

Inscribing Desire

The Southall-born, London-based artist discusses the loss of queer spaces and the identities associated with them, the politics of desire, bodily presences and sexuality as material.

Prem Sahib interviewed by Paul Carey-Kent



Untitled, 2017

Paul Carey-Kent: I think the first works of yours I saw were the ‘Sweat Panels’ in which resin drips were meticulously painted in one by one to give the impression of a moist surface. What were they about?

Prem Sahib: When I first began making these works, I was thinking a lot about contact and how to indicate a bodily presence across a surface. As the series progressed, I used the same clear resin on different anodised panels, beginning with silver, then gold then black, and each time the suggestion of what substance it might allude to shifted. The palette always remained restrained, but the mark-making developed with scale. For me, despite the initial immediacy of their appearance, the paintings embody the tension of sustaining a transient moment of wetness and also a mania of production, hand-painted drop by drop. I’m currently working on a red painting, which marks a definite shift in the series. With all the codified suggestions of bodily substances or spatial registers that may have existed with previous works, the red becomes blood-like. I’ve been thinking a lot about heredity, family and descent – all things I’m also exploring in ‘DESCENT’, so this painting feels strongly connected to the new work.

Subsequently, your work has often merged the aesthetics of minimal art with references to gay life and iconography. For example, the ‘Horizons’ series of silicone versions of roller towels implying post-sexual wiping-up, or the absurdly inflated black rubber cock ring of 2016’s *Beast II*. How does the link work for you?

It is not my agenda to make work about Minimalism. However, I do like the idea of destabilising some of what we have come to associate it with. Because I often use my own experience of sexuality as a material, I am inevitably queering the associations of that tradition. I am more interested in the abstraction, formalism and ideas around physicality that are part of this movement.

You have often used tiles, for example in your 2015 exhibition at London’s ICA. What is the appeal?

I am interested in how ubiquitous things around us impact the way we interact or adhere to the rules of a space. Tiles are banal but have a highly reflective surface that, if you look carefully enough, allow for a view behind you. I have come across that while



Cul-de-Sac, 2019, video

standing at a urinal facing a white-tiled wall, which ideologically exists to be cleanable, formally reiterating ideas of hygiene, yet also allowing your eyes to stray. When I have made work about cruising in the past, it has been in recognition of these ‘opportunity structures’ and novel ways in which people exploit the properties of a material, allowing for an experience of a space that is counter to its intended use.

I think of you as fusing ‘mainstream’ and ‘queer’ in, amongst other things, an exposure of comparative visibility, such as the 2018 public installation *500 sq ft*, which was based on the footprint of the typical one-bedroom apartment now being built in the Vauxhall area of south London. How did that work?

It was a maze-like structure which also referenced historical structures found in the neighbouring pleasure gardens, such as the walks and pavilions that were known to be transgressive spaces after dark, and also the interior of contemporary saunas, night clubs and cruising spaces. The LGBTQ+ community is an important part of Vauxhall, so I thought its presence should be reflected in what was essentially a public artwork. And with a high-rise brought down to ground level, the installation was intended to appear as though it had very quickly landed in the local park, threatening this social space. The area is changing so rapidly that it troubled me to think that certain realities might be sidelined in favour of more sanitised versions that suit the new preferred ‘narrative’ of the area put forth by developers.

How does your new series of shows carry on the themes you have developed?

I continue to examine how our relationships with objects and the built environment has an effect on us and who we become – the reciprocal relationship between the world we make and the world that makes us as moral persons. I’m thinking about how we are socialised, what we’re taught and learn, but also what we have to unlearn to recognise the structures we might not see but which can govern the way we interact.

‘DESCENT’ itself consists of *People Come & Go*, *Cul-de-Sac* and *Man Dog*, each running for three weeks. Why did you adopt the unusual approach of three consecutive exhibitions?

I felt that I had more to say than would fit in one conventional show, so it was better across parts. I didn’t want to feel limited by how I might be expected to make an exhibition or occupy a space. Spreading the show across time as well as space was more suited to the work I was making. It’s a journey for me, and it also establishes a different relationship and experience for the viewer.

