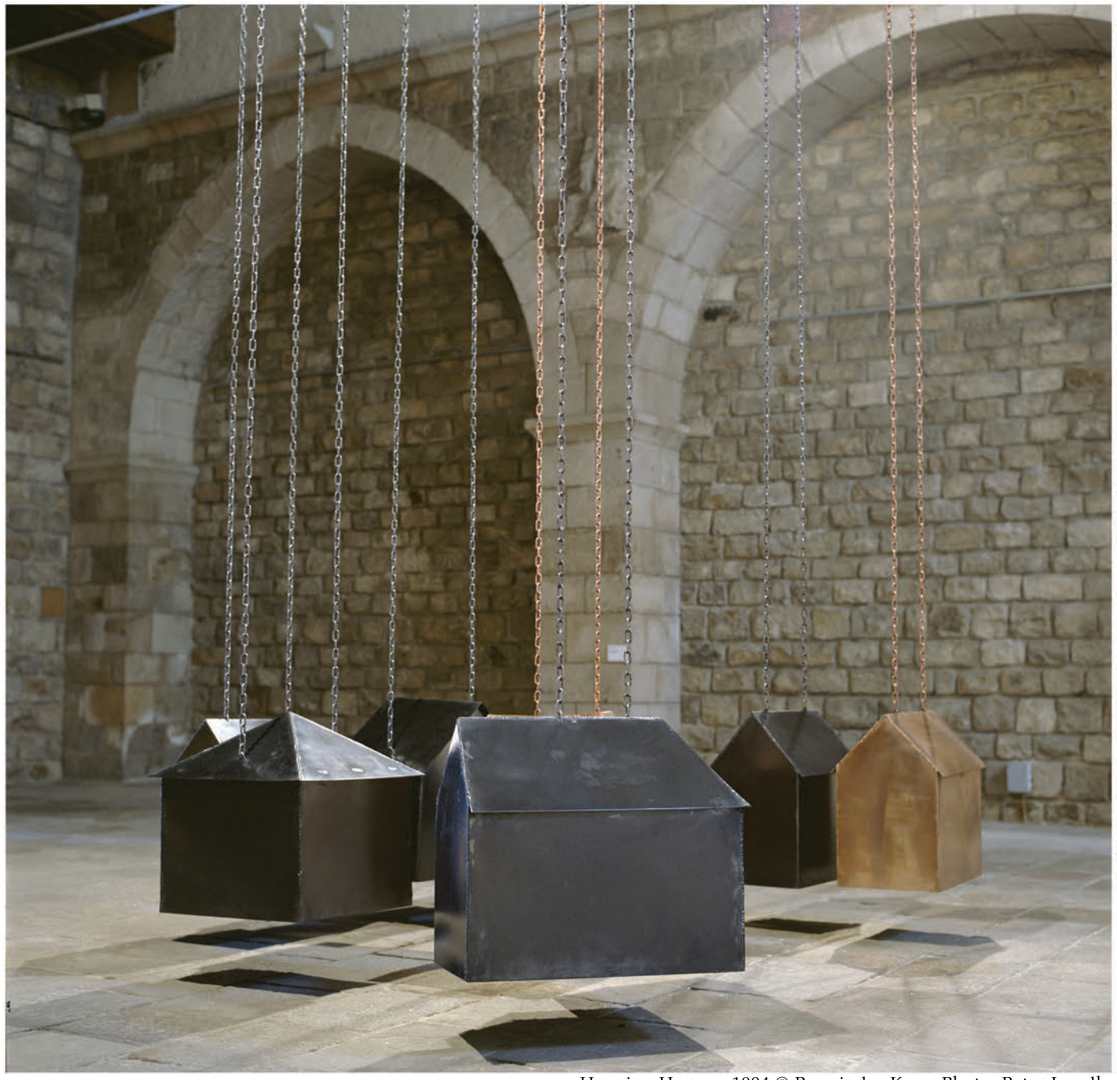
An Interview with Permindar Kaur by Anna McNay



Hanging Houses, 1994 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Peter Lundh

Permindar Kaur (b1965, Nottingham) uses her sculptures and installations to explore themes of childhood, cultural identity, vulnerability and 'home'. Having started out showing with the British black arts movement in the early 1990s, she returned, after a decade's break, in the 2010s and has rebuilt her reputation and standing, so much so that she is currently participating in three exhibitions simultaneously. Her works – always self-made to escape the pre-existing connotations and histories of a readymade – are frequently simple domestic forms, which play with and distort scale, and incorporate bright colours, to bring about a precarious – and often unsettling – counterpoise between playfulness and darkness; fairy tale and nightmare.

Kaur studied at Sheffield City Polytechnic (BA Hons Fine Art, 1986-89) and Glasgow School of Art (MA Fine Art, 1990-92) and has gone on to exhibit internationally, including in Japan and Australia. Major solo exhibitions include Hiding Out at the Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham Lakeside Arts (2014); Untitled at the Berwick Gymnasium Art Gallery, Berwick (1999); Comfort of Little Places at Aspex, Portsmouth (1998); and Cold Comfort I and II at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and the Mead Gallery, Coventry (1996).

Kaur spoke to Anna McNay during lockdown #3 about her current exhibitions, her key concerns, what 'home' has meant for her at different points in her practice, the influence of her Sikh heritage on her work, and the strange, colourful 'bed bugs' in her current solo show at 5 Howick Place, London.

You are currently very busy, with three exhibitions on the go: the group exhibitions Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945, an Arts Council Collection Touring Exhibition, currently at Yorkshire Sculpture Park; A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s, at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; and the solo show Home, curated by HS Projects, at 5 Howick Place, London. Is it usual for you to have so much happening at once?

