



## Jasleen Kaur

### Hearing from Artists

*Jasleen Kaur examines the malleability of culture and layering of social histories. She grew up in Glasgow and is now based in London. In 2017 and 2018 she showed work at and developed community projects with MIMA. Here, she is in conversation with Kate Moses, Public Programme Assistant Curator, in June 2020.*

**KM:** You have previously spoken about navigating your practice “from a problematic space of being invisible and hyper visible”. Could you expand on this – how does this experience affect your approach to work?

JK: I think I said that in relation to my experience of being a woman of colour in the arts, both as an artist and as someone who teaches in institutions. I often come up against this problem of being ‘boxed in’. Sonya Dyer writes about this in her research paper, [‘Boxed In: How cultural diversity policies constrict black artists’](#). There’s a history of work by artists of colour being filed under ‘black’ or ‘ethnic’ and being undermined because it can only ever be about ‘identity’ or ‘race’, while the work of white artists doesn’t fall under these flattening categories. This was written in 2007 and I don’t know how much has changed.

As a brown artist being commissioned by white institutions, almost entirely run by white workers (except for cleaners, caterers, security staff) there’s a process of grappling with who I’m speaking to. There’s a problem of translation. And I wonder what art practice could look or feel like if I stopped translating to whiteness. I’m really trying to practice this.



Portrait, 2016, credit Jake Curtis

One thing that feeds into all this is diversity policy and how problematic and useless it can be. Maybe it comes from a good place but the Arts Council’s ‘art and culture for everyone’ rhetoric leads to tokenized ways of working in the name of representation. Hearing words like BAME and diversity over and over has made me really apathetic. There’s no action surrounding the words.

**KM:** Last year, you collaborated with Glasgow Women’s Library on *Be Like Teflon* (2019), a publication made through conversation with women of Indian heritage living in the UK. What themes emerged and how do they connect with the ideas and interests in your wider practice?

JK: I find it a difficult project to talk about because it’s so deeply personal. The book takes several forms; part essay, part recipe book, part conversations with women in my life. Conversations happened over cooking a meal and eating takeaway and leftovers, and I was



*Father's Shoes*, 2010, spliced brogue and flip flop, courtesy of the artist

driven to have these conversations out of a sheer lack of hearing women's voices in my family, and in my community. We spoke about being in the diaspora, our families, loss, labour, duty and how these things are a product of our histories.

I grew up around a perpetual silencing of women, I still live that now and I think I was just desperate to start speaking up — to come into voice. I grew up not being able to locate myself within mainstream notions of feminism, and in recent years I found myself turning to a lot of incredible black feminist writers. But I was also desperate to find voices from South Asian women and to author my own story. Two books that were really fundamental to me at the time of writing were Urvashi Butalia's 'The Other Side of Silence' and Amrit Wilson's 'Finding A Voice'. Their way of researching through testimony really helped me to sit with the traces of trauma, racism and abuse from my history (both personal and colonial) that we carry heavy in our bodies day to day. A friend recently called it 'hauntology' which feels like an apt description. So in *Teflon* I'm writing from that messy place where lots of complexities and nuances and times and places intersect.

**KM:** Early works such as *Father's Shoes* (2009) and *Oil Drum Stools* (2010) make use of found objects and materials. What is it about working with found objects that appeals to you?

JK: My art education was in crafts. I studied metalwork and jewellery so material and making has been at the core of my understanding of how to create something. My family are also massive influences. My dad runs a hardware shop — like many diaspora kids I grew up in shop life and cash 'n' carries, pricing lots of paint tins, bulbs and cutting keys. There is something about that space. It's not a formal learning space, but it was my first schooling in a way. How to fix stuff, how to talk to customers, how to use the till. In art school it was also these kinds of shops — the local hardware shop or pound store — that I would get my material from. I wouldn't necessarily go to an art suppliers.

