

While you were sleeping...

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In the concluding moments of an enchanted tale, the awakening or 'coming home' signals the reinstatement of calm and invariably proclaims a rite of passage. 'Home' is proffered as the winning post or El Dorado, at which a veil is drawn on the 'happily ever-after'. This 'home' is logical and ordered, in contrast to the chaotic distortion of the familiar, which characterizes the 'other' of fantastical worlds. It provides a discrete sense of identity and location, fulfilling the need for both physical and psychological comfort.

It is this illusion of home, propagated in the fairy tale - a revealing product of our social and political beliefs - which forms for us 'a theatrical backdrop of sorts, against which the present is enacted'. As Nancy Spector has suggested, 'it serves as the frame of reference, the psychic constant that signifies the familiar, and therefore, the safe'.^[2] This prototype is 'furnished' with the illusory objects of the homily - hearth, stove, armchair and bed. A narrative employing devices which distort or confront this mythic creation, often through the deliberate subversion of these familiar objects, strikes at the heart of our psychological defence system. The thriller, for example, inverts or 'doubles' the familiar associations of the domestic scene. Against the idyll of 'home' is set the horror of the 'un-homely', the domestic grotesque or 'uncanny'.

The 'unheimlich' or uncanny was described by Freud as 'that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'.^[3] It owes its sinister character to the distortion or 'doubling' of that which is 'heimlich' - intimate and secure. An experience of the uncanny is terrifying precisely because it exposes repression - perhaps of

fear, pain or desire buried deep in the unconscious. Psychoanalytic theorists have suggested that a cultural practice which employs the uncanny may produce a cathartic experience, which in turn may be interpreted as a process of mourning. This disruption of denial functions as an awakening of sorts - a coming to terms with loss. It is around this poignant site that we locate the work of Permindar Kaur.

In *Cold Comfort* Kaur conjures up the uncanny through the distortion or manipulation of domestic objects. Deceptively familiar in their structure or appearance, initially the works seem to evoke the comforting associations of the generic bedroom or nursery - intimacy, childhood and play. As items of furniture (beds, cots and chairs) and toys (soft, brightly coloured figures, trucks and satin horses), these objects resemble displaced domestic belongings. They appear incongruous within the sterile institutional spaces of the gallery. Yet what is striking about *Cold Comfort* is the deliberate denial of a nostalgic identification with such objects. Rather than ready-mades removed from an existing abode, these are fabricated domestic grotesques. Consequently the work is cast beyond merely a tension between 'public' and 'private' to explore the multiplicity of meanings around an intensely personal stage.

The illusion of security, bound to the notion of home, is unmistakably shaken by the implied violence of Kaur's art practice. The production of *Falling, 1995*, a wall of polar fleece figures, entails seemingly torturous processes - wrapping, twisting and impaling. Consequently the frieze of dejected forms appears as a display of trophies. Similarly, human forms sketched into felt are transformed into objects of war by the attachment of tailor-made metal armour, a cloth toy is impaled on a long metal pole and white satin horses are hung like carcasses along a butcher's wall.



Yet the pervading mood of *Cold Comfort* is one of mourning, rather than a crude representation of violence. *Falling* acts more noticeably as a work of commemoration, than as a triumphant display of the vanquished. The sombre associations of the make-shift memorial, the unnatural conflation of childhood and death, lend this work a deep sense of loss. Similarly, the small truck, fashioned by the artist from copper tubing, is transformed from an object of play into a pall-bearer by the insertion of a small pile of ash. These works examine that shifting and ambivalent space of the unspoken; though the sense of community, implicit in *Falling*, is absent from the individual pieces, which instead connote a melancholic solitude.

Kaur's careful plotting of the spaces of *Cold Comfort* prevents a nostalgic or indulgent sentimentalism from glossing over the unnerving aspects of her work. The alternation of size from gigantic to miniature ensures that, as viewers, our position fluctuates between one of superiority to inferiority. A paternalistic response is thus denied. The incongruity of the tall bed relates to what Susan Stewart has described as the antithesis of our position in relation to the miniature. 'We are enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow, whereas we know the miniature as a spatial whole or as temporal parts, we know the gigantic only partially.'^[4]

It is this partial view of *Tall Beds* that renders us powerless. Consequently the work not only resembles the fairy tale grotesque, but also reduces us to the vulnerable state of children. Here Kaur subverts the comforting associations of 'bed' and consequently interrupts the mythic illusion of home. By evoking the inhumanity of the institution through the unyielding steel material of *Tall Beds* and the inversion of our position of control, Kaur points to



established systems of control outside the home and to their inevitable effect on our behaviour.

Sleep, as a metaphor for the unconscious, is invoked in these works, yet, unlike the awakening of Alice from Wonderland or Dorothy from Oz, the reality to which we awake or 'come home' is ambivalent and confusing. Through the nightmare distortions of these objects, we witness a decentering of identity and a confusion of location - the undoing of 'home' as we know or believe it to be.

In the half-light of these dream-like spaces, the objects appear as shadows of their real selves. It is here that the device of repetition is brought to bear. The multiplication of forms - two chairs, three beds, multiple horses and felt figures - imitates the repetitive patterns of memory. A process of psychological catharsis is mirrored then both in Kaur's distortion of the familiar and the repetition of forms. Her work is unnerving precisely because the objects articulate intensely personal emotions through processes that mimic the workings of the unconscious mind. Our dream-states distort the apparent logic of the real, revealing the complex and chaotic nature of existence. On waking a search for a sense of logic or order, for the place called home, remains.

Footnotes

- 1 Nancy Spector, 'Homeward-Bound', *Parkett*, 27, 1991, pp.80-89.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, ed. James Strachey et. al., London, 1955.
- 4 Susan Stewart, 'The Gigantic', *On Longing*, **Duke University Press, Durham, USA, 1993.**