

Another way to see it: quiet transmutations to action otherwise worlds.

By Nura Ali

The work of artist Russna Kaur envelopes. It's a multi-sensory experience. The abstracted forms move, swell, contract, playing with our visual perception of line form and colour. A line will carry your eye around the internal composition of the paintings, suddenly change colour or density, until finally, it jumps the confines of the canvas altogether and wanders into the environment.

Kaur's work turns our understanding of paintings as static objects into taffy. She pushes and pulls where the pictorial frame ends and the gallery environment begins. An audience member to her show must feel their way through, both visually and physically. A large scaled painting will have its dimensions tripled by the immersive wall paintings it's nestled within and on the next wall our bodies' spatial relationship to the work will be flipped as we are presented with a series of intimate small scale studies such as in *I THIK THE KRACDIL WIL ET SME AND NO BUTE WITSE SME A GIN*.

In this same exhibition, a small painting is framed by a hand drawn set of curtains. The scale of the curtains is both grand and nostalgic and dwarfs the painting it surrounds. The size differential makes it inconceivable that the painting could be the window that the curtain drawing is trying to suggest for us and, in this way, brings into focus the fictive immaterial work that painting does. Kaur, then, is the magician who tricks us but then shows us how the trick was done, both Dorothey and Wizard. She is constantly throwing us curve balls that pull us into and out of experiential looking.

Arguably, there are certain shortcuts to bringing on experiential looking, one of the most obvious, perhaps, being scale. Yet even in Kaur's monumental scale paintings such as *What would YOU do?* and *What wasn't there before*, scale is but the first step in drawing a viewer into experiential looking. These paintings, like all of Kaur's work, reward those who pay attention. At first glance they appear to conform to the rectangles and squares of traditional canvases but they are in fact multi-panel modular constructions. In innumerable ways Kaur's work presents us with the standard and then subtly shifts it so that we must now become aware of all the assumptions we have brought into the room.

Rather than Kaur's monumental painting becoming emblems of the heroic or the spectacle, they subtly tap into a whole other conversation. Each painting within the larger whole is a world unto itself but also enacts on a smaller scale the permeability of borders and boundaries. They borrow lines from each other, relay shapes to one another, add to and adapt what has been begun in the neighbouring panel. The meaning of each painting is made interdependently through its relationship to its neighbours as well as in the composite threads that weave throughout the whole.

For Kaur, the drive to create these immersive installations, or as she called it environments of over-stimulation, comes from a desire to call up a specific feeling. It is the feeling one gets as you walk through a bustling flea market, when our own individual, overscrutinised bodies blend into the anonymity of the crowd.

Though it may seem paradoxical to find spaces that bombard you with sensorial information restful, for those who have experienced what it feels like to live under the oppressive blanket of hypervisibility, this is a deeply longed for feeling. In these installations the eyes of our fellow art goers are trained away from us and onto the line that slithers its way across the floor, cuts across the wall and crawls its way up the ceiling such as in *She was there for a while*. Visitors to her exhibition must focus instead on the process of perception lest they miss the magic of the moment.

Walking into one of Kaur's exhibitions is to step into an abundant, constant, hive of activity where all the pieces are operating as our brain does. Different groupings of paintings are responding to, filtering and firing off stimuli. This is exactly the way that we can understand memory, a theme prevalent in Kaur's work. What we think of as memory is essentially the reactivation of a certain group of neurons, or more specifically the connections between these neurons, the synapses that passes information from one neuron to the other.

Both pictorially and metaphorically she draws our attention to these relay systems to show how malleable and evolving both experience and memory truly are. The installation *SHE WAS THERE FOR A WHILE* is a perfect example of this. In a way, it is a restaging of an 'environment of over-stimulation' but it has not been staged as a perfect replica of that physical place. What's called up for us instead is the feeling, the patch work of colour snipits, the almost memory that is an amalgamation of half remembered fragments. Kaur's work prompts us to think on how the very act of remembering can change our memories, that perhaps it may be impossible for us to bring a memory to mind without altering it in some way. The modular nature of the paintings mean that they can be rearranged, reconfigured so that the memory or feeling that inspired them can continuously be approached from a different viewpoint.

Rather than memory being an accurate record of our history, Kaur shows how our memories are partially rebuilt every time they are recalled. Some types of memories, such as flash bulb memories (those formed during momentous situations where we can recall incredible amounts of detail) are more susceptible to alteration. In remaking these environments of overstimulation it's the process of retelling that renders these memories more plastic; where the situation, environment and particular people we tell these memories to morphs the original content of the memory. Kaur's work instead is an emollient that softens the rigidity with which we narrate the formative moments that have shaped how we view ourselves and our place within the world.

Similarly these environments of over-stimulation factor in how our emotions, too, play a significant part in our perception of experiences and what we learn and can recall. Because our sensory system can't process everything at once, our emotions drive our attention and are biased towards focusing us towards emotionally salient information. Selective attention then is an evolutionary response that prepares us for action, a way to sift through all the data our brains are receiving and focus on, retain or act on the most useful information necessary for our survival.

