



Permindar Kaur
Interlopers

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Introduction

A sleuth of bears has escaped and temporarily roams the gallery environment. Though its physical attributes and behavioural characteristics are distinctive, this species has not been previously identified. The bears have a black fleece, sharp pointed ears and a small upturned snout. They are agile climbers and fast-movers. Confident on their hind legs, their preferred habitat provides tree-top vantage points, away from observers, where they can survey their environ. The bears usually live in small communities of between 7 and 12 members. These are rarely a family group, but a collection of same-generation, same-sized creatures. They are curious animals that confidently explore and inhabit new territories and objects. Although their behaviour is at times unpredictable and threatening, their cute appearance is appealing.

Over three decades, Permindar's work has consistently explored the human condition, who we are and where we belong. Her signature polar-fleece sculptures combine the innocence of cuddly toys with an underlying threat or vulnerability. These creatures 'stand in' for us replicating the behaviours, emotions, fears, thrills and instincts with which we negotiate our lives.

Permindar's last major exhibition *Hiding Out* (Djanogly Gallery, 2014) presented a new series of varied and patterned soft sculptures. Moving away from the human form, she created reticent creatures that hid, and were camouflaged by their varied backgrounds. They were imbued with a sense of caution and defensiveness, protected by copper claws or spears. Now, in *Interlopers*, Permindar introduces a single species that emerges with increased confidence. Her black, faceless teddies are climbing, travelling and exploring, perhaps even considering escape. Where copper elements were once weapons of defence, they now aid movement and have become the tools of control and even invasion.

The emerging themes of travel, migration and the threshold between one place and another chime with the disrupted global experience of the refugee. In the face of fear, helplessness and dislocation, the mobile bear community are taking control of their lives.

The individual sculptural works within *Interlopers* were developed during an intensive residency within the School of Creative Arts, University of Hertfordshire. We are grateful to the school for supporting Permindar's access to research, new materials and techniques, and crucially her immersion in its student and staff population. Our gratitude is extended to Richard Cork for his insightful survey of Permindar's recent work. We would like to thank Professor Barbara Brownie for her text proposing the sculptures' independence and agency, and for her dynamic blog series that charted the evolution of this remarkable new species and the survival of its fittest.

Annabel Lucas

Exhibitions Curator



Perminder Kaur: Danger, Compassion and Playfulness

Richard Cork

As the provocative title of her new exhibition suggests, Perminder Kaur has transformed the UH Galleries into a place invaded by small vagabonds. Wherever we glance in this surprisingly lofty location, teddies seem to have taken over. But they appear to be far removed from the cuddly playthings so loved by little children. All black, they are devoid of facial features apart from inquisitive ears curving upwards. Instead of lying back and waiting to be fondled, they look surprisingly active. None more so than the teddies visible in a very large piece installed near the panoramic gallery window. All attached to gleaming copper chains, they seem to pause in space before resuming their epic climb. Resolute, plucky and united by this group endeavour, they could hardly be more different from passive toys.

As we make our way round this fascinating and unpredictable show, Kaur makes sure that the teddies convey a very wide range of emotions. Take the narrow gap in a wall, reminding us of a tiny cupboard and stacked with teddies who appear to be climbing on each other. Although they might be involved in a game, these creatures could equally well feel claustrophobic. The teddies at the base of the cupboard look as if they are in danger of being injured or even crushed. Kaur invites us to explore the ambiguity nourishing this work, caught halfway between the bleak possibility of imprisonment and a far more reassuring sense of fun.

That is why her exhibition proves so rewarding to explore. All the pieces displayed here are the product of her residency at the University of Hertfordshire, based in a studio at the School of Creative Arts where she found herself surrounded by busy students. Rather than finding their presence disturbing, she was immensely stimulated by the noise and activity. The students' swift, restless energy made her feel slower by comparison, yet Kaur's show now testifies to the fruitful time she has enjoyed here. An intriguing air of mystery can be detected throughout the exhibition, especially in a work called *Black Curtain* (2015) where the teddies are suspended in the camouflage-like fabric and become part of its pattern. At first, we might not even see them lurking there, but then they begin to emerge. Half protected and half disturbing, they typify Kaur's subtle ability to keep us guessing about their true significance.



