

RE-NEGOTIATING THE FAMILIAR, INHABITING THE STRANGE: The Installations of Perminder Kaur

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"Life is a bridge. Cross over it but build no house on it."
Indian Proverb

Over the past seven years Perminder Kaur has been creating a repository of constructed objects, which have their overt sources of iconographic reference in the worlds of domesticity and childhood. Some of her objects are reconfigured and therefore transformed articles of domestic furniture, like beds, cots and chairs. Others are toy-like cloth figures and articles of home-made children's (or dolls') clothing, which are generally displayed as wall pieces. Various juxtaposed and located within gallery contexts, their most immediate effect is to plunge us into worlds that refuse to accommodate us. Her strong, simply-constructed metal-framed beds, with their brightly colored and patterned mattresses and plump pillows, are pristine and inviting. But they shift abruptly in scale from the dangerously high (Tall Beds, 1993) to the minuscule (Small Dreams, 1994). Quickly experienced as promising rest, relaxation and protection only to bodies that are imaginary or size-shifting, they threaten or exclude our own. Then there is Cot of 1995. Looking into its interior through unnecessarily high white bars we see pieces of bright red clothing (simply but neatly constructed from polar fleece) protruding from an orderly pile of heavy red mattresses. Each in turn has been methodically trapped and crushed.



Not surprisingly, Kaur's installations have been described as unnerving. As one writer has put it, "the illusion of security, bound to the notion of home, is unmistakably shaken by the implied violence of [her] art

Jorella Andrews. 'Re-negotiating the Familiar, Inhabiting the Strange: The Installations of Perminder Kaur' Crosscurrents, Exhibition Catalogue, Oslo Museum of Ethnography, Oslo, Norway. 1997

practice.”(1) “Home is security,” writes another, “but the manifest vulnerability in these works invites one to meditate on loss ...”(2) Since Kaur's ethnicity is British Asian (she was born in Nottingham in 1965 of Sikh parents), there is also a propensity for her work to be read as describing feelings associated with cultural deracination and so-called “diasporic longing.”(3)

But if her desolate bedrooms and abandoned nurseries are provocative of difficult emotions, by no means do they leave us stranded in them. Her environments are bold, beautiful and engaging as well as threatening. And, while individual items of her reconfigured furniture are ultimately experienced as inhospitable, their very uninhabitedness, their formal simplicity (akin to that of minimalist sculpture), their openness, and the stark nature of their arrangement within their spaces of display, invite continued exploration. The world Kaur opens up is a fantastical or mythical one in which the intertwining of the fearful and the familiar are both destabilizing and challenging. As such, her work encourages us to further thought. Not only about feelings of vulnerability and dislocation, but also about personal and culturally-held assumptions concerning the nature and location of safety and safe haven



These further explorations of threatening emotional (and intellectual) territory are in part made possible by the fact that ultimately it is not in us as viewers that the most intense or extreme responses to perceived threat are evoked. Rather, these are acted out for and before us by the faceless polar fleece figures which populate Kaur's wall pieces and may be seen in part to function as stand-ins for us. As a consequence we can identify with the positions adopted, and yet maintain the necessary disinterestedness with which to observe and critically assess their repercussions.

As it turns out, the various responses to perceived threat enacted before us are in all instances radically ineffective. The root of these failures seems to be clearly indicated: most of Kaur's figures, while pointing schematically to the human form (or in some cases the animal), are hollow, flattened, limp and pelt-like, lacking internal substance. As if aware of this dangerous combination of threat without and void within, some of these figures have attempted to provide themselves with external protection. Small Martyr of 1996 and Untitled of 1995 are small figures dressed in armor. But their helmets and boots are made not from steel but from malleable copper. Secured to the gallery wall, these pieces are trophies to courageous inadequacy.

In Untitled of 1995 (one of the two pieces in Crosscurrents), two disproportionately tall metal chairs 4 on stilt-like legs have become, for the yellow polar fleece figures cowering upon them, invulnerable towers of self-protection. Flight instead of fight. As if this were not enough, the figures have folded in on themselves, their limp limbs and heads tightly pressed over their over-stuffed, ball-like bodies. Having once climbed energetically beyond the grasp of one danger, they have placed themselves in a situation so precarious that now the slightest movement could be fatal. They are inert and unseeing, apparently as frozen in place as is Lucifer in the icy core of Dante's Inferno. Further, with this retreat to a point of absolute immobility, they have lost the capacity to communicate - with others (should we wish to reach up and hold them, the attempt would be in vain) and, it seems, with themselves. (This loss of self-reflexivity seems to be indicated formally by the fact that, although these two figures-on-chairs are identical, suggestive of ego and alter-ego, and positioned so as to allow processes of mirroring to occur between them,



absolutely no such inter-relating is in evidence, or indeed seems possible.) As in *Cot*, there is a sense of inner poverty, and of life having been evacuated.

