

# NOTHING FIXED

## The Sculptural Strategies of Permindar Kaur

Natalie Rudd

“Nothing is fixed,” Permindar Kaur mused recently when discussing her initial thoughts on the layout for her exhibition, **Outgrown**, at The Art House, Wakefield.<sup>1</sup> It was a seemingly innocuous comment, briefly uttered albeit with quiet determination, yet it lingered in the atmosphere, conjuring images of a delightfully playful sculptural scenario, of objects free to transform and reconfigure at will. Kaur went on to describe a veritable art house where anything could happen: monsters under the bed, a herd of animals in the playroom, a tower of chairs at risk of toppling. Kaur’s longstanding interest in domestic space as a site for narrative potential has attracted considerable critical attention.<sup>2</sup> When one delves beneath the external armature of her work, however, it is possible to discern an intriguing set of sculptural preoccupations centring on the tensions between notions of fixity and flux. Through a close analysis of Kaur’s artistic development and motivations, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of a beguiling sculptural practice, one which evades easy categorisation and pushes the possibilities of a given material or space.

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Even the beginning of Kaur's career is notable for its avoidance of fixed positions. Born and raised in Nottingham to Sikh parents of Indian heritage, Kaur accepted a place on the undergraduate Fine Art degree at Sheffield Polytechnic (1986-89). She immediately enjoyed the freedoms of "a generous fine art course,"<sup>3</sup> one which enabled her to acquire skills across a range of materials and approaches – including sculpture, ceramics, photography, film, and animation – without feeling cajoled into any one discipline. Although making and materiality emerged early on as primary drivers, her proximity to the performance department was enlightening, enabling her to discern the powerful potential of movement and change.

From the start, Kaur was fascinated by the juxtaposition of contrasting materials: the soft pliancy of hand-stitched textiles, for example, pressed up against the unforgiving strength of welded steel. Welding was considered a more serious activity than sewing at Sheffield. However, at this early stage in her career, the gendered implications of Kaur's material choices were less important than the relationships between Eastern and Western ideologies. Combining different materials and techniques enabled Kaur to engage in a haptic exploration of the various components of her own cultural heritage. This spirit of play in Kaur's emerging practice was also informed by the work of the American artist, Mike Kelley (1954-2012). Kaur became aware of Kelley's work during her time at Sheffield and she was immediately struck by the powerful, menacing way in which he incorporated soft toys into his work. This disarming "mixture of playful and disturbing" made a lasting impact on Kaur, encouraging her to explore the darker recesses of childhood imagery and toy forms.<sup>4</sup>

There were further opportunities for Kaur to extend her terms of reference during her time studying for her MA in Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art (1990-92). A group trip to Germany gave Kaur direct insight into the work of Arte Povera artists, including Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017). She admired their direct manipulation of a reduced range of accessible materials coupled with the



strong installational implications of their work. Kaur also enjoyed the formal and material dexterity of the so-called 'New British Sculpture' produced by an older generation of sculptors including Tony Cragg (b. 1949), Richard Deacon (b. 1949) and Alison Wilding (b. 1948). Their witty and playful manipulation of everyday materials using a range of DIY techniques prompted Kaur to muse that she had been "born in the wrong era."<sup>5</sup> The French American sculptor, Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), provided another important source of inspiration. Her mysterious cage-like structures housing disturbing domestic scenarios provoke poignant reflections on the container and the contained, and on issues of safety and threat. Kaur recalls the powerful experience of viewing a range of Bourgeois' sculpture for the first time in the United States Pavilion of the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993.

Kaur enjoyed early success, fuelled in part by the advocacy of the art historian, curator and fellow artist, Eddie Chambers (b. 1960), who has championed the work of Black British artists since the 1980s. Spotting Kaur's acute talent, Chambers secured an impressive range of exhibition projects while she was still a student at Glasgow.<sup>6</sup> Kaur was hugely grateful for the support, but became increasingly aware that "if I continued to do projects to do with identity, that's all I would ever do... I want to be able to make work about everything, really."<sup>7</sup>

In 1992 Kaur moved to Barcelona, where she would reside, on and off, for the next six years. It was a bold move, one which involved the artist unfixing herself from her northern European ways and embracing everything that was unfamiliar: a new language, a new culture, new customs. She enjoyed the process of inhabiting the feelings of her parents when they first arrived in the UK. The relocation had a liberating effect on Kaur's work, freeing up space for her to incorporate a heightened emotionality. The experience also enabled her to draw inspiration from an artistic community which thrived on a looser approach. As Kaur recalls: "I liked to make things well, sturdy and strong, but my way was not better. I admired their lightness of touch. It felt like something I could never get, and really wanted."<sup>8</sup>



Cot, 1994. Photo:  
Peter Lundh.