Back in the '90s, I was actually a lot busier. I was showing constantly, and I was being asked to be involved with lots of different projects. It was going really well, but then I took a 10-year break, and afterwards my approach to art had changed – it is less exhibition dependent and more of a continuous process.

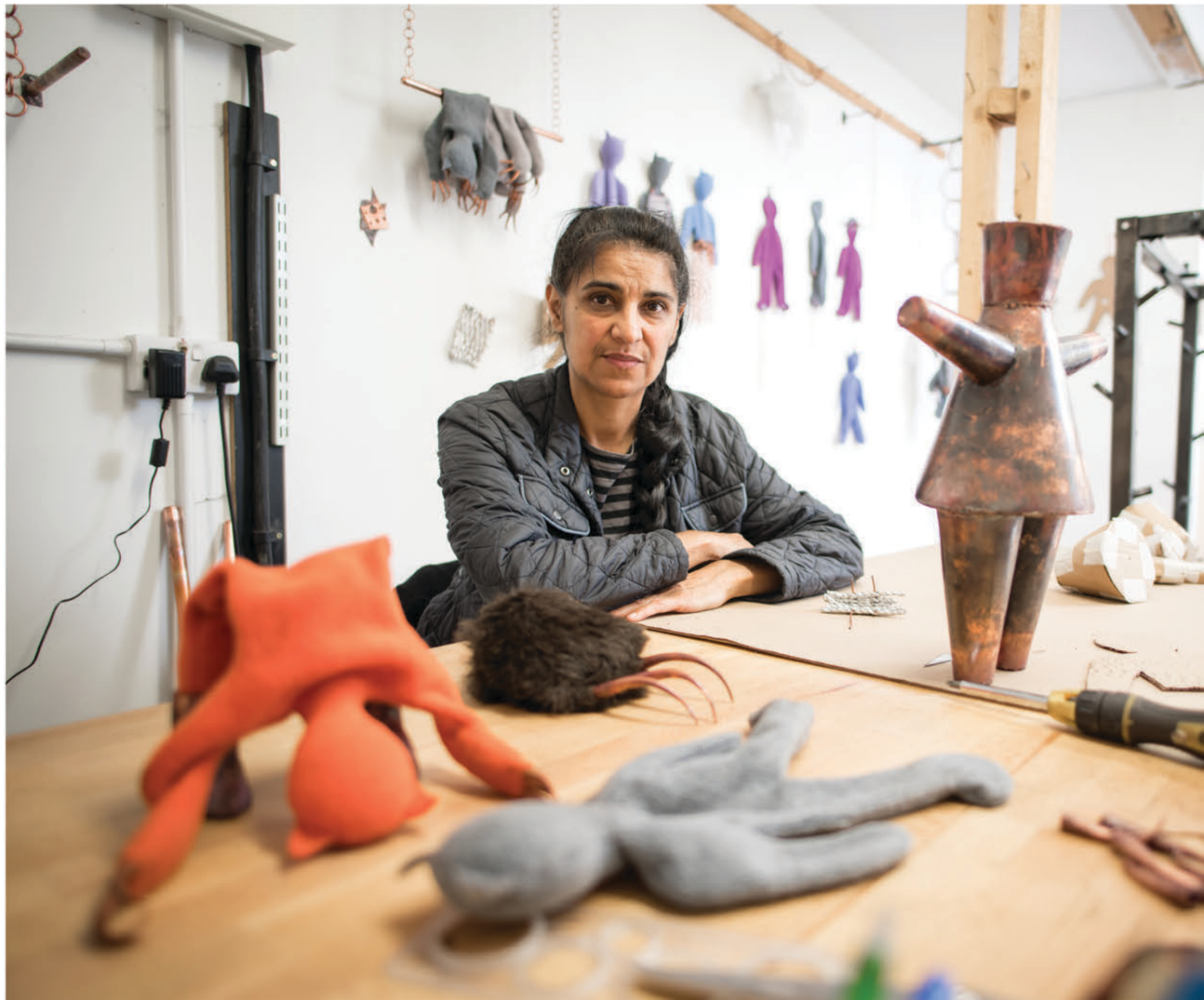
Have you managed to keep working throughout the various lockdowns this past year?

I have been in the studio a lot more. I haven't been able to travel to London or elsewhere. Meetings have been fewer and mainly online. Work seems to become a dominant force – that's all there is, work. The lack of social interaction has affected me, but being busy has kept me focused and stopped me being worried about the future.

Is that largely positive in your case, though?

It has been good, yes, to have more time in the studio, and to play and explore. Through the first lockdown, I had the show in London to prepare, which was good, because I know other artists who had the majority of their projects indefinitely delayed or even cancelled. I had to bring the timetable to get the work ready forward, just in case of another lockdown. It was a lot of juggling, but it was good to have that focus.