One of the most alarming exhibits is *Armoured Truck* (2016). We are unable to discover who is driving this stark container, which resembles a vehicle, a cage and a cot. Even so, it looks ominous enough, and the teddies heaped inside could be finding themselves transported to a very sinister destination. Because our news at the moment is so dominated by incessant reports about the plight of migrants, they spring to mind when we look at *Armoured Truck*. But Kaur did not specifically intend it to address this issue, even though she realizes that some viewers are bound to think about the tragedy of present-day migrancy when confronted by this sculpture.

Another piece, *Watching and Seeing Unheard* (1992), was produced at a far earlier stage in Kaur's career when she was studying at Glasgow School of Art. There, in the early 1990s, she wanted this work to reflect an awareness of her family members who lived in Glasgow and cultivated their privacy. Growing up in Nottingham, she had been very conscious of her Indian and British background. And when Kaur first arrived at her UH residency, she realised that the title *Watching and Seeing Unheard* reflected her own feelings, quietly observing all the intense student activity.

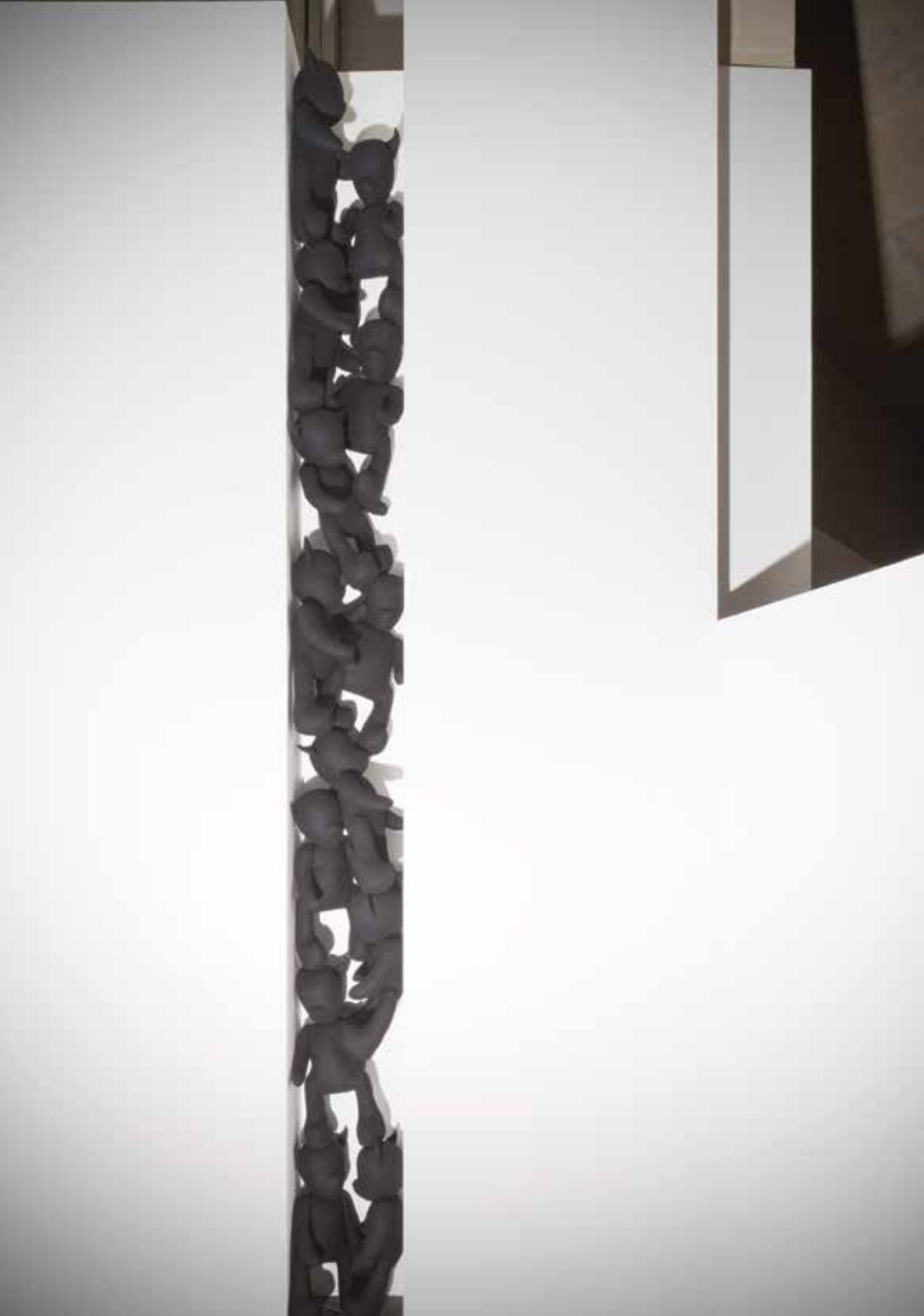
Hence, perhaps, her decision to make a new piece where a teddy is seen perched in the branches of a tree. With one leg hanging loose and the other resting expectantly on a curved branch, the creature appears to be caught at an ambiguous stage between relaxing, listening and preparing itself for action. But we can easily imagine this teddy deciding to jump down and become very busy indeed, just like the artist who made him. There has always been an autobiographical element in Kaur's multi-layered work, and *Branch* (2015) is no exception.

