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## A Survey of Contemporary Sikh Art in Los Angeles Expands South Asian History

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Avtar Singh, 'Mata Dharat Mahat, Guru Nanak in Modern Fields', 2022, gouache on handmade wasli paper.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE SIDHU FAMILY COLLECTION

There have been so few sizable exhibitions of contemporary Sikh art at major US museums, you could nearly count them on two hands. “There have been maybe a dozen exhibitions at large museums,” said Syona Puliady, a curator at Los Angeles’s **Fowler Museum** of Art who specializes in textiles of the eastern hemisphere.

Curated with Sonia Dhami, president of the Art & Tolerance organization and a trustee of the Sikh Foundation, the exhibition, titled “I Will Meet You Yet Again: Contemporary Sikh Art,” brings together 40 works. Ranging from sculpture to photography, from painting to photographic essays, the works center Sikhism, a socio-religious group with an origin in India’s Panjab region and a diaspora that today numbers around 25 million.

A new exhibition of Sikh art that Puliady co-organized offers what the previous have lacked: an opportunity to exceed one's understanding of both South Asian art history.

No two works approach Sikhism from an identical historical moment or perspective; they represent the constellation of experience that forms collective memory. To bring them together, Dhami and Puliady worked with scholars, artists, and local religious practitioners for over two years.

“We wanted personal stories, not another anthropological exhibition,” Puliady said. “This was an opportunity to make room for women, ideas on climate change, political activism. We could expand past the boundaries of conventional pairings of sacred and historical narratives.”

The show is organized into themes that have shaped modern Sikh identity, starting with the 1947 Partition, during which India was violently divided to form a second nation, Pakistan, following its liberation from British colonial rule. In the process, millions of Sikhs were displaced from their ancestral lands.

But rather than lingering on the tragedies wrought upon the Sikh community, as is common among Western narratives about Partition, Dhami and Puliady explore topics of gender, artistic production, architecture, climate change. Themes in the show, for example, include “Sikh Heritage as Artistic Inspiration” and “Sikh History in the U.S.A.” Additionally, underpinning the exhibition are three concepts—*sangarsh*, (struggle), *basera* (home), and *birha* (longing)—that speak to more ineffable elements of Sikh identity.

The show celebrates Sikh women, whose achievements have been woefully understudied in institutional settings. Among the standouts are two seven-foot-tall tapestries by the Singh Twins, British artists of dual Indian and English ancestry. The tapestries depict Sophia Duleep Singh, an Indian princess and high-profile suffragette in early 20th century England, and the Hungarian Indian avant-garde painter Amrita Sher-Gil. Both women—radical thinkers in their respective ways—stand amid a dense weaving of traditional Panjab symbols and allusions to the legacies of colonization.

A solemn section of the show focuses on 1984, the year the Indian government initiated a pogrom against its Sikh population. During the genocidal campaign, sacred sites and Sikh-owned business were destroyed across the country and civil rights were curtailed, and within days, some 3,000 Sikhs were murdered in New Delhi alone.



Arpana Caur, *Wounds of 1984*, 2020.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAPANY COLLECTION, SIKH FOUNDATION

Artist Arpana Caur has contributed *Wounds of 1984* (2020), a surreal expression of the injustice inflicted upon Sikhs after the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, the event which triggered the pogrom. Whether ghost or physical, the figures in the painting have been transmuted by anguish, elongated, wide-eyed, and withered. But they are also the only varied bursts of color within a black night flickering with firelight.

Elsewhere is an excerpt from *1984 notebook* (2013) by Gauri Gill, one of few first-person chronicles of the anti-Sikh pogrom. Working for *Tehelka* magazine in 2005 and *Outlook* magazine in 2009, Gill conducted interviews with survivors in Trilokpuri, Tilak Vihar, and Garhi, and took their photographs. Later, she asked artist friends with a connection to Delhi to write a small paragraph to accompany the images. The entirety of the project is available for reading online, and is very worth it.

There is a severe lyricism to the pairings. On page 8 of the online edition, there is an image in which a woman named Nirpreet Kaur does not look at the camera. The caption reads that when she was 16, she joined a protest movement, and married a militant. Later, he was murdered, and her family was arrested. Beside Kaur's stark black and white portrait are these words by the artist Monica Narula: "The insolubility of the photographic surface gives life its stupendous force to keep in contention the very will to breathe itself."

It's an important idea in this show, which toils over the ruthless transference of the past into the future. Kaur sought justice repeatedly in court but, like countless others, never found it. In the whole of South Asian art history, Sikh artists were pushed to the margins. Recognition—taking a photograph, weaving a tapestry, curating such an exhibition—is an expression of resistance.

"Most institutional spaces stop at the Partition or 1984," said Dhami. "I think the reaction from the community has been so positive because this is more a collection of stories, monumentalized or memorialized through artworks. It's the building of a home."