Permindar Kaur, 2018 © Brian Benson



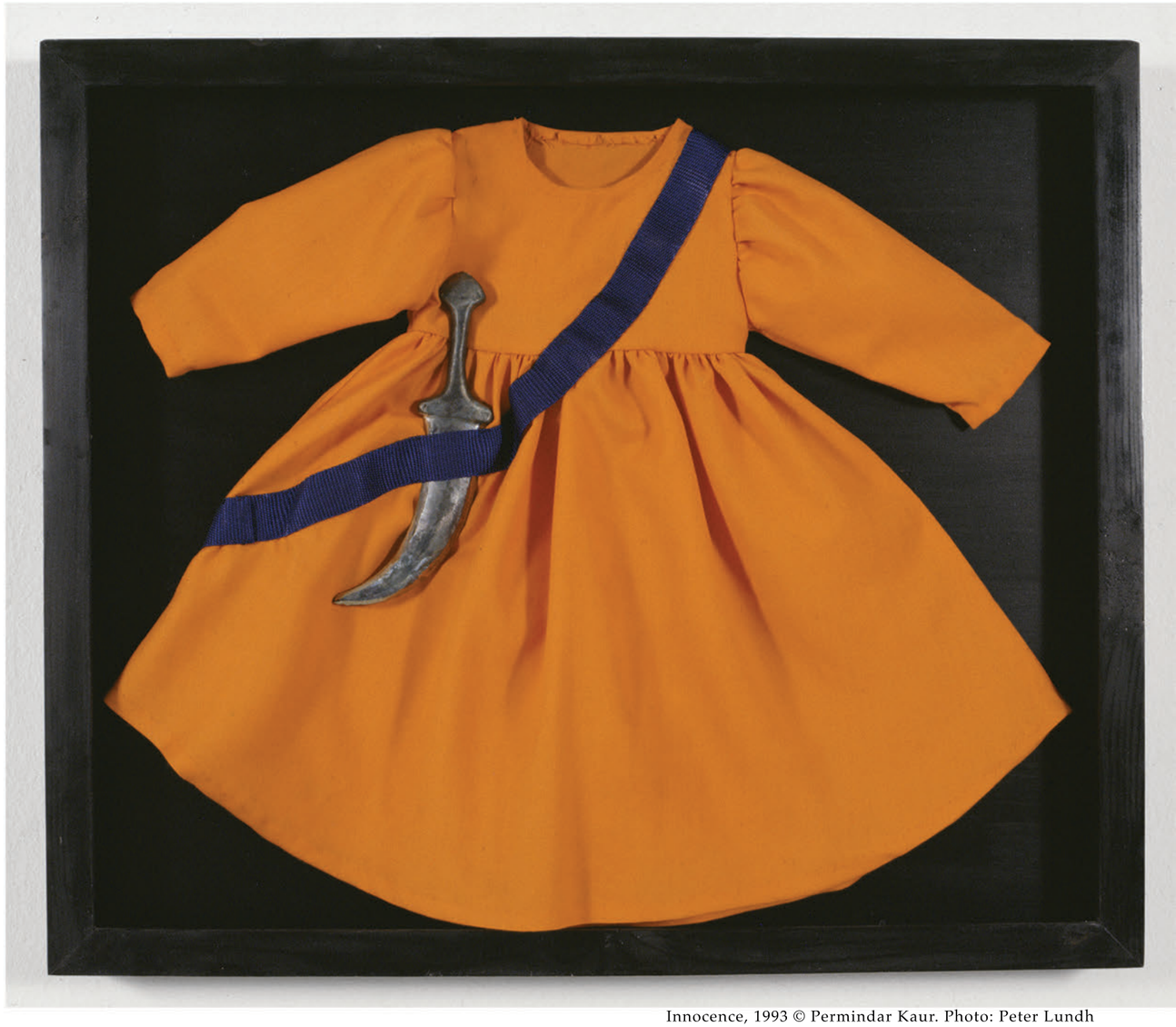
Tell me about the significance of the exhibition title, Home. And what does 'home' mean to you?

I was thinking about how the concept of 'home' has changed for me in different works throughout my career, from the very first house I made in 1990, in my first studio in Blast Lane, Sheffield, in the heart of the steel industry. It was a three-metre-tall house, and each brick was carefully welded in steel. I placed ceramic objects inside the bricks: those in the bottom three layers represented my grandparents; the middle layers represented my parents; and the top layer represented me. The building – the home – was made up of the different generations, and my idea was that that is your identity, that is who you are. Then the Glasshouses, which I made in 1991, were about the wider Sikh community in Glasgow. Because they were made from glass, they felt like museum displays, and you weren't sure whether the ceramic objects inside were historical or everyday objects. I piled them up, so you couldn't actually see what some of the objects were, but they were all Sikh or Indian objects. The houses were designed like the one-storey buildings found in the Punjab. Then, in 1994, I made Hanging Houses, which was shown in a church, La Capella, in Barcelona, where I was living at the time. They were built like bunkers from iron and copper and hung on long chains, hovering above the ground, they became the new bells of the space and made quite a nice sound as they hit each other. My most recent house, Overgrown House, which is on show in the Home exhibition, is completely different from the others. There are no objects inside, and it's more austere. It looks organic, but it looks abandoned as well. There are a few little growths with offshoots coming up from the ground, as if another house were growing. So, each house has a very different feel to it. I think the meaning of the house and the home changes each time I make one. It's not just about me and my identity.

Overgrown House, 2020, London @ Permindar Kaur. Photo: Thierry Bal

Talking about identity, can you tell me a little about the dress, Innocence, you have in Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945? It makes reference to your Sikh heritage.

I made the work in 1993, again while I was living in Barcelona. It is very much about my cultural identity, but I didn't make it to be read as a Sikh garment. I wanted it to be read on many different levels. When people first saw it in Spain, they saw it as a ceremonial dress and thought it could be something from the Middle East. The most important aspect of that work is not that it is a Sikh garment, but the juxtaposition of putting a knife next to a baby's dress – that feeling of naivety and vulnerability, a child coming into the world.



Innocence, 1993 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Peter Lundh

The knife is also a Sikh object, though.

Yes, it's one of the Five Ks. The Five Ks are the things that practising Sikhs wear to symbolise their religion: a Kirpan (knife), a Kara (steel bracelet), Kesh (uncut hair), Kaccha (cotton underwear) and a Kanga (wooden comb) – all things beginning with the letter K in Punjabi. The knife is worn as a symbol of strength.

Is the knife in the work a real knife?

Yes, but I made it myself. I don't ever use real objects in my work. I make everything from scratch, or have things made up from scratch, because I want to remove some of the associations, I want them to have their own history – more of an undefined history.

Tell me about the significance of the colour orange of the dress – and in your work more widely.