Do people need to see all three parts?

Everything has been conceived in a way that means it is not contingent on that, but knowing there was a part before or is one yet to come will change viewers’

It is not my agenda to make work about Minimalism. However, I do like the idea of destabilising some of what we have come to associate it with. Because I often use my own experience of sexuality as a material, I am inevitably queering the associations of that tradition.

perspectives. They will see the later parts in relation to what may have existed before – either because they have seen it or in the knowledge that they missed it. And I was interested in how getting to know something fully requires you to understand that there are multiple perspectives on it – histories even – so the framing becomes a way of showing that.

Is there a thematic flow across the three shows?

There are some loose themes, such as exclusion and shame, and death is overarching, including the death of my relationship to certain spaces as well as content. I have made a lot of work about gay and queer spaces in the past, and in particular those that have closed because of market-led redevelopment and gentrification in London. So I was thinking about the death of those spaces but also about the death of the identities that used them, trying to ask questions like, who benefits from these spaces and who is excluded? Where is desire inscribed and how does it operate?

Part 1 of ‘DESCENT’, then, was *People Come and Go*, an installation based on an interior section of a neighbouring cruising club. Entering the gallery took you directly into a 1:1 replica of a tunnel feature found within the club.

I replicated a space that was solely designed for gay men – it is not somewhere that women, non-binary and trans people are allowed to go, for example. In questioning my own gender identity and feelings towards these spaces, I was interested in creating an image that can exist outside of the place itself, so that we might look at it differently and more openly in a way that is not shielded by the culture of the space. It became a parallel realm where one highly orchestrated image was presented.

That aspect of ‘getting out of yourself’ or transcending a situation is also important. It recurs in *Cul-de-Sac*, for example, when a ground-level view switches to aerial drone footage, all of a sudden floating up a bit like consciousness leaving its abode. I remember how, in the Tibetan book of the dead, a travelling soul moving between life and death goes down a corridor where couples are copulating, and it is here that these couples decide which body they should enter – effectively choosing one’s parents.

On entering *People Come and Go*, it wasn’t evident that you had stepped into an art gallery. The door was mysteriously ajar, and you found yourself in a dark space with no obvious ‘art’ in sight. How did people respond?

Visitors had to follow the unusual cues, like the door being ajar with the instruction of a ‘push the door’ sign. I had put in a new floor and lowered the ceiling, and they had to wend their way through a narrow corridor. People were excited by the apparent absence of the gallery, and finding themselves lost, almost. Some were made nervous by how the usual gallery frameworks didn’t exist so explicitly. But I considered the structure quite sculpturally – the narrowness of the corridor, the redness of the light, and how you would be going down a tunnel then looking down another tunnel. I had been thinking a lot about tunnels as conduits between places and between realms, as burrows even.

Is the recreation of the environment more literal than in previous works?

Yes, it’s the first time I have recreated scale, proportions and material qualities, rather than presenting a version of architectural spaces that I have edited in some way. It was something I needed to do with my work, as a means of testing the extremes of representation and abstraction. That said, I wasn’t concerned with recreating every detail, it was more about the uncanny sense of familiarity to a space that exists in the same neighbourhood and that is both private and public – human – but also a pen-like enclosure, industrial yet intimate.

At certain times you had a performer in the space. What did you see that as adding?

That introduced a further variable of framing. Would visitors encounter the performer or not? I wanted the performer to look as if he had passed out or was sleeping. I was interested in how that positioned the viewer in a moral sense, looking at a body that might be vulnerable in some way. Even though you realise it’s art, there is some suspension of disbelief, so when you are led down a darkened corridor it becomes a charged moment of encounter. Again this is linked to the idea of varying perspectives, and of environments explicitly designed for escaping social constraints or for escaping the self. I was interested in it feeling a bit like a trap. There were also still-life elements present in the tunnel, so even when no performer was there, clues of habitation existed. There were coins scattered on the floor, a dirty T-shirt, a wallet and a makeshift bin. This detritus made it feel like you were entering an environment that someone had occupied.