Nor is *Classroom* (2016), where a deep blue teddy sits on a steel chair as if spellbound by the teacher's words. This time, it conveys Kaur's realisation that her residency had sent her back to school. The contrast between the cold, hard metal in the chair and the creature's soft fabric intensifies the atmosphere. Her surprising decision to employ blue rather than black reflects Kaur's desire to give this teddy a certain amount of sadness, while at the same time emphasizing the enlightenment she is receiving from an educational institution.

But the copper tag dangling from the creature's left ear is far removed from anything autobiographical. It reminds us that the teddy is actually an animal, and part of a branded herd or species.

Her urge to make a piece called *Classroom* does not simply reflect Kaur's awareness of the knowledge she has gained during this highly productive residency. It also refers, in a more general way, to the ten-year break she took while the millennium came and went. That radical decision, to stop making art for such a lengthy period, inevitably made Kaur wonder if she had changed after resuming her work a few years ago. Although she felt like the same person, her art was indeed different. It is more active and solid, while at the same time expressing a nervous and caring vision. Now, at the age of 50, Kaur has developed into a deeply compassionate artist without sacrificing the playful wit which always counter-balanced her realisation that darkness is ever-present in our alarming, turbulent world.

Richard Cork is an award-winning art critic, historian, broadcaster and exhibition curator. His most recent book is 'Face To Face: Interviews With Artists', published by Tate in 2015.







Uhr und Galerie



Permindar Kaur: Art with a Life of its Own

Barbara Brownie

When Permindar speaks about her teddies, she credits them with agency. Many of her developments respond to the notion that the teddies are somehow “active” and potentially able to interact with their surroundings. Two of her larger teddies guard the entrance to the gallery, positioned on the highest perches, looking down at those entering and exiting the space. “I want it to feel like they could escape through the doors and windows,” she says.

Permindar speaks about the teddies as if she does not have total control over them or their apparent purpose; as if they are sentient, independent creatures whose motives cannot be anticipated, even by their creator. She describes them as “doing their own thing, existing in the space”. Permindar would like to create the impression that her teddies might not be permanently contained within the gallery space, rather that they could, at any moment, reconfigure themselves.

Unexplained events in the gallery seem to reinforce the idea that they have a life of their own. Since installing her exhibition, Permindar has noticed that certain teddies have been mysteriously rearranged. On occasions she has arrived to find them stacked in a tower, or sunk deeper into their cart. These changes, which were likely the result of audiences’ associations between teddies and play, support Permindar’s descriptions of the teddies as active agents, apparently capable of escaping of their own accord.

In many ways, this approach to her artwork bleeds into Permindar’s working practices. She does not only credit her work with agency, but also with its own creative direction, allowing the work to mould itself into its own finished form. She speaks about her process as if the work leads the way. “The work changes, adapting to the space”, she says, and “you don’t know what will come out”. Each teddy, or each piece of metal, seems to have a destiny that is not solely designed by Permindar herself.