Orange is a very important colour in Sikhism. In 1947, when the British left India, and Partition happened, some Sikhs were hoping for their own country like the Muslims had in Pakistan. It didn't happen, but, at the time of making the work, those who continued to want Khalistan, their own country, wore orange turbans. Now orange is worn more generally.

You were born in Nottingham and were not particularly brought up following Sikh traditions. What made you bring them into your work so much initially?

I wanted to explore my identity and look at who I was. My first works basically looked at my childhood. When I first left college, I saw an advert from [art historian and curator] Eddie Chambers in Artists' Newsletter asking for artists to submit work for a self-portraiture show. I decided to make a two-metre-high head of myself. It was painfully intricate, welding each individual rod to make up the whole structure, which I then filled with childhood objects: some Indian, some western. Those sort of things were important to me at that time, and my work was primarily about myself. Then it moved to being about my family, and then my wider family in Glasgow. I had family living there as that was the first place my parents went to when they moved to the UK, before moving to Nottingham. I was intrigued by them as they were a lot more religious than my parents. I was at the college, surrounded by art students, and then, from time to time, I would see my family. There was a stark contrast between the two.

Before studying at Glasgow School of Art, you did a 'generalist' course at Sheffield City Polytechnic. Had you specialised in sculpture by the time you went to Glasgow?

Yes, I had realised by the end of my time in Sheffield that I liked making things, and sculpture was my thing – working three dimensionally in space – and installation. In Sheffield, I got to try everything. We were allowed access to painting and sculpture, film and video – all the specialisms. I spent a lot of time in the sculpture department in my final year. But I also spent a lot of time in the ceramics department. I made lots of pots back then. I was fascinated by clay. Making animations and doing photography – it all influenced the way I approached sculpture as well.

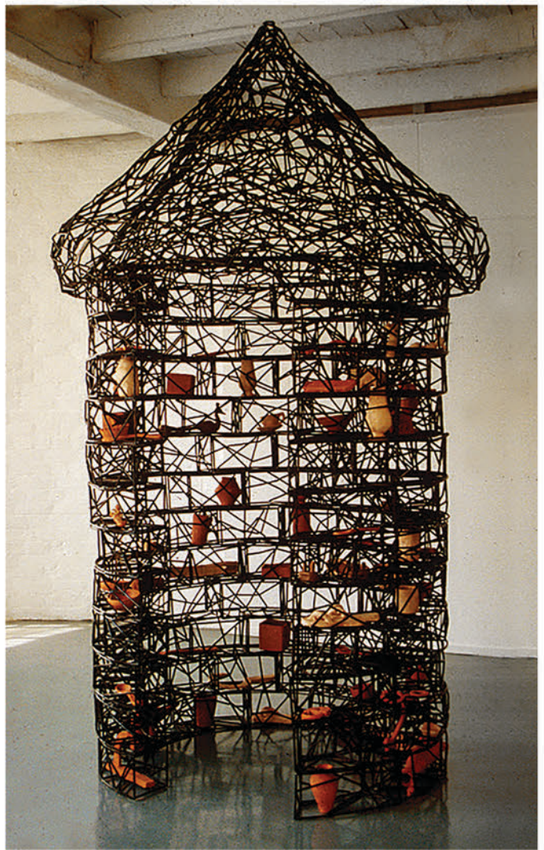
It seems like you still work with a lot of different materials and techniques today – from stitching to welding to carpentry.

Yes, but I have my favourites now, which are fabrics and metals, and combining the two together.

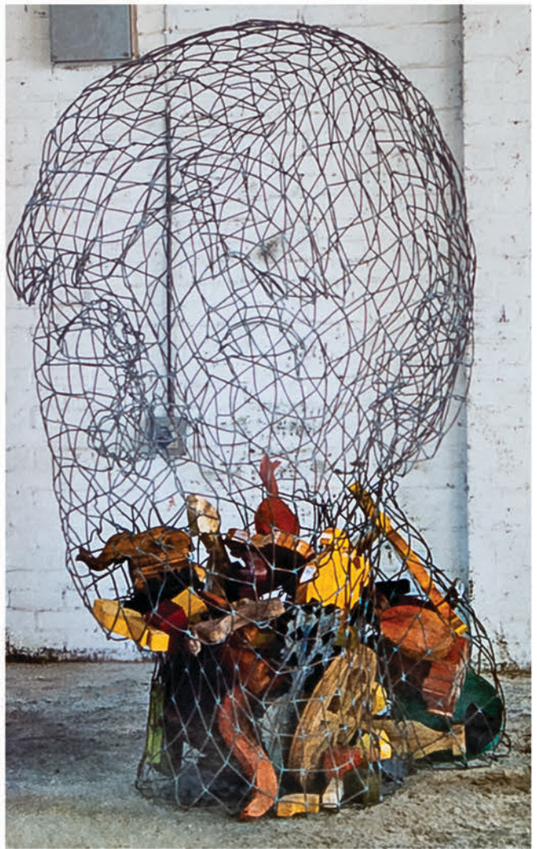
What made you move to Barcelona when you had finished your MA?

It was just on a whim. I had been offered a place at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, but there was no funding. I moved to Barcelona, and, while I was there, they offered me an amazing stipend, but I had become settled in Barcelona, and so I turned it down and stayed there.

