Stitched: Merging Photography and Textile Practices

Simranpreet Kaur Anand Audio Tour
Written by: Sarah Danruo Wang

Simranpreet Kaur Anand

Collective action and the urgency of social activism are at the centre of the photo and textile collages by Punjabi artist, curator, and cultural worker Simranpreet Kaur Anand. Her work centres the experiences of Sikh immigrants to the Greater Vancouver region which is one of the two largest Sikh populations in the world outside of India. Mirroring the current immigration policy that greatly curtails those arriving from India, Anand proves that old colonial habits truly die hard.

In the installation *Wake of Departure*, the legacies of Sikh labour protests within the past few generations in British Columbia juxtaposes the individual with communal strife,
elevating protestors with megaphones and paper signs as sirens for better working conditions, particularly in the agricultural industry. Black and white found and archival photographs are juxtaposed with contemporary coloured counterparts, the colourful threads stitching together not only the continued struggle across generations, but the greater labour movement across Canada. Two works that are titled *A True Story of Government Neglect* and *A True Story of Direct Action*, force the viewer to contend with lasting legacies of action and inaction, change and stagnation, in our all-too brief collective memories.

Anand's images float between the textures of the textiles (cotton, silk, canvas) and their fine embroidered details. These animate the picture and the civic responsibility of documenting calls to action. Even in the two *Untitled* works, the two individuals, in pixelated form after being printed on fabric, still retain the emotional nature of witnessing protests: the jubilant gestures of victory and progress and the unwavering conviction of demanding justice.

The texts used in the rug from the *Magic Carpets* series and in the photograph titled *IELTS Bazaar* critique the reality of postcapitalist fatigue. The works harken back to the nineteenth century bombastic advertisements calling for immigration to what colonialists at the time noted as empty, virgin lands in North America. They play upon the pathos of wealth and opportunity to lure the poverty-stricken; *100% No Guarantee! DREAMWORLD* is both sarcastic but nevertheless a brutally honest appraisal of the fates of those who are still arriving from the Global South. Rather than acres, we get crumbs. Rather than dreams, we get sobering reality. In dialogue with *IELTS Bazaar*, this reality is a lot muddier. Where does the eye even look among the sea of signs to prep a prospective migrant on the linguistic, legal,

and economic criteria necessary for landing in Canada? Here immigration is nothing but an assembly line, devoid of individual impetus, subsumed to the mold of the model minority.

Like the questions asked in Liz Ikiriko's works, what is the afterlife of a culture that has been dislocated? In another section of this exhibition, we have the poignant video work, ਮੁਕਤਿ ਮਾਲ ਕਨਿਕ ਲਾਲ ਹੀਰਾ ਮਨ ਰੰਜਨ ਕੀ ਮਾਇਆ ॥ *mukti maal kanik laal heera man ranjan kee maaiaa* || (2021) the artist and her collaborator Conner Singh VanderBeek stack and fold fabrics to reenact the Sikh practice of donating sets of *rumala sahib* to gurdwaras, Sikh places of worship. This tradition occurs on special occasions like births, deaths, weddings, and holidays when the textiles are opened and placed atop the Guru Granth Sahib. Textiles, like photographs, enshrine the personal. Sikh funerary practices uses cremation as the method to transition the body in the cycle of life, and this practice was prohibited in the early days of Sikh immigration by the City of Vancouver. Here, objects and textiles which have touched the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikh faith and regarded as a living entity, retains the Guru's "sacred energy". The once natural fibres of the textiles burned in this process, are now mass-produced synthetic ones which linger after the cremation process via toxic gas fumes. Drawing a parallel to surplus textile production in Canada being stored and then destroyed via burning, Anand and Singh VanderBeek sought permission from the Canadian textile facility and fellow Sikh community members on utilizing these fabrics for this process in this work. This work is as visual as it is tactile, tenderly holding on to a pivotal process within the Sikh community.