Ironically, *Falling* of 1995 is more optimistic. Here, one hundred and nineteen small and similarly sized polar fleece figures (some red, others blue-grey, and the remaining a patterned blue) are arrayed before us on a white background. As with the figures in *Untitled*, they are folded in upon themselves, refusing to interact with each other or with us. Except, to some degree, for the patterned blue ones who have their heads raised and might therefore be addressing us. Again there is a terrible sense of frozenness, made more insistent by multiple repetitions.



Nonetheless, through this process of falling they seem at least to be moving back within reach. Indeed, we notice that they have a "glove-puppet-like" quality. As such, they invoke handling, play, involvement, and thus the possible emergence of new scenarios. Perhaps they have entered a space not unlike that described by the early 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart as "the Wayless Way, where the Sons of God lose themselves and, at the same time, find themselves"?

On the one hand, then, it would seem that in these works radical responses to perceived threat are brought to expression - responses that might not normally be available to us. However, (with the exception of aspects of *Falling*) the degree of dysfunction revealed in these behaviors is so extreme that it borders on the absurd. Indeed, in this regard, these pieces - in fact, Kaur's works as a whole, with their frequent inversions or distortions of expected relations between us and things - seem reminiscent of those absurd worlds-upside-down which were so frequently depicted in the margins of medieval illuminated manuscripts, or used to decorate ecclesiastical architecture and furniture. On the other hand,

therefore, as with the works belonging to that earlier tradition, Kaur's wall-pieces in particular may also be read as having a satirical, and therefore critical, function.

The characteristic common to Kaur's entire polar fleece figure is the state of physical immobility to which each has been reduced. This physical immobility may be regarded as symbolic of an equally inflexible or "rigid" psychological attitude. One in which a person is "generally ill disposed, when examining an object or person [or a given situation], to recognize in them any clashing traits; and continually tries, in his remarks, to arrive at a simple, categorical, and summary view."⁶ Such intolerance of ambiguity leads inevitably to the identification of safe-havens (whether physical or metaphorical) with the indisputably stable, certain and fixed. With such a view the western mindset is well-acquainted. It has so frequently recurred in the history of its thought, and so frequently been brought to expression in its social and cultural practices. The fundamental dysfunctionality of this emotional and intellectual position is implied by the obvious impotence of Kaur's figures.

If Kaur's work has lessons to teach us about the nature and location of safety - and if so, this occurs largely by default and through irony - then the most important lesson is this. Safety is a position of flexibility connected with an internal capacity to tolerate situations that are multivalent and ambiguous. This alone can allow for a suitability of response in any given situation. According to the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, such qualities of multivalence and ambiguity are necessarily integral to our experiences of those things with which we are the most familiar. They are, for instance, foundational to our lived experiences of our own bodies. As he puts it in *The Phenomenology of Perception* "writing from a non-dualistic position with



respect to the mind/body relationship" "to say that [my body] is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perception, that it is with me." This body, which is always "with" me, slips easily into unfamiliarity. To know myself means never to have an unambiguous grasp of myself. It is to inhabit an existential space between "absolute presence" and "absolute absence". It is with such an internal space, so easily regarded by us as threatening or aberrant, that Kaur's installations can reacquaint us.

1 Claire Doherty, "While You Were Sleeping...", in *Permindar Kaur - Cold Comfort (Exhibition Catalogue)*, Ikon Gallery, Mead Gallery, 1996, pp. 6 - 7, (p. 6).

2 José Lebrero Stals, "About Loss but not Childhood," *ibid.*, pp. 4 - 5, (p. 5).

3 An expression coined by bell hooks.

4 Dimensions: 2.25 m x 35 cm x 35 cm.

5 "Psychological Rigidity" is an expression used by Else Frenkel-Brunswik in 'Intolerance of Ambiguity as an Emotional and Perceptual Personality Variable,' *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 18, September 1949, pp. 108 - 43.

6 Merleau-Ponty writing in "The Child's Relations With Others," reproduced in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp.96-115 (p. 101).

7 *The Phenomenology of Perception (1945)*, trans. Cohn Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964. p. 90