House, 1990 © Permindar Kaur



Self Portrait, 1990 © Permindar Kaur



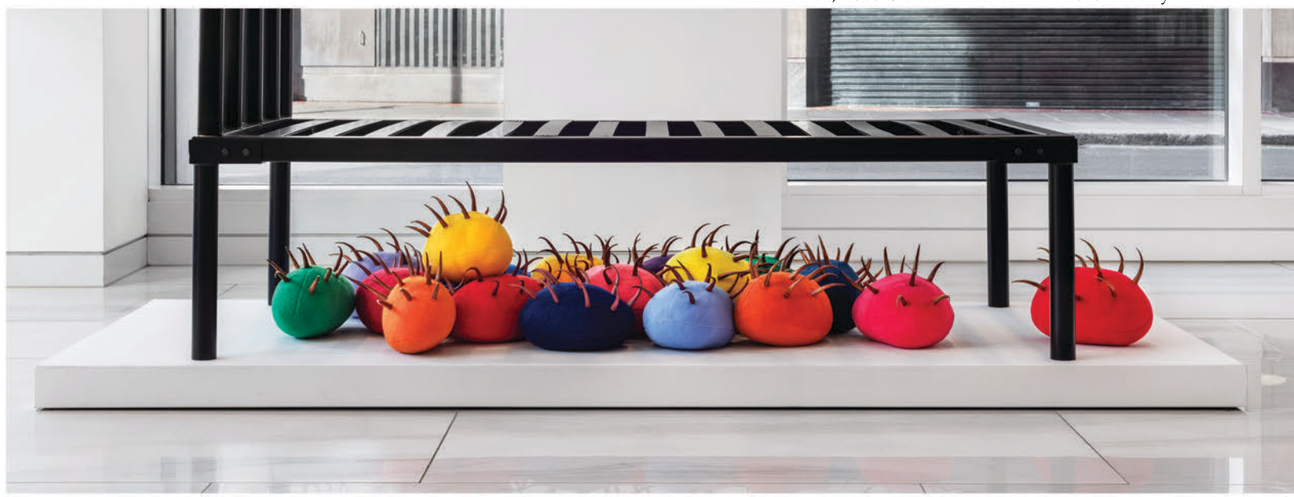
How did your work change as a result? In the UK, you had been involved with and showed a lot with the British black arts movement. Did you feel you were being pigeonholed as a British Asian artist?

Yes, I was working under the umbrella of black arts, which I was happy to do. It enabled me to work on quite big projects and get my work seen. On the other hand, though, yes, it was limiting. I was aware that if I continued to do projects to do with identity, that's all I would ever do. And I wanted to make work about other stuff. I want to be able to make work about everything, really.

What would you say are the key themes in your practice? Childhood still seems pretty central, and then that uncomfortable juxtaposition of childhood, security and innocence with an element of threat – for example, the knife in Innocence, or the bare frame of Untitled – Bed (2020), with the spiky 'creatures' underneath, or the stack of Tall Chairs (1996), on top of which child-like figures seem to cower, afraid.

Childhood is interesting. My first works were, as I have said, about my own childhood, but the later works use its symbolism to talk about vulnerability. Other themes I wanted to work with? Yes, insecurity, and, again, as we have discussed, the idea of the home. The domestic, as well, and the uncanny. I often like my work to reference fairy tales or nursery rhymes. I think it's good when they have a fun, playful side to them, with darkness within that. The most difficult thing is to strike a balance, so the work's neither too dark nor too playful, so you don't quite know how to react to it.

