

Permindar Kaur Cold Comfort

Interviewer, Claire Doherty

Permindar Kaur's first major solo exhibition, Cold Comfort, appeared across two venues, the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, during the Spring of 1996, and subsequently at the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool. Born in Nottingham, Kaur studied Fine Art at Sheffield Polytechnic, and then took a Fine Art MA at Glasgow School of Art. She was selected for the British Art Show 4. Claire Doherty is Exhibitions Co-ordinator at the Ikon Gallery.

Cold Comfort was initially split across two venues. At the Ikon and Mead Galleries you created two noticeably different contexts, and now at the Bluecoat Gallery the work is re-contextualised yet again. How do you respond to 'site'? [Claire Doherty]

The site is very important, because the work is often in the form of furniture, wallpaper or curtains. The work occupies the space as it would in a room of a house. At the Ikon, for example, the work occupied a large, open space, creating a cold and stark atmosphere, while at the Bluecoat the effect is more intimate, private and invasive. The Bluecoat Gallery used to be a school, so the site plays on the associations of the work - childhood and institutionalization to name but two. [Permindar Kaur]

Tall Beds (three steel beds constructed to stand high above the viewer) operated as monumental sculpture, industrial and stark, at the Ikon; at the Bluecoat they evoke the fairytale grotesque.

Claire Doherty. 'Cold comfort.' Transcript. Dundee, Scotland. Vol. 2, Issue 2. p. 18 -25. 1996

Similarly, Falling (a frieze of polar fleece figures) now occupies a room of its own at the Bluecoat, whereas it was placed alongside Tall Beds at the Ikon. How do you see the meanings of the work fluctuating between each site?



At the Bluecoat, the Foiling room has been converted into a nursery. The figures occupy three of the wall spaces, literally surrounding the viewer. The inclusion of Loss (a small copper trucklike object containing a pile of ash) adds to the sense of play. The figures existence and meaning become inseparable from the toy-like truck.

Falling was like a commemorative wall at the Ikon, as opposed to a nursery room, situated in a space which evoked nightmare, through the juxtaposition of objects within the open space of the upper gallery.

Yes, there the white satin horses functioned as dreams or redundant costumes, whereas at the Bluecoat the warrior associations of the work come to the fore within the room of armoury. The multi-faceted nature of your work is revealed in this process of re-contextualization. At the Mead Gallery, for example, a museum-like display was created. The works, being dramatically lit, took on the characteristics of spoils of war. It was here that your interest in armour was most noticeable. How did you first come to examine this form of costume?

I always had a fascination with armour. Innocence (a boxed orange dress wearing a knife) refers to Sikhism, the idea of carrying a weapon as a symbol of strength. When the use of armour initially appeared in my early work it was to do with barriers, defining one's

space as one's own, and then with the territory of the home. But to use armour is a cliché. I try to use it in a subtler manner. The armoury does not in fact defend, but acts as a hindrance or offers only partial protection. Many of the felt figures are clothed in armour. When did you start to amalgamate these objects with the trappings of war or defence?



At the beginning of 1995, I began to think about making toys dressed in armour. I was interested in the idea of a kid playing with and dressing up their toys in armour, trying to protect them in a way, which then developed into the pieces impaled upon the wall or framed in heavy wooden frames like trophies or displayed objects.

So why use copper?

first used copper in the BBC Billboard Art Project for which I constructed four large speakers. Steel would have lent the speakers the associations of 'Big Brother', whereas copper connotes 'the other', possessing a quality, which is far more soft and fragile. These associations are still in the work. If I had used steel to create Loss, for example, the truck would have become industrial, as opposed to something precious. One might assume that because the armour is made from copper, is from India or Asia, but actually its design is intentionally North European. The design of armour in India was lightweight, because of the heat. In reality, armour is never made from copper, after all.

Why is there a lime-green silk visor on the helmet?

It's a continuation of an idea I examined in Small Martyr a small red polar fleece figure impaled on a copper pole, wearing copper boots and helmet), in which the armour's protective function becomes redundant. Equally, the

fabric negates the objective function of the helmet and effectively blinds the wearer. You used the harshness of steel in your chair piece and placed three vicious steel pins in one corner. In doing so, you transformed a domestic object into an instrument of torture. The stark quality of this piece operates in contradiction to the more subtle, fragile, small copper bed.

