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Understanding the unsaid

everything left unsaid reviewed

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Figure 1. Raina, Jagdeep. Floral Coat. 2022. Mixed media on paper. Libby Leshgold Gallery, Vancouver.

everything left unsaid

January 13 - February 26, 2023

Libby Leshgold Gallery

Emily Carr University of Art and Design

Vancouver, British Columbia

Jagdeep Raina is a Canadian interdisciplinary artist making work addressing the global Kashmiri and Punjabi Sikh diaspora. *everything left unsaid* marked Raina's first show in the City of Vancouver. Raina had previously exhibited another body of work as part of a group exhibition at the Sikh Heritage Museum at the National Historical Site Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford, British Columbia in 2018.

everything left unsaid included twenty two wall pieces, as well as stop-motion animation film in the adjacent media gallery.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, anthropologist Kamal Arora writes: "While many Canadian Sikh diasporic retellings of the Partition and the violence of the 1984 Delhi massacre often unwittingly or unintentionally breach into necromantic territory and singular focus on these two events, what sets Jagdeep Singh [Raina]'s work apart is the deep ethical entanglements with which he creates not only art, but an archive where an archive did not previously exist."



Image Credit: *everything left unsaid* – exhibition documentation images by Blain Campbell – Libby Leshgold Gallery – all documented artworks by artist Jagdeep Raina.

The word archive echoes throughout the various written pieces in the catalogue. Tangible objects act as containers of memory: a cloth, a paper, a house. These objects are waiting to be activated by those generations who have lost their own material narratives in the cracks of migration. Raina's work appears to address and speak to those who are searching to make meaning from these lost materials. I am captivated by his creative mission in this exhibition.

A garment's name is offered, clumsily described in insufficient language: *Floral Coat*. All colour is drained from the stitches, but it is surrounded by patterns, drawings, and words pulsing with the vibrant greasiness of oil pastels and deep inks. Hidden in the surrounding sketches is the artist's ever-present voice: "MY MEMORIES OF OUR GARDEN SURVIVED THE BLOODSHED, I WILL TAKE THIS PRECIOUS BEAUTIFUL KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSMIT IT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS". The grey scale of the textile evokes antiquated images as if captured and contained in old photographs. The coat's neck droops open with the darkened inner fabric exposed; its arms spread wide in exposition as though it is pinned to a shadow box on a museum wall. The coat is empty of the warm brown body it was once made to clothe. There is a body, however, hiding in plain sight: a turban peeks from the top of the garment's neck, hinting that we are being guided through the image by a Punjabi-Sikh character. The figure holds this faded grey *phulkari*, lifeless yet infused with meaning. I read *Floral Coat* as exploring the impossibility of *phulkari* in an art gallery context. The surrounding marks: figures sewing, the pounding of spices, a set of bones, *mehndi* on an outstretched palm, animals in stoic profile. This imagery is notably of South Asian, and perhaps rural, life. The characters seem to come to life, becoming my companions throughout the exhibition.

Raina does not limit himself to just invoking a past, he also dreams a future by calling upon those that are not yet alive. He transmits "this precious beautiful knowledge ... to future generations", smuggling memories nestled between the contradictions of an archive and a common, shared Punjabi-Sikh worlding. Tucked within these waiting images is a tender hand for those that have and will inherit the grief of lost and stolen traditions.

Thinking through Raina's work, I am reminded of the Israeli anti-imperial lens scholar and filmmaker Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. It is from her that I have learned that our companions are fellows in a common struggle against the destruction of our shared worlds, and that these companions may traverse time to be with us. Azoulay theorizes that art as we know it today lives in the legacy of the violent separation of objects from the communities that give them meaning (Aisha Azoulay, 188).

In *everything left unsaid*, this definition of art (the separation of objects from meaning-making in community, and of people from their objects held in common) is activated. Raina's work acts as an archive, as well as a counter-archive. The counter archive is necessarily differentiated from an 'alternative history', a retelling of an under-represented time from the past. Jagdeep Raina's work cumulatively exposes the death-making of the archive itself by participating within it with earnestness and skill that "(obfuscates) what previously seemed clear" about linear progressive representations of time (Johnson). The contradictions that arise from the struggle against and participation within archives become a poetics of unresolve, "un"progress, and unravelling of our own conditions.



Figure 2. Raina, Jagdeep. Filthy Imperial Glory. 2021. Andan embroidered tapestry. Libby Leshgold Gallery, Vancouver.

Filthy Imperial Glory is a tapestry built up with long loose stitches, the practice of embroidery becoming a language in itself. Raina traverses across the normative boundaries of gendered labour to engage in the sacred work of storytelling and culture keeping. It's through this sewn dialect that Raina refers to and speaks with the textile traditions that run through his imagery.

The *Kashmiri Gate* is one of thirteen gates in the historic Walled City of Lahore in Pakistan, the architecture dating back to the Mughal empire in India (Qureshi). The gate points to Kashmir, now a borderland of dispute between Pakistan and India. The threads in *Filthy Imperial Glory* create an unruly image of the Kashmiri Gate: it is a rupture in time pointing to imperial desire and conquest. This rupture represents something both familiar and otherworldly. A stolid block unmoving among the hot tumult of Lahore traffic. The tapestry shows a thread heavy image hard to contain. The cloth's edges are drawn in, wavering under the tension of time bubbling to the embroidery's textured surface. This representation of the Kashmiri Gate exposes the multiple layers of imperial borders, displacement, and material cultural memory. Raina is not working alone in his use of materials to create new narratives infused with the archive. He is in conversation with companions dead, living and yet unborn.

The objects that he presents are waiting for their companions, too. For those who lack the knowledge or connections to the histories that Raina references, only a limited set of relations are formed between the artwork and the art. For those who understand Raina's references, the art works become a portal to transport memories back into living worlds. Raina invites us to claim that which has been stolen as alive, if you and your relations can meet them in a common language.

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