Untitled Bed, 2020 © Permindar Kaur. Photo:Thierry Bal

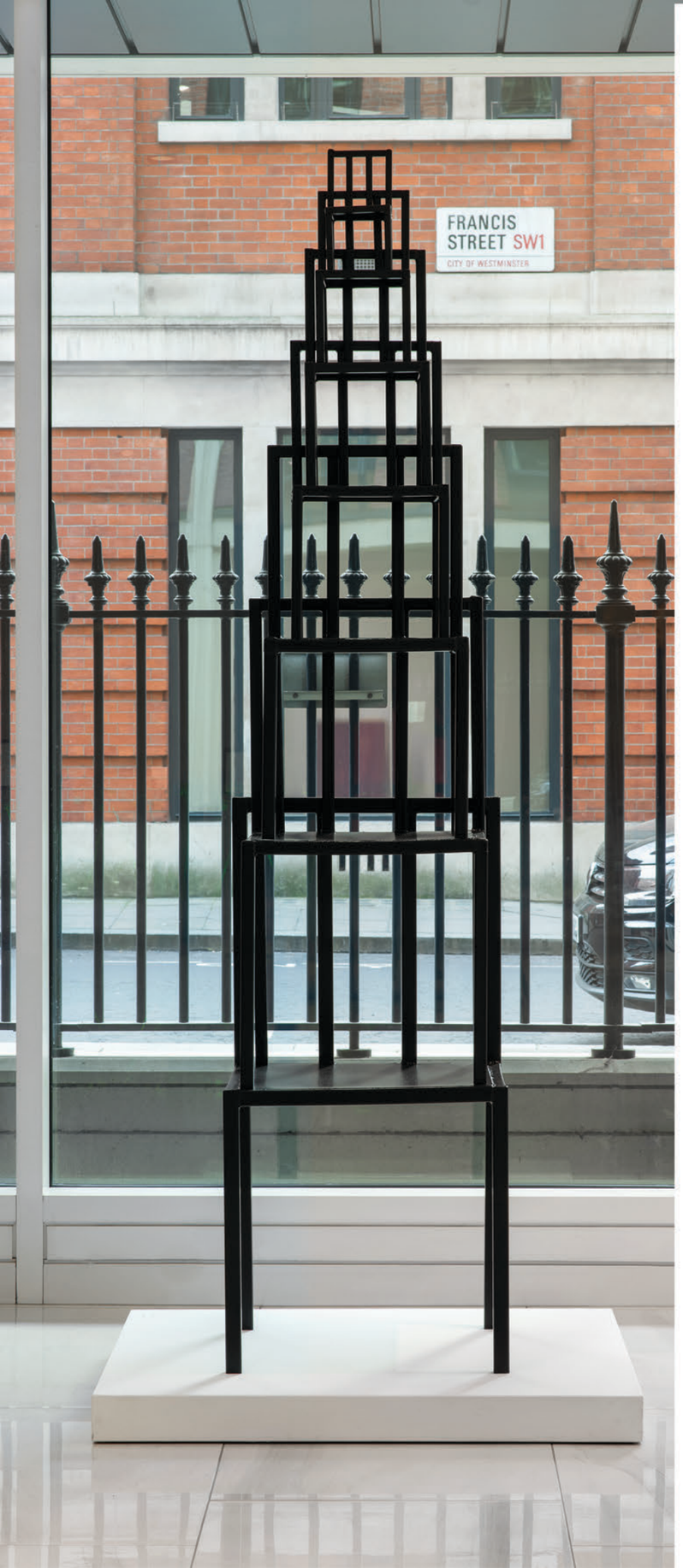


And, from what I have gathered, you don't particularly want to give the answer to that yourself, do you? You want people to figure it out for themselves.

I want to lead them in a certain direction through the choices I make, but not close it off so there's only one interpretation or one way it can be seen. I want to leave it open enough so that people can bring their own ideas, while guiding them to a certain place.

Can you tell me a little about your process? What makes you decide to work in a particular way and with a particular material? Does that dictate the work, or do you have the concept first and then find the appropriate material?

There are two main ways in which I start a work. I'm always drawing in a sketchbook. The best way is when I draw something, and I look at it, and I think: 'Yes, that's what I want to make,' and it's almost fully worked out in my mind. For example, Tall Beds (1996) were something I drew and knew straight away I wanted to make. The next stage is working out the size and the materials – and that can take time. With Tall Beds, I knew I wanted to make really tall beds, and for them to have mattresses, but I didn't know if that was enough, or whether I needed anything underneath the mattresses or the beds. Through drawings, I tried out lots of different interpretations before settling on the final concept. But, basically, 50 per cent was already worked out with the initial sketch. The other way is more intuitive, and I might just have the beginning of something, and then I have to take a risk and think: 'OK, I'm going to make this,' and then I'll start playing with it and putting other objects with it. That takes longer. Overgrown House came about intuitively. I just knew I was fascinated by welding circular steel tubes on to square steel tubes, and it looked both organic and inorganic while being neither.



How important is scale to you?

It's so important. I have played with scale from my first degree show in Sheffield, where I had an oversized toy cart and a seesaw. Maybe it's just natural because I make everything myself, which means I can change the scale without even thinking about it. But scale is important because it changes the way the viewer sees the work. If it's small, then it's more vulnerable, so you become protective of it. If it's large, then you are made to feel vulnerable yourself.

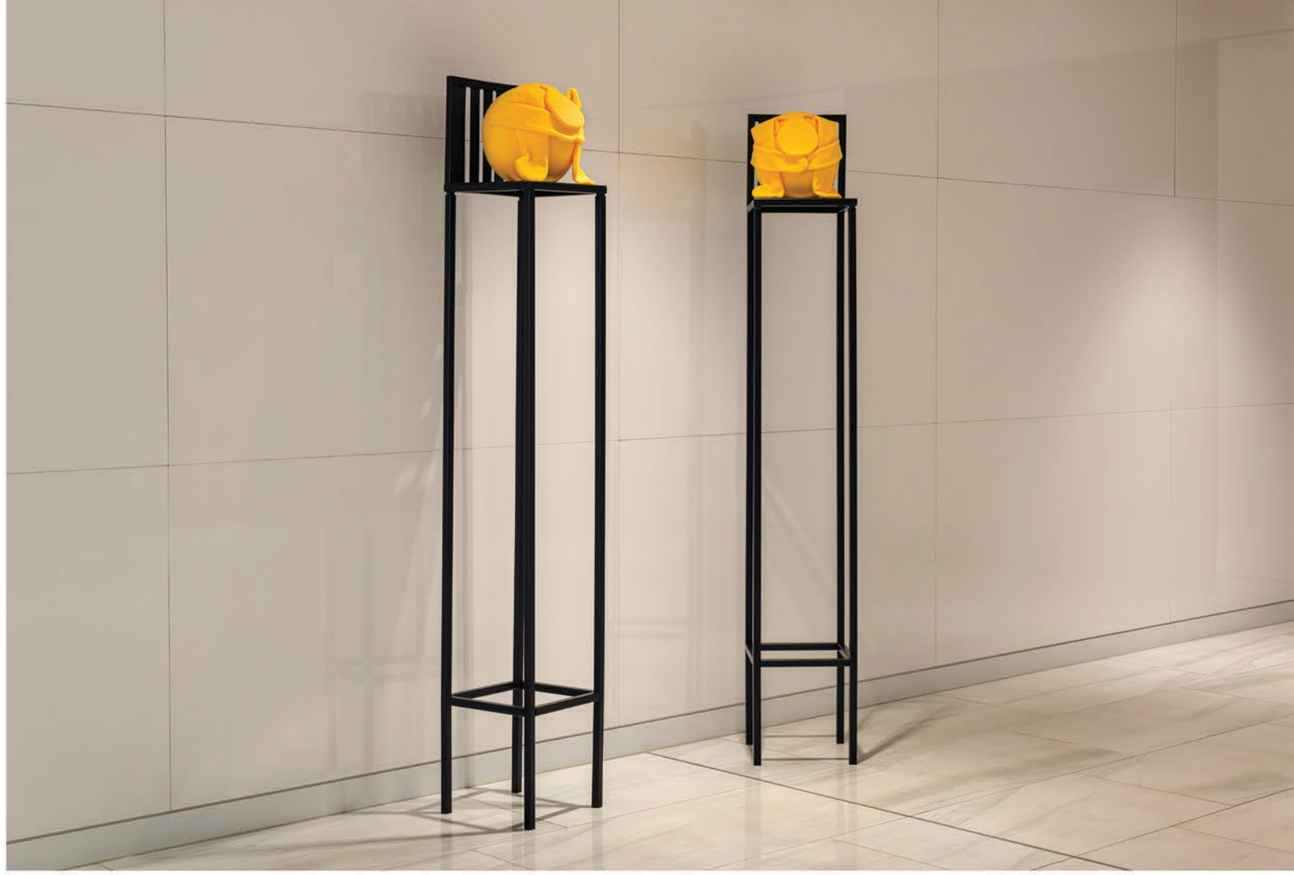
Small Tower (2014-19), a pyramidal stack of chairs decreasing in size, included in Home, was originally made as a public sculpture for Letchworth Garden City in 2014. How does the meaning or impression of the work change when it is brought indoors? Do you often remake works for different purposes (and at different scales)?

