Eddie Chambers, Bristol, 1991
- vi Sue Clive and Sarah Derrick, 'Eye openers', *Permindar Kaur Cold Comfort*, exhibition guide, Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, 1996
- vii Richard Cork, 'Injury Time', *British Art Show 4*, exhibition catalogue, Hayward National touring exhibitions, London, England. 1995, pp. 12-32.
- viii "Permindar Kaur and Claire Doherty, 'Permindar Kaur Cold Comfort Interview: Claire Doherty', *Transcript: Journal of Visual Culture*, School of Fine Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1996, p. 23.