The creative process is a journey into the unknown and one that Permindar describes as “finding something at the back of your head which you didn’t know

was there.” Outcomes evolve through experiments, as she works on several pieces simultaneously, led by instinct. Her role is not to plan, but to enable the work to reveal itself. Ideas continue to be shaped throughout the final stages of production.

Permindar likens part of her process to free play. Free play, in Permindar’s case, is a method of idea generation. The goal is to serendipitously discover something which may later be of use. That spark of inspiration must then be followed up: to encounter something that is “interesting, and then... to work out why it’s interesting”.

“Playing with ideas”, Permindar enables the work to resolve into its ideal form. She is not alone in this use of play. Stephen Nachmanovitch has described “free play” as a method for provoking “spontaneous creation”, that often generates “the kind of creative breakthrough from which art and originality emerge”. For Permindar, play is how she makes unexpected leaps and discoveries. While a structured, logical process of development would only yield predictable results, play leads to unexpected destinations.

This intuitive method was partly driven by the space in which the work would be exhibited. The gallery is a large space, requiring engagement with installations and spaces that are much larger than the studio in which the pieces were developed. Permindar notes that large works can’t be considered complete until they are located within the gallery space. Moreover, since it is site-specific, each installation is a different piece of work every time it is sited.

Permindar’s approach is evident in the final installations, as she allowed it to evolve even after the exhibition has opened to the public. The work will never be entirely fixed. Despite the markers of domestic space – a chair, table, and “nest” – the teddies have not yet found a home. They will continue their journey towards their unexpected destination, and even Permindar does not know where they will end up.

Dr Barbara Brownie is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Communication at the University of Hertfordshire.

Reference:

Nachmanovitch, S. (1990), *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, New York: Penguin Putnam, p. 1.



Image: Nest, 2016





Image above: *Den*, 2016



Permindar Kaur Biography

Selected Solo Shows

- 2016: *Interlopers* – UH Galleries, Art and Design Gallery, Hatfield
2014: *Hiding Out* – Djanogly Gallery, Nottingham
1999: *Untitled* – Berwick Gymnasium Art Gallery, Berwick
Comfort of Little Places – Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth
Comfort of Little Places – Fabrica, Brighton
Out of Breath – East London Gallery
1998: *Independent Thoughts* – Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham
1997: *Secrets Must Circulate* – Galeria Carles Poy, Barcelona, Spain
1996: *Cold Comfort* – Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and UK tour
Cold Comfort – Mead Gallery, Coventry

Selected Group Shows

- 2016: *Now for Tomorrow II*, Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham
2015: *Talking with Deptford* – Deptford X Gallery, curated by Janette Parris, London
2014: *A Vision of Utopia* – site specific commission for Spirella Building, Letchworth
2013: *What's Going On?* – Usher Gallery, Lincoln
2005: *Spoilt Rotten: Young Curators 2005*, Oriel Davies Gallery, Newtown, Powys, Wales
2000: *At Home with Art* – Tate Gallery, London and National Touring Exhibitions, London
1999: *Hot Air* – Granship, Shizouka Arts Centre, Japan
1998: *Claustrophobia* – Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and UK tour
Where I Am – Galeria da Mitra, Lisbon, Portugal for Caminho do Oriente, Expo '98
1997: *Flexible Co-existence* – Art Tower Mito, Mito, Japan
Krishna, The Divine Lover – Whitechapel Art Gallery, London and UK tour
Pictura Britannica, Art from Britain – Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
Out of India – Queens Museum of Art, New York, US
1995: *The British Art Show* – Manchester, Edinburgh, Cardiff

Public Commissions

- 2002: *Dudes*, permanent public sculpture, Port of Tyne International Ferry Terminal, North Shields, Newcastle
1999: *Hakata Riverain Art Project* – public art commission for Hakata Riverain, Fukuoka, Japan, curated by Fumio Nanjo of Nanjo and Associates

www.permindarkaur.com

Interlopers Perminder Kaur

18 March – 7 May 2016

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