It's something new for me. Usually I like to work site-specifically. In some ways, I have done that both with Small Tower and Tower at Letchworth. There, the tower needed to be monumental as I wanted the work to reference the utopian ideals that made Letchworth the first garden city. The gallery version has a completely different feel to it, and it's responding to the site and fills the space in a different way. I thought the work was relevant here because it would talk about hierarchy and utopian ideals, and an office workspace in the City of London is all about that.

Do you approach the making of public sculpture and gallery pieces in a different way?

Yes, because, when you work large, and someone else is making it, you have to have everything worked out. With smaller pieces, there is more of a handmade quality. Small Tower, for example, is a bit rickety and has a narrower, tighter form. To get each leg to fit on, I kept cutting bits off to make sure it sat completely square.

Left: Small Tower, 2014-19 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Thierry Bal



Tall Chairs, 1996 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Thierry Bal

You said that you like to make work specifically for the venue. 5 Howick Place is a mixed retail, office and residential block, and your works are on show in the foyer. What does this venue add to the work and its interpretation?

I was really intrigued. I loved responding to the site, because it added another layer, another meaning to the work. It draws attention to the private and the public sphere. The people walking through there are on their way to work, and so I decided to make the venue more like a home. Instantly, when you put a bed in a space, it becomes a private dwelling. It's fascinating, and it's challenging, because, in a space like that, there are lots of different limitations which help to direct the work.

How involved were you in the curatorial process? Is this typical for you?

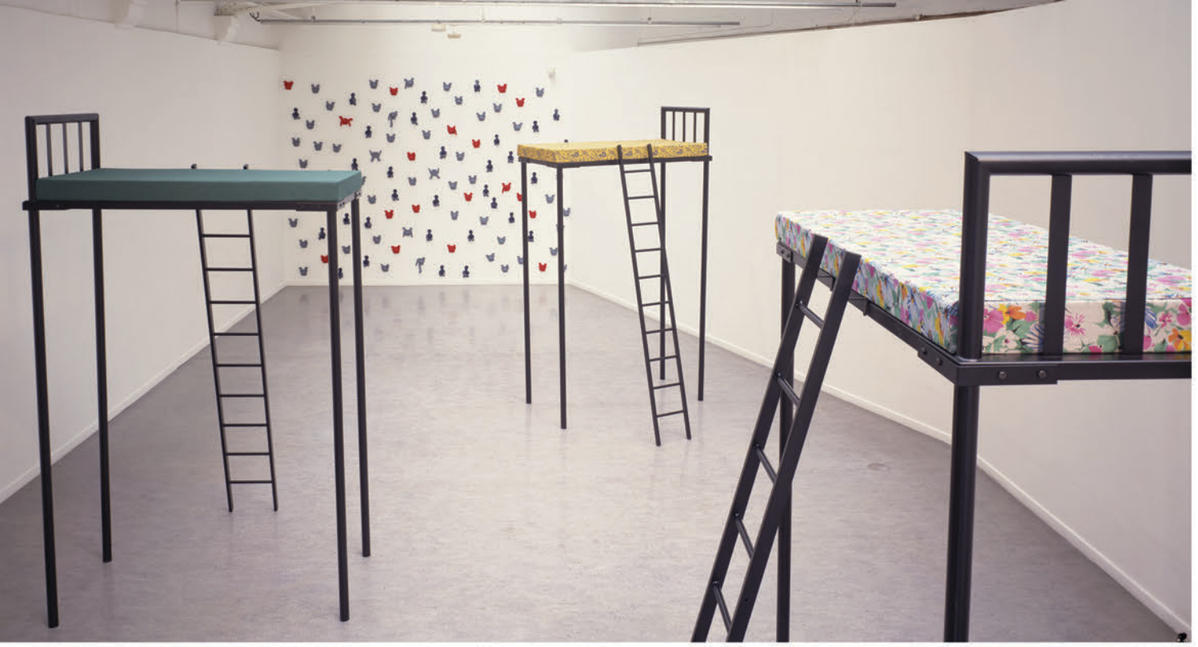
I'm always very involved when it's a solo show. When it's a group show, you have to leave it to the curator, because they have their overall vision of what the show's going to look like. But, with a solo, I tend to have a strong vision of which works should go in, and how I want the work to look. Solo shows are a lot harder to do. I like to create a body of work that forms a particular installation, so it has a certain feel to it. It's not just a case of putting this and this and this together, it's trying to create an overall narrative for the work.

Home is a mixture of pre-existing and new works.

Yes. The oldest one is Tall Chairs, which you mentioned before – two narrow, tall chairs with yellow blob-like figures sitting on top.

Looking pretty scared and vulnerable ...