The way in which the bed was constructed, the apparent dip in the centre, makes it look as if it has been slept in. I had made holes in the copper framework, so that the object appeared to be damaged or 'unhealthy', as if it were leaking, and initially only used the pieces of red fabric to block the holes up, but then they became like flames or flowers growing up from the interior of the bed. This created a meaning totally different from that which I had originally intended, which adds to the organic nature of the work.

In 1995 you returned from Barcelona after three years. Would you say that your stay there changed the direction of your work?

When I first moved to Barcelona, it drastically altered the way in which I thought about making work, because the context was completely different. Exploring ideas about being an Indian artist in Britain became no longer relevant. Before, in England, I had been making large, technically problematic installations. In Spain, it was practically difficult to work on this scale: the diversity of materials spread over a number of retailers, as opposed to the large-order operation of UK suppliers; the heat, which affected my working process and my capacity for physical engagement with the work. Most noticeably, the work became quite personal, due to the fact that did not distance myself from it through language. In Spain, there is less of a need to justify work through language, and my work thus became far more direct. I did, however, after a period of time begin to miss the critical discourse in Britain. When I came



back, my work did not change drastically. Here I fitted into a way of working that I was accustomed to. I had become fascinated by the manufacture of objects - Loss for example is a hybrid between a truck and a cot.

And also a pall-bearer or shrine? A number of commentators on your work have pointed out the especially personal and intimate nature of your work. Do you find this aspect of the work difficult to discuss?

When I take part in discussions or give talks, 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.

Critics have pointed to your 'examination of childhood', but it is not simply a caricature of childhood - rather an examination of the inner self. It could be suggested that the poignancy of works such as Loss must be driven by a source of pain. How is the work rescued from nostalgic sentimentality?

There is an edge to the work. You mentioned that Foiling reminded you of a display of trophies. Many of the works have sinister overtones. They are like ritualistic objects.

Would it be correct to suggest that you have an extraordinary interest in that area of work which examines insecurities, the child and the self? Has that always been the case?

My first contribution to an exhibition at the Bluecoat was a seven-foot high head of myself filled with toys, and so the personal has always been there. In using toys I have always been interested in dealing with different types of reality.

Yes, toys are stand-ins for reality, instruments of make-believe, and therefore can take on sinister connotations because they strike at the heart of perceived innocence. Do the embroideries relate in any way to your childhood?

Yes. They have resonance for me.

There is one way in which you could read them as stereotypically Sikh. Are you enforcing a stereotype?

No, I do not work with traditional patterns, but rather use the technique to create sketches or scenarios of Western objects, as ways of working out ideas. The original idea came from my mother's embroideries on furnishings around the house. She embroidered English words that always struck me as quite strange. One of my first works was an embroidery of a house.

What kind of house?

A Western detached house with a garage. The dream, I guess. I showed it as a photograph, so that those personal associations were once-removed.

The interest in 'home' is there then from the beginning. It reminds me of the archetypal sampler - the 'home sweet home' tapestry. In comparison to your peers in The British Art Show 4, many of whom are using new technology or high-tech materials in their work, how do you resist the feminization of your practice as craft?



There has always been a play between craft, which is conventionally identified with decoration, and minimalistic fine art. My use of craft imbues minimal objects with intimacy.

There is prejudice in certain areas against work that examines the domestic or personal through materials. The judgment of your work as craft must surely take into consideration the manner in which the work goes beyond the aesthetic, the way in which it articulates something that cannot be expressed in words.

At the moment, I feel there is a fascination with work that explores childhood and the miniature world. Though I have used photography to explore certain ideas, I am reluctant to use new technology for its own sake. I was trained on a mixed-media course before I went on to sculpture, and so worked with video and photography. I discovered that one has to have fixed ideas in order to succeed with the medium of film. I'd like to continue to work with photography, developing my previous collaborations with other artists, but at present wish to develop my work with these particular materials.

What about projects off-site, outside the gallery?

I would like to present work in a person's house in which I would place a bed in every room, so that the house becomes an installation. The public would be allowed to walk around the house and the occupiers would continue to live around the beds. My original idea was based on the question: why would a person need to sleep in every room of their house? An added luxury? Or the need to live in a dream world, bordering on illness? The spaces become dysfunctional. The intimacy of the bedroom is transposed to every room, subverting a space of security.