If our emotions drive our attention then it's particularly interesting to see how Kaur uses colour amidst these environments of over-stimulation to elicit complex emotional responses from viewers. Colour's effect on our state of mind and the resultant physiological responses, such as increased heart rates, changes in respiration and adrenal activation, has long been studied. Yet, what Kaur does is slightly different.

Let's take *What would YOU do?* as an example. In the simplest sense of colour theory we can see how its composition of mostly blues and greens is typically supposed to render a painting restful because these two colours focus the colour directly on the retina and so require less strain from our eye muscles. Yet in this painting, these islands of calm are shot through with bolts of yellow and orange. In this way it keeps us oscillating between serenity and stimulation.

Arguably Kaur is not the first painter to utilise this but what Kaur does is lock us into this heightened state of psychological interest through multiple streams. She shoots a buffet of prompts at us to spike our focus through an incongruous situation (also known as an expectancy violation) and draw our attention to a discrepancy between prior expectations and the new information. Whether this is through colour, form, line, figuration what it ultimately results in is a cognitive reset for that "learned content", for the expected, the standard, the given. After that, it remains open to the audience whether this will serve as the prompt towards self-directed exploration, also known as "seeking" behaviour.

This pushing the viewer towards “seeking” behaviour can also be seen in the ways that identity and autobiography is approached in the work. There are certain questions that are only asked of you if you inhabit certain bodies. Certain propositions put to you, certain devil’s advocate arguments, certain accusations. One of the most insidious seems to be the ways in which racialised or minority artists are questioned on how their work represent particular segments of their identity with “authenticity”.

In an interview the filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha breaks down the particular tension that rests in the word authenticity. She says “Firstly, it has to do with power relations in knowledge: authenticity is always defined by the one who consumes the so-called authentic. It’s almost always construed for the other. And, secondly, if the other is claiming it for themselves, such authenticity could either be a reaction to or a way of internalising dominant values.”

Inherent in the assumption that a racialized artist is able/should talk to their identity or culture in ways deemed believable by an external other, is the belief that there is in fact a fixed identity that can be named. The work of Russna Kaur pushes back against the artist of colour’s forcible conscription to the task of naming, of rendering oneself, one’s communities, culture and history more legible for those who want to consume authentic otherness.

In her film *Reassemblage*, Minh-ha shows us what the alternative to demands for authenticity might be. A voiceover begins the film with “I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby”. Here Minh-ha proposes a simple way to forgo the role cast for minority artists to be an authoritative declarative mouthpiece able to speak for others. She says “When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you’re very close to your subject, you’re also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them”. Kaur’s work does not speak for others. It offers us ways to feel and be: alongside.

For Kaur the issue was never about how and where our lived experience crops up in our work but the ways in which these autobiographical elements are super glued onto meta-narratives that fetishize, exoticize and other. To toil within or rail against that particular logic system is still to be enmeshed within its snares. Nathaniel Mackay posits another way that we might think about the word “other”; other as a verb and other as a noun. The first is artistic and the latter social. “Artistic othering has to do with innovation and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend. Social othering has to do with power, exclusion and privilege, the

centralising of a norm against which othering is measured, meted out, marginalized". We can see "other as verb" in Kaur's work through the ways in which identity is not treated as a fixed category, but instead is presented as a co-creation of multiplicity and assemblage; where identity is simply an amalgamation of various shifting and relationally made meanings.

In *HOLDING A LINE IN YOUR HAND* we have a clearer example of how this process of turning "other" into a verb is done. In this exhibition the figurative elements reference certain autobiographical details such as shuttlecocks from when Kaur used to play competitive badminton in her teens or the yellow star pupiled eyes that are pulled from street signs in her neighbourhood. These figurative elements are not straight forward but incongruously and surprisingly play with scale and positional arrangement. A shuttlecock balloons to take up an entire panel, the street sign eyes now have eyebrows and sight lines drawing our attention to the cars that are underneath the painting. The street sign wanders away from the traffic signal and into other memories of a car accident Kaur was involved in years ago. This "artistic othering" shows us ways to think about other as *otherwise*.

This is also true for the way that Kaur approaches writing. At first glance her poems appear to be full of fragmentary images and disjointed pronouncements. Once we understand the process for writing these poems, their formulation becomes much clearer. It's not often known how key a role writing plays in Kaur's work. Writing is where it all begins. Not only are the titles for the paintings pulled from her poetry but all of Kaur's paintings are in fact a response to or pulled from the poems she writes at the onset of a new project.

Like with painting, Kaur takes a less than straightforward approach to writing. Rather than offering a way to say what we cannot say, but need to, her poems are a lyrical rather than logical approximation for how we feel. The existing text that Kaur uses is not mined for its context, nor its content. Instead words, syntax and punctuation are as red, blue or green might be on a pallet. They are to be taken away or added; shifted, stretched, rearranged. These pre-existing texts, that in their original forms speak so definitively about the human condition, the natural world or religion are pulled away from linear meaning and remade into prismatic fractals. She conjures up a world where deliberate slips and ambiguities provide a new source of revelation. Through this process of slicing away, Kaur is the orchestral conductor directing us towards otherwise meanings that we would never have seen.