The performer I saw was white. Was that typical?

Yes, it was important to me that all my performers were white males so that there was a demographic which could help me to look critically at how those spaces operate, at the politics of exclusion. I have received more racism in the gay community in recent



QR code to download Kamaljit Sahib’s archive, shown as part of ‘DESCENT II’

years than elsewhere, and for someone who ‘found themselves’ in that community it can hurt even more, because you feel rejected where you thought you were accepted. I’m not saying that racism doesn’t exist to the same extent more broadly in society – it definitely does – but it is something I can’t avoid speaking about in relation to my own experiences and recognising how these attitudes can become institutionalised.

What is your own background?

I grew up in Southall in west London with a Polish mother and an Indian father. At the time that they met, that was very unusual. When I’m in predominantly white spaces I am othered, because whiteness has a pervasive way of seeing itself as the norm from which everything else deviates. It has taken me time to hone a voice with respect to speaking about some of these issues in my work. I also don’t want to feel like I always have to disclose my experience as a person of colour for an audience – I can also be looking at whiteness as a means of dislodging its centrality.

How does body type play out aside from race?

Often in mainstream gay venues there is a certain type of body that is venerated or given agency. In some spaces masculinity is a currency, leading to a form of misogyny; they become places that don’t let in anyone who looks feminine, regardless of how they might identify in terms of their gender.

Are you suggesting, through *People Come and Go*, the limitations of a particular perspective?

The problems of a myopic view, yes. In Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, she discusses structural racism, citing scholar Marilyn Fryre who uses the analogy of a bird cage to describe how, if you have your face so close to the cage that you are looking between the bars, you don’t necessarily see the forces of oppression that exist around the bird, so that one might imagine the bird could fly away. And if you move your head slightly and see just one bar, you might think the bird could fly around that bar quite easily. It’s not until you have a wider view that you can see the actual forces of oppression. So there is something about this metaphor, of trying to look from outside and question to what extent a space is one of liberation or freedom and who gets access, which is incredibly relevant to me.



Beast II, 2016, installation view, Grand Union, Birmingham

The body is more often implied than present in your work, isn’t it?

A lot of my work has played with the absence of bodies, it’s true, and so it was interesting to have an actual presence, albeit one that wasn’t available to all visitors. Last summer I made a performance in Italy called *Cruising Pompeii* and it was specifically timed to take place as the sun was going down, so it became very dark by the end. And I have performed with Eddie Peake in the past, again involving bodies in a dark room creating audible cues, so you were imagining what they might be doing rather than seeing it. Similarly, the body in this work exists in relation to the limitations or the conditions of its environment: where it begins and ends as a body isn’t clearly defined.

The phrase ‘people come and go’ could suggest birth and death.

Yes, referencing the fragility of both people and spaces. And the viewers of the show coming and going, also the exhibition itself coming and going, and the earlier parts generating residual feelings – you might remember that something else existed there very recently.

Do you expect a non-gay viewer to react differently from a gay viewer?

I work with the spaces I occupy and the materials I encounter, but that doesn’t mean other people can’t access something about them, in fact it’s probably even more of a reason that they should. It has been interesting to hear from people who aren’t familiar with that kind of space, but could still respond to how that interior made them feel.

The second part, *Cul-de-Sac*, centres on a video which extends your framing of specific architectural structures to a whole residential street, with its organisation of houses, communities and lives. How does that follow on from Part 1?

Where the object body was lying there in the tunnel, you come back to find a video. You might have wondered whether the person was conscious or not, and I see the video as imagining a consciousness slipping away. It is also somewhat dreamlike, with a fragmented soundtrack that feels quite dissociative – as if you’re in between places, or in two spaces at once.



Outer Wear, 2015, installation view, ICA, London

I have made a lot of work about gay and queer spaces in the past, and in particular those that have closed because of market-led redevelopment and gentrification in London. So I was thinking about the death of those spaces but also about the death of the identities that used them, trying to ask questions like, who benefits from these spaces and who is excluded? Where is desire inscribed and how does it operate?