Despite the geographical distance between Barcelona and the UK, significant exhibition opportunities continued to arise during the mid-1990s. Kaur was included in the fourth British Art Show in 1995.<sup>9</sup> Curated by the critic, Richard Cork (b. 1947), and artists Rose Finn-Kelcey (1945-2014) and Thomas Lawson (b. 1951), this edition of the five-yearly survey of contemporary British art fell on a boom year for so-called 'Young British Art', with Damien Hirst (b. 1965), Gary Hume (b. 1962) and their contemporaries, grabbing much of the spotlight. The exhibition was also notable for

its significant representation of art by women: sixteen women were represented compared with just ten men. Kaur showed five works, including **Innocence** (1993), which was subsequently acquired for the Arts Council Collection, and **Cot** (1994), a foreboding white steel vessel stuffed with bright red mattresses spluttering out limb-like appendages. Kaur was in good company, particularly among several women who were experimenting with precarious and fragile sculptural forms, including Anya Gallaccio's (b. 1963) sensuous installations made using chocolate or decaying gerbera flowers. Kaur was particularly entranced by the light-touch work of Lucia Nogueira (1950-98), a Brazilian artist based in London. Her intricate installations involved a range of found materials including spent matchsticks, broken glass, and a 6,000-piece chandelier smashed onto the floor.

Although Kaur and Nogueira shared an interest in creating disconcerting domestic scenarios, Kaur has never used found objects, preferring instead to make everything herself. Her sculptural forms are therefore pristine, box fresh: emerging as if newborn into the world. This strategy satisfies Kaur's ongoing desire to avoid preconceptions and fixed interpretations: "I wanted objects that didn't have a place, so you didn't know where they came from and you were not aware of their history."<sup>10</sup>

**Tall Chairs** (1996) is the earliest work on display in **Outgrown**. It occupies a curious position within Kaur's practice, embodying early influences and concerns but also looking forward to current preoccupations. The work was first presented in 1996 at the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick as part of Kaur's first solo exhibition, **Cold Comfort**, held concurrently at the Mead and at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Entirely fabricated rather than found, the work comprises two black steel chairs towering over seven feet tall. Atop each chair rests a small genderless, toylike figure – no more than a blob with head, arms and legs – made from polar fleece in a dazzling shade of sunshine yellow. The two figures cower, apparently too afraid to look up or down. There are



many tensions here. Firstly, the nightmare scenario of attempting safety through climbing, only to find yourself stuck in mid-air with no means of escape. Equally striking is Kaur's long-held interest in transforming the scale and height of things to increase dramatic tensions, in this case by extending the proportions of a chair far beyond ergonomic usefulness.

There are also multiple material collisions, particularly the charge between the fearful fleece bundles perched perilously on unforgiving powder-coated black steel. Yet, although this work conveys a precarious situation, it remains, in all respects, well-made and precisely executed: inherently strong. As Kaur has reflected recently, her work is

Tall Beds, 1996, in *Cold Comfort*.  
Photo: Gary Kirkham.

precarious yet *not* fragile.<sup>11</sup> This unusual combination, of precarity and strength, sets Kaur's work apart from many of her contemporaries who were exploring the vulnerabilities of perishable materials or distressed found objects.

In many ways, **Tall Chairs** could be considered an early rumination on how to fix a feeling of unfixeness. Kaur's use of dramatic stasis, of freeze-frame moments, is a strategy that can be observed across many of her works and perhaps stems from her early experimentation with photography and performance at Sheffield. It is as if the viewer's presence has prompted a sudden stop in the action, which in turn unleashes the potentiality for things to go either way. This uncertainty emerges from private emotions that the artist weaves into the work, allowing them to reside there quietly – not without melancholy – for wider contemplation. As the curator, Claire Doherty, has deftly defined, Kaur explores a “multiplicity of meanings around an intensely personal stage.”<sup>12</sup>

The reference to staging is significant, for Kaur not only stages scenarios within individual works but also considers each solo exhibition to be a unique installation in itself, one which responds to the dynamics of a given architecture. Her works operate as individual players that perform a specific function within a wider dramatic situation, or as Kaur explained recently: “each work having its own individual purpose, but creating a whole story when viewed together.”<sup>13</sup> At The Art House, the square format of the gallery provides a domestic setting, with different corners allocated to different ‘rooms’. In an alternative context, a very tall space, a corporate setting or a large window might spark different ideas, enabling new configurations and groupings. Each exhibition opportunity offers new permutations for play, and, of course, fresh possibilities for keeping options open.

Kaur's increasing interest in the power of constituent parts has directly informed her recent work. **Overgrown House** (2020) provides the centrepiece for the









**Outgrown** exhibition. Towering over three metres tall, this foreboding powder-coated steel structure reminds us of the sinister domestic architecture of fairy tales and nightmares. Peppercorned with the nuts and bolts of new growth, each sprout clipped uniformly to suggest the presence of an overseeing custodian, the house speaks of an uneasy kind of tug of war between presence and absence, nature and culture, progress and stasis. The house is surrounded by a copse of stunted shoots, creating a context, a forest, a private domain. This intriguing scattering of parts recalls the preoccupation with repeated units found in minimal and post-minimal sculpture. There is also a spirit of playful unfinishedness akin to completing a house of Lego only

to discover a baffling assortment of unused parts. At a studio level, Kaur's interest in parts serves as an important reminder of the practical considerations informing the making of large-scale sculpture. Her initial decision to make works in sections that can be broken down and packed away neatly stemmed from a pragmatic need to consider storage and transport implications. Over time, she has come to realise that there is significant creative potential to be found in a modular approach, and she enjoys the technical challenge of making units that can fix together and come apart again.