Yes. They remind me of Humpty Dumpty. They could fall, and then they could never get back up again. Then there's Small Table (2020), as well, which is a new work for that space. I decided to make the table quite small, so it was more of a child-sized table, and then, again, it was all about hierarchy, because on top of that is an even smaller table with four chairs. The tablecloth is more like a carpet, so you've got different levels. As a viewer, you might ask yourself whether you would prefer to be sitting in the larger chair, which is still quite small, or as part of the smaller group, where there are four chairs, a carpet, and there's more of a friendly – and colourful – atmosphere.



Tall Beds, 1996 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Gary Kirkham

I'm thinking of Goldilocks now – probably because you put the idea of fairy tales in my head.

I feel like sometimes Goldilocks is there in the choices of chair and bed … I had to make those decisions, too, when making Untitled – Bed – did I want it to be large or small or comfy…?

It's not comfy at all. It's a bare bed frame, and then it's got these curious, slightly uncanny, soft but spiky 'creatures' underneath. I don't know what you would call them …

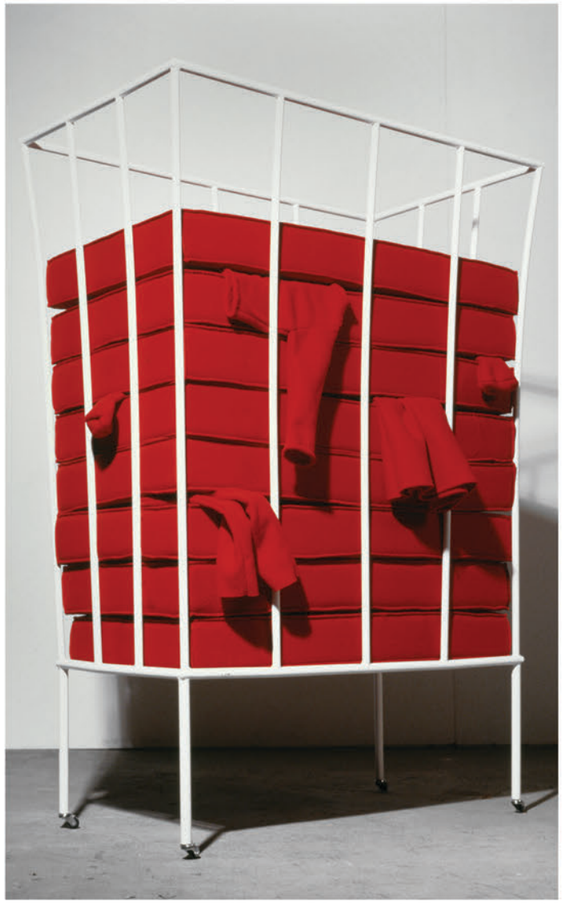
I don't know what to call them either! That work is the only one in the show that's untitled. I do like coming up with titles for my works, but most of them are quite simple. The small table is called Small Table. But I like that, because you don't know which table it's referring to. Is it the really small table or the slightly larger small table? But, with the bed, I struggled with giving it a title. It's because I haven't been able to name the creatures yet. On one level, they are quite playful, because of the colours, and they reminded Alice [Correia, co-chair of the Black British Art Research Group, who has written an essay for the publication to accompany the show] of Tribbles – the furry creatures who took over the spaceship in Star Trek. Then again, they have quite sharp copper spikes on their backs. And they are living under the bed. Are they friendly? Are they happy there?

It's like the childhood saying, 'Sleep tight, mind the bugs don't bite'.

Yes, and I was actually referring to the work as Bed Bugs, but I didn't want to call it that because bed bugs have such negative connotations. I've been told that this is the visitors' favourite work, though. People are drawn to it because, I suppose, there is a fascination with what those creatures are.

In terms of your three current exhibitions, you are also included in A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s, the fourth in a series of surveys of Ikon Gallery's artistic programme. What are you showing there?

I had a big show there in 1996 called Cold Comfort, and I put in three really tall beds and converted the space into a really strange bedroom. The exhibition was actually spread over two galleries. I had Cold Comfort I at Ikon and Cold Comfort II at the Mead Gallery in Coventry. It just so happened that I had two solo shows on at the same time, and they decided to work together. For the Ikon show now, they have taken work from both of the exhibitions. Falling (1995) is a large fabric work which is placed across a whole wall so it looks like wallpaper. The fabric figures are all curled into themselves, and they're in impossible positions. I called the work Falling because the whole show was about falling. Tall Beds, for example, was something you might fall out of, and another work, Untitled – Curtain (1996), comprised a frame with a white curtain inside it, with all these clips on it, from which a number of fleece birds – the pattern – had fallen to the ground. From the Mead Gallery show, we're including a small copper truck filled with ash. The front of the truck is sealed, so you don't know who's driving it, and the ash is falling out at the side. It's called Loss.



Cot, 1994 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Peter Lundh

That's quite poignant. Finally, you mentioned that, at the beginning of the millennium, you took almost a decade out from being an artist.

It was quite brutal. I stopped making art completely. I didn't go to galleries. I didn't respond to any commissions. I just took a complete break. Coming back has been quite hard because everything has moved on and changed, and the people I worked with in the past had all moved up the ladder, and I hadn't. I had broken my trajectory. There is no real framework for someone to do that and then to come back to work. I wasn't a young artist starting out anymore, and I wasn't an established artist. There wasn't really a place for me.

Do you regret it now? Or do you think it's given you a fresher outlook on your practice?

I don't regret it. Did it give me a fresh outlook? I suppose it might have stopped me from becoming staid. I'm still fascinated by materials and trying to learn new skills and new ways of working. I think my work is stronger for it, actually, for having taking that break.

For more information, see permindarkaur.com

Permindar Kaur: Home, curated by HS Projects, 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, 12 December 2020 – 2 July 2021

Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945, Longside Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 29 May – 5 September 2021 (followed by a UK-wide tour)

A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 18 June – 30 August 2021

Glasshouses, 1991 © Permindar Kaur. Photo: Jon Baturin