

Harminder Singh Judge: The Inconsistency of Everything

India is many things to many people. It is a complex place in which mythology and modernity mix, where religious and cultural traditions co-exist with cutting-edge industries and technologies, and where the timeless and the contemporary are inextricably interwoven. It is a place that is full of paradoxes, of seeming contradictions and inconsistencies. Britain's relationship with India is equally complex, which is perhaps not surprising given the intertwined histories of the two countries, and in a post-colonial period that is witnessing the rapid economic expansion of a potential new super-power (certainly a nuclear power) mutual curiosity is matched by increased cultural collaboration, commercial partnership and intellectual exchange. Harminder Singh Judge finds himself in the middle of all this, both inadvertently as a British citizen whose family roots are in the Punjab, and as an artist whose work engages with the themes of multicultural identity and intercultural dialogue.

Growing up in South Yorkshire, it must have been a bit of culture shock for Judge to visit his family's village of Uttowal in the Punjab. Created for this, his first ever solo exhibition, at New Art Exchange, *Self-portrait after Kali and Gene* (2010) is a projection and wall drawing that addresses the disjuncture between the culture that surrounded him in the North of England in the late 1980s and 1990s and his experiences as a boy in India. He recalls how a group of women would keep on coming up to him to touch him, catching him unawares. On asking his parents why, he discovered that as the eldest son in their family, some people in the village believed that by doing so they would gain good fortune. These women had devilish black faces painted on the outside of their houses, reminiscent of Kali, a Hindu goddess symbolizing some kind of destructive and never-ending energy. Not among the most popular goddesses, Kali is usually depicted with a ghoulish appearance, recognizable for her pitch-black face and her blood-covered tongue sticking out.

Seeing images of Kali, Judge instantly made the connection with Gene Simmons, lead singer of American rock band Kiss who is often known as 'the demon', notorious for his black and white face make-up and famously photographed with his tongue out. In Judge's self-portrait, the artist casts himself as both Kali and Simmons, Hindu goddess and rock 'god'. Using black paint on the wall of the gallery as if make-up on his own face, the projection brings a strange, almost uncanny dimension to the work, as if life is being shone into a mask, or spirits being projected into his own image.

The combination of personal identity, modern Western music and ancient Hindu myth is also at the heart of *The Modes of Al-Ikseer* (2010) – a major new touring performance piece by Judge that is being presented at NAE as a closing event to accompany the artist's exhibition. The performance is based on the Hindu myth of Samudra Manthan (The Churning of the Ocean of Milk) a tale in which the gods and the demons worked together to create an elixir of immortality. To do so, the serpent god Vasuki was wrapped around Mount Mandaranchal in the middle of a sea of special milk, with the gods pulling his tail and the demons his head in order to churn

the milk. According to some accounts, the first attempt failed as the mountain sank into the ocean, resulting in Vishnu, the supreme Hindu god, appearing in the form of a turtle to support the mountain on his back. The myth, part of an epic saga that incorporates intrigue, deception, poison, betrayal and even the occasional decapitation, appears in various forms in the holy Hindu scriptures of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Vishnu Purana.

Judge's performance sees the artist, dressed in traditional Hindu clothes, standing in darkness on a rotating aluminium jagged disc surrounded by a pool of milk. Assuming the role of Mount Mandaranchal churning the elixir, he wears a ring of neon lights that are analogous to the serpent Vasuki. With wild hair and a beard, he appears like a swami – a Hindu spiritual leader – or a sadhu, an acolyte of Hindu mysticism, and stares expressionless