Parts and their permutations take a starring role in Kaur's latest work, **Unidentified Animals** (2022). Comprising an assorted heap of legs, heads, and torsos, this random menagerie awaits animation through haptic interaction. Kaur has chosen a small scale: the parts are easy to handle, and toylike in quality. However, as Kaur explains, there is "a harshness to them."<sup>14</sup> Made from welded lengths of steel box section, these simple units provide only enough information needed to identify the creature: a hump suggests a camel; the long neck denotes a giraffe. There is a clear economy here, reminiscent of the sparse yet significant mark-making evident in a child's drawing. Kaur leaves space for the imagination to fill in the gaps, to transform the familiar.

What happens when we challenge expectations by building a hybrid six-legged, horned creature with two heads? There are obvious opportunities for change here, however, as Kaur acknowledges, "it is limited change."<sup>15</sup> The animals are ultimately curtailed by their own abstracted rigidity. After enjoying brief moments of play, they must return to the confines of their tabletop home as redundant, inanimate fragments. This intriguing interest in curtailment within a wider spirit of flux can also be discerned in Kaur's dynamic teddy bear forms where bodies are stuffed uncomfortably tight, and limbs are stitched to strike one active pose.



Kaur reflected recently that she received criticism at art school for her tendency to make more than one of a similar thing. She considers this predilection to stem from her Sikh heritage, where the expectation was always to put the collective, the group, the family, before individual concerns. How individuals behave within a collective remains an ongoing source of inspiration. Random configurations and positions, as evidenced in **Unidentified Animals**, can contribute to a sense of redundancy and inefficacy. When individuals cluster together to perform the same action or orientation, as in **Untitled – Bed** (2020), suddenly the crowd becomes a source of threat and power.

Equally discernible within Kaur's practice is an interest in the proximity of animal and human behaviours and interactions. Again, Kaur accounts for this interest by referencing her Sikh upbringing, citing a memorable image on permanent display in the family home during her childhood. This commemorative portrait of Guru Gobind Singh (1667-1708) – the divine poet, philosopher and warrior – represented the spiritual leader as upright and triumphant, riding a white horse and holding a falcon in one hand. Kaur's distinct memory of this vivid interjection of magical, spiritual realism into an otherwise mundane domestic setting is compelling, providing a powerful visual antecedent to her subsequent work. After all, Kaur creates dreamlike spaces where anything can happen; where humans, animals, and birds engage in fantastical domestic dramas. Her hybrid characters are proactive in their quests to secure protection, comfort, territory or escape – key concerns for any living creature. However, unlike the achievements captured in reverential portraiture, Kaur's protagonists never meet success. There are no reassurances, no victories, no conclusions here, for Kaur's realm is interminably precarious, insistently troublesome. Nothing is certain, nothing fixed.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Perminder Kaur conversation with Damon Jackson-Waldock and Natalie Rudd, 15 July 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example, Alice Correia, *At Home (in a Pandemic)* in **Perminder Kaur: Home, Alice Correia and Eddie Chambers** (London: HS Projects, 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> Perminder Kaur conversation with Natalie Rudd, 4 August 2022.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> These feelings were catalysed by the teaching methods at Glasgow School of Art, which favoured a highly conceptual approach.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Kaur showed her impressive early work, **Glasshouses** (1991) in the group show, **Four x 4**, at Arnolfini, Bristol in 1991, which also featured the work of Virginia Nimarkoh, Alistair Raphael and Vincent Stokes.
- <sup>7</sup> Perminder Kaur and Anna McNay, *An Interview with Perminder Kaur by Anna McNay*, *The Flux Review* 5, (2021). [www.permindarkaur.com/texts/anna-mcnay-interview/](http://www.permindarkaur.com/texts/anna-mcnay-interview/) [accessed 10 August 2022].
- <sup>8</sup> Ian Hunt and Perminder Kaur, *Perminder Kaur and Ian Hunt in conversation*, in **Perminder Kaur: Black & Blue** (London: New Art Projects, 2017), n.p.
- <sup>9</sup> Vicky Lewis and Katrina Kookall, eds., **British Art Show 4** (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995). The exhibition toured to Manchester, Edinburgh and Cardiff, UK.
- <sup>10</sup> Ian Hunt and Perminder Kaur, in conversation, n.p.
- <sup>11</sup> Perminder Kaur conversation with Natalie Rudd, 4 August 2022.
- <sup>12</sup> Claire Doherty, *While you were sleeping*, in **Perminder Kaur: Cold Comfort**, ed. Claire Doherty (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1996), p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Hilary Gresty, *Perminder Kaur and Natalie Rudd, Researching Women in Sculpture season: Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 4 May 2022 [the full recording is available in the Henry Moore Institute Library].
- <sup>14</sup> Perminder Kaur conversation with Natalie Rudd, 4 August 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



