

Cold Comfort

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Perminder Kaur's new body of work continues to be as enigmatic as ever her work was. What references to Sikh/Indian identity and culture should we read into her sculpture? Or should we set such readings aside, for fear of misreading or erroneously locating some of the most powerful sculpture currently on offer to gallery-going audiences in this country? It would, after all be relatively easy to suggest, as one commentator did several years ago, that Kaur's work 'is informed by two cultures' and that 'She may think of herself as both an Indian and a British woman'. But this type of assessment is little more than a rehashing of the From Two Worlds thesis: a bizarre form of anthropology that invariably locates artists such as Kaur in neat 'half and half, neither fish nor fowl' packages. In many ways, a more plausible reading of Kaur's work would acknowledge that all sorts of 'cultural' influences (if we can speak of such things) are discernible within her work. As to what, if any, national identity (again, if we can speak of such things) she subscribes to, we do not know, because, very simply, she has not told us - either through her sculpture or by other means. The temptation to continually ethnicize Kaur's work is apparent even in the official publicity that accompanies the exhibition. The Exhibitions Co-ordinator somehow feels able to make the statement that 'Kaur's intensely coloured materials refer without doubt to her Asian cultural background.' Such statements appear all the more spurious or bogus when set alongside the reality of the colours used in Kaur's work. There is black, lots of black. And there is white, lots of white. There is copper and there are one or two other colours, such as red and olive

green. 'Intensely coloured materials' are (apart from mattress coverings) conspicuously absent from the exhibition.

And yet, specific, 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 plate glass houses, for Four x 4 at the Arnolfini in Bristol. Inside and (occasionally) outside, the

houses were filled with handmade 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 centre of worship. More recently, 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 which often symbolises the kirpan, one of the five K's of the Sikh religion.

We may be tempted to view such potent symbolism as a form of literal referencing of 'identity', 'religion' 'culture' and so on. But such limited readings would leave us distinctly short-changed. Because such symbolism takes its place alongside (but not above, or ahead of) other equally dramatic devices and elements central to Kaur's sculpture. Perhaps the most consistent dramatic device employed by the sculptor has been her extraordinary use of scale. For the 1990 self-portrait exhibition, Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces, 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 artists own distinctive facial features. Successful work on such a scale, requiring as it does copious amounts of patience and technical expertise, is rare indeed.

In her most recent body of work (Cold Comfort, Bluecoat Gallery, 27 July - 31 August 1996), Kaur's ongoing interest in questions of scale is abundantly apparent. The centrepiece of the exhibition is three steel-framed beds, constructed to stand high above the viewer. Each bed comes complete with attached ladders, enabling prospective users to literally 'climb into bed'. Elsewhere in the exhibition, a pair of chairs similarly dwarf the viewer. Perhaps one of the most disconcerting things about these



particular pieces is that they do not look like the eccentric or slightly odd creations of an artist. They are polished, highly finished pieces of furniture that have a showroom-like quality, making them all the more disconcerting. But the scale of the sculpture is not always expansive. There are a number of works that are reductive or undersize, creating further disquieting effects on the viewer. The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition features a full page photograph of a four-wheeled cart resembling a cage on wheels. The photograph makes the cart look as though, like the three beds in an adjacent gallery, it too might be the biggest cart we've ever seen. In reality however, the viewer towers above the cart. Another piece in the catalogue (again, a full page photograph) shows a row of five beds made of welded metal, each bed complete with brightly patterned or coloured mattresses. But how big are the beds? This work is not in the Liverpool exhibition, so the scale of the work, as presented in the photograph, is doubly ambiguous. Measurements are conspicuously absent from the

catalogue, thus compounding the ambiguities of scale. In another part of the exhibition, a brass bed has been made - not exactly the sort of bed for a baby or a young child, yet by no means adult sized.

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 we safe, what demons or calamities might overwhelm us? What protects us and what might 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, are several meters off the floor, as if the sleeper is anxious to escape or avoid some ground-level calamity or danger. The brightly coloured or patterned mattresses on top of these beds do nothing to dispel disturbing thoughts. Instead, all they offer is cold comfort.

Despite the magnitude of the emotions thrown up by Kaur's work, despite the potential within the viewer for feelings of despondency, her voice is not shrill or alarming. Nevertheless there is melancholy. There is sadness. The cart piece, mentioned earlier is titled *Loss* - as melancholy a word as any in the English language. The disquieting nature of *Loss* is compounded by the contents of the cage on this cage built on wheels. Instead of sand - the playmate of children, the cage contains a pile of ash - the residue of material burnt



in a fire. And the ash falls through the bars of the cage, invading our space, disturbing our space.

Kaur has taken an interest in armour and her chain mail clothing, and other items of head and body armour, in some ways reference Sikh protective military adornments (such as breastplates) from 18th and 19th century India. But Kaur's renderings of body and head armour are anything but reassuring. In this regard, one of the most disturbing works is a baby-sized chain mail dress. Why would a young child need body armour? Children may indeed need protecting, but body armour has historically been worn by battle-



dressed warriors, not 'innocent' toddlers. Similarly, Kaur has made a copper helmet, which has a pleated cloth covering, where one would perhaps expect a visor to be. The visually impenetrable pleated cloth is somehow reminiscent of the no-nonsense veils worn by some Muslim women. Again, Kaur obliges us to question what can protect us? What are we to be protected from? The unwelcome gaze? The potentially fatal blow? Most disturbingly, do we need or do we seek protection from ourselves?

Perhaps, ultimately, Kaur's work points towards the futility of 'protection'. This notion is nowhere more apparent than in the piece that consists of four horse-shaped outlines made of stitched satin. These four horses are almost a sarcastic or pitiful rendering of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. So even the horse, which for millennia has been a near-universal symbol of military conquest, might and indomitable spirit appears powerless, tragic and comic, pantomime-like, when given the Kaur treatment. In contrast, Kevin Atherton's metal

outlines of horses, which appear along the railway line between Wolverhampton and Birmingham, are strong spirited creatures.

But quite possibly, it is this point that makes Kaur such an important sculptor. By using material, be it glass, felt, or whatever, in ways that go beyond the conventional, or beyond the orthodox, Kaur is able to animate a whole range of emotions and to oblige us to reconsider notions and attitudes that perhaps might otherwise merely lie dormant. Who else but Kaur would think of rendering horses as satin cutouts? Who else but Kaur would make a dress of body armour for a little girl?

Though we can do little or nothing about those who insist on clumsily ethnicizing Kaur's work, it is to be hoped that increased exposure of work in exhibitions such as Cold Comfort will bring the appreciation and consideration that Kaur's work deserves.