

INTRODUCTION

Damon Jackson-Waldock

Perminder Kaur's major new exhibition **Outgrown**, at The Art House in Wakefield, marks nearly 20 years since the artist first exhibited in the city as part of the group show **Changing Rooms** at Wakefield Art Gallery. Despite having an international career spanning across four decades, this is the first time Kaur has staged a major solo exhibition in Yorkshire. So, it was an honour when she accepted my invitation to take up a residency with us over the summer of 2022 and stage her new exhibition here.

My first encounter with Kaur's work was in 2017, whilst working for Yorkshire Sculpture Park. I was struck by the power and vulnerability of her piece **Innocence** (1993) as it was being installed in **Tread Softly**, a group show of contemporary artists exploring childhood memories and experiences – something Kaur has been investigating since being a student. Later, I reconnected with her work in the Arts Council Collection touring exhibition **Breaking the Mould: Sculpture by Women since 1945**, curated by their then Senior Curator Natalie Rudd, who has kindly contributed a thoughtful text for this publication, reflecting on the sculptural strategies of the artist's work.

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Born in 1965 in Nottingham, Kaur's first connection with Yorkshire began in 1986 when she went to study art in Sheffield. Whilst others at Sheffield Polytechnic were focused on either sculpture, painting or printmaking, Kaur was one of the few who were breaking that 'mould', using many different methodologies, owing to studying on an experimental 'generalist' Fine Art degree.

After graduating she had a studio in Blast Lane, the industrial heart of the city, known around the world for its steel production and manufacturing. Situated in Sheffield's industrial quarter, Kaur had ready access to steel and welding advice. It was during this time that she created her first sculpture in the form of a house. **The House** (1990) was a three-metre-tall metal structure containing clay objects, including vessels and animals. It was here she fell in love with creating large objects by hand – a commitment to the intimate process of making still evident in Kaur's studio practice today.

In the early 1990s, even before she graduated from her MA course at Glasgow School of Art, Kaur was showing work alongside many artists from the Black British art movement – championed by Dr Eddie Chambers, a contemporary art historian, curator, and member of the 1980s BLK Art Group, who continues to champion the practices of Global Majority artists. Kaur gained an international reputation for her playful approach to making work. Frequently returning to themes of childhood, and investigating the territory of cultural identity, the idea of home became central in her practice. Kaur's early work in Sheffield began as personal reflections of her own identity, but over the years, her practice has grown to include other themes and concepts. Following a ten-year break – starting a family, and living in Spain and Sweden before returning to the UK to settle in St Albans – Kaur returned to practice to discover that the themes she investigates have become a powerful shared experience.

Today, Kaur's practice encourages us all to consider the universal question 'where is home?'. Her subject matter has become an invitation to discuss identity and vulnerability, and her work has never been more relevant, as issues of homelessness, displacement, and



social inequalities dominate the media. Kaur's recent residency and her exhibition, **Outgrown**, contribute to conversations on belonging and identity. The recent pandemic merged homes into workspaces, and with over 100,000 people in the UK registered to host Ukrainian refugees in their homes, the concept and boundaries of 'home' have never been more in flux.

I am proud to say that since its beginning in 1994, The Art House has worked to address many inequalities. We create a bold artistic programme focused on those whose voices have traditionally gone unheard in the arts, and extend the opportunities for artists by enabling interaction between art and the communities that we aim to serve.



The Art House considers itself a safe space and home to many, not just visitors and our local community, but also to more than 50 studio holders who represent the wide range of talent found in Wakefield. In 2017, it set up the first and only Studio of Sanctuary in the UK, providing support for artists seeking asylum to re-establish their creative practice, as well as offering creative opportunities for asylum-seeking communities.

We are passionate about supporting artists at every stage of their career, from those traditionally underrepresented to creatives who have taken career breaks and face barriers to restarting their practice. As Kaur herself had a career break, she too shares our ethos in supporting other creative practitioners. During lockdown in 2021, Kaur approached me to offer online mentoring and professional development sessions for students and recent graduates. Her kindness and generosity at a time when opportunities for creatives were limited was inspiring and her wealth of experience and knowledge was a huge source of support to those early-career artists.

It was at this time that we began talking about the central question, 'where is home?' explored in her 2020-21 exhibition **HOME** at HS Projects, London, which had been affected by the restrictions of galleries unable to open until May 2021. At that same time, I had just started as Programme Director at The Art House. Following a visit to the gallery by Kaur, it became clear that our aspirations aligned, and the idea of a residency emerged.

Kaur challenged herself to produce new work in a collaborative way; the resultant piece is a large-scale sculpture co-created

with two Yorkshire-based and early-career-artists, Ifa Abebe, who was born in Ethiopia and Ranya Abdulateef, who was born in Iraq, and raised in the United Arab Emirates.

Kaur's notions and ideas of the home have also addressed issues around migration, displacement, and the difficulties many people face when relocating homes, even homelands. These ideas were central to her time working with textile artist and printmaker Abdulateef – who has been part of The Art House's Studio of Sanctuary since 2019 – and DJ, poet, and architect Abebe, who works as a community facilitator for the programme. Both have lived experiences of displacement, and together with Kaur, they investigated concepts of safety in the home; conversations that were also informed by members of Wakefield's asylum-seeking communities through workshops.

I am excited about the final outcome of this residency, marking the first time Kaur has worked in this way. Their collaborative work, **Dream Runner** (2022) goes on display at Wakefield Cathedral, a place that is both welcoming and protective, and a key advocate alongside The Art House for supporting Wakefield as a City of Sanctuary. The new sculpture takes the form of a sleeping pod on legs; a kind of bed that, unlike a traditional one, takes a more organic and curved shape – a departure from Kaur's simple lines and forms. Usually a place of solace and warmth, beds have always played a significant role in her work, representing a sense of comfort and safety. Working with Abdulateef and Abebe, who brought their knowledge, experiences and multidisciplinary approaches to the project, Kaur has had time to question and experiment with the illusion of security. Together, they ask us to consider contrasting notions of home across the world, and raise questions about the privileges of safety and sanctuary.

Growth is fundamental to creativity, and there is much joy in learning from others who have different life experiences from what we are used to. I have no doubt this process has offered important personal growth for each artist. Kaur has shared her knowledge and experience of the art world and is an artist who continues to look outwards to question the themes that have been integral to her practice for four decades.



To say nothing of the power and impact it has had on two artists who are at the start of their artistic journey. I am forever indebted to Permindar, Ranya, and Ifa for all their hard work, dedication, and laughter throughout this project.

Many people have helped bring this project together. My heartfelt thanks go to Natalie Rudd for her perceptive and considerate essay, and to Brian and George Fell for all their support with the Wakefield Cathedral commission. I would also like to thank Arts Council England whose support enabled the project to flourish. To all of my dedicated colleagues at The Art House, I extend my gratitude.

I have come to realise that it isn't art that has the power to change thoughts and minds, and have a positive impact on the world, it is people that do this. As obvious as it may seem, the world needs more empathy and care, and more time spent listening to others. It has been a privilege to work with Permindar, and I thank her for getting to know the staff and our Studio of Sanctuary community. I will also be forever grateful for her support of Ifa and Ranya. All of us at The Art House have been moved by this project. I, especially, have been touched by Permindar's selflessness, kindness, and generosity.