There are various distorting devices in the filming of the street, aren't there?

Yes, there is the repetition of moving up and down a place that is familiar, like walking up and down the street until you eventually transcend that action. When filmed from above, the street appears bodily and phallic. There is also a kind of 'blinking' that occurs in the footage, which then becomes abstract, like an image might when your eyes close.

The street is the one in Southall in which you grew up. Do you see that, along with much of your work, as autobiographical in nature?

There is always an autobiographical starting point, but I wouldn't say it's reliant on this in order to access the work. If the idea of descent in Part 1 was about descent as a kind of passage – going to the darkest place, which is hard to look at – Part 2 connects ideas of descent as lineage. Some of that came about through me thinking about my family's life in Southall, as well as my compulsion to leave the area. The cul-de-sac, which is shown when the film rises above the landscape, is also a metaphorical dead end. It is both cradling and comfortable and yet a trap in itself.

Is that connected to why you left Southall and moved to the East End?

Yes, as I felt I didn't fit in with familial or community structures at the time, and in that case you go somewhere else to find yourself or think the 'way out' means distancing yourself from where you come from. I wanted to question this sense of disenfranchisement and why I didn't get to understand certain histories sooner. It has been amazing to learn about how politically active the Southall community was, but also how traumatic that time must have been. We absorb and internalise so many dominant messages that can sometimes make us feel disempowered in regard to societal wrongs, silencing us or diminishing the impact we can have on the institutions that shape our lives.

What is in the collage of sounds?

Recordings from nightclubs, arguments between me and my boyfriend, a recording of a storm out on the street, aeroplanes, sleep talking – losing consciousness, again – and my Dad playing the flute segueing into 'Hotel California' at the end, which is quite soothing. It evokes going down the street as an architectural space that contains all these different lives and houses and worlds. The overall effect is quite trippy, and I wanted that to co-exist with the theme of how you navigate being an individual in a family and in a community.

The film is shown with a collection of archival material that expands on the history of the area. How did that come about?

After my Dad passed away last year, I was intrigued to hear more about his experience as a young boy arriving in this country. And I learnt that he had been stabbed in the leg by the National Front around the time of the race riots in 1979 – something he and the community had tended not to speak about. My father's older brother had been an outreach worker for people with drug addiction, HIV and mental health issues, and was involved in a lot of activism. He mentioned that he had a folder of press clippings he had collected from that period. So I was able to learn more about the area and his perspective on it, and how he challenged mainstream narratives about the people that lived there created, for example, by journalists writing about young people and gang culture, which demonised them and distorted the role that racism, economic hardship and housing play. So many of the issues are still pertinent today: the police stop and search laws, the Tory cuts to services, racism. These things don't vanish with time, they reshape. There are legacies we still need to talk about and challenge.

What can we expect in Part 3, *Man Dog*?

The recent history of the exhibitions has led me to arrive at object forms: some on the floor, one partially visible behind a wall – harking back to ideas of being included or excluded in a space. It will be more of a 'classic' gallery installation. On the floor will be 'pet beds' – made, not found – somewhere between baskets you might leave your possessions or laundry in and a space that your dog might sleep. So they will be still-lives, but I'm thinking about them as containers embodying the contrasts of finding comfort or being alienated, of being in a domestic space or in captivity. I arrived at them by looking at patterns in men's shirting and noticing that they are like bars, suggesting containers which structure identities.

So we'll move from club to street to what might be inside a house, but with a continuing interest in the impact of those spaces on people's lives. What will be behind the wall?

Four pairs of legs will be partially hidden – like a spider creating a matrix for itself. The spider is the beneficiary of the web it creates, whereas we humans might ask – as in *People Come and Go* – who are these spaces for?

Paul Carey-Kent is a writer and curator based in Southampton.

Prem Sahib's 'Descent III. Man Dog' runs at Southard Reid, London, 15 February to 7 March.