*Father's Shoes* and *Oil Drum Stools* were made whilst studying — a time when I was making so prolifically and joyfully! I was intuitively cutting and pasting with objects I was drawn to, working in an unplanned way and there was something really liberating about that, coming from a traditional metalwork and jewellery department. Working in a much more rapid, nonconformist way, I used a lot of Araldite to join things together. It was a beautiful time and I really miss those days of making, of working without self-editing.

I really geek out on the associations and materiality of the objects that I use and am drawn to — the specificity of a dusty blue rubber



*He walked like he owned himself*, 2017, embroidered tracksuit, credit Malcolm Cochrane



*The Five K's*, 2017, in use at MIMA Housing Study Day. Image courtesy of MIMA

flip flop, or plastic covering on upholstery. These spliced objects were like a new language, a new way of speaking.

**KM: In 2017, you showed *The Five K's* at MIMA, as part of 'A Room of Our Own'. The work – a series of shaped carpets – addresses intersections between communality and food culture, a recurrent theme in your work. How did the project develop and how does it connect with other works?**

JK: Eastside Projects in Birmingham invited me to dream up what cooking and eating together would look for the exhibition, 'Artists House'. I made a series of five large-scale carpets from heavily patterned Axminster carpet, typically seen in British-Asian homes or Gurdwaras. I was literally borrowing aesthetics from the Gurdwara, where we sit on long rolls of carpet and eat together. There's something about that style of carpet that for me has associations to a kind of Indian-ness, despite being British. It's this social life of material and objects I'm interested in. The carpets loosely take the form of the Five Ks, which are five objects that Sikhs carry on their person; bangle, uncut hair, comb, genderless cotton underwear, dagger. The forms direct how groups convene on the carpets.

I started to use food at the Royal College of Art with *Chai Stall*, using food without any understanding

of how it had been used in contemporary art prior, as I didn't have that education. I was starting to think about using food as a way of disrupting the formal white wall gallery space. I wasn't interested in putting stuff on a plinth or on a wall just to be looked at; I wanted these objects to be drunk from or sat on.

Around the time of the Eastside Projects commission, using food in my practice became more complicated. I started to feel uncomfortable with being of Indian heritage and cooking Indian food in almost wholly white spaces. The misreading and performativity of it.

Now it's a material or skillset I use when working in workshop settings with community groups. Food can be material for play. In a recent project, *Everyday Resistance*, with Serpentine Projects, dough was the vehicle for having really complex and specific sets of conversations. It was used like play dough, to bake bread together but also to talk about the local area, migrating to Britain, its hostile environment and racism. But fundamentally food is just practical and welcoming; I like to feed and nourish the people I'm working with.

**KM: How do you approach working with communities and how has this developed over time?**



Everyday Resistance, 2019, cotton print blankets, credit Mike Din

JK: I've spent a lot of years doing community outreach with institutions and I think I've been trying to unlearn some of the stuff I was doing in those settings, where there's maybe less of a complex ecology and less at stake. There's also a lot of bad practice, bad funding, unethical relationships in 'socially engaged art' or whatever you want to call it. It has made me not want to work with certain commissioners, who don't see their locale or communities as paramount. I've realised that in order to take part in this way of working, it really requires the organisation to be committed to those people. When the artist parachutes in and out, with no continuity or care from the organisation, it's fake and tokenistic.

The work you do at MIMA is much slower, longer term, with less 'measurable' outcomes. I felt really supported in working with your communities, because you understood the complexities. The onus wasn't on the artist to emancipate people though art.

There is a rhetoric around art giving voice to communities and I think that's rubbish. We really need to stop thinking we are going to heal anybody with art – we're not, the problems are so much bigger than us. The White Pube wrote about solutions in '[ideas for a new artworld](#)', proposing institutions partner with grassroots organisations and hand over significant portions of budgets to those communities, essentially a call to redistribute the funds. I think this could be a way forward. This pandemic has revealed a crisis in the arts sector and how it functions so precariously. Curator Jemma Desai was talking about these huge art galleries, civic buildings, lying empty and dormant in some of the poorest boroughs of London. I can't stop thinking about that. Covid-19 isn't a leveller it's a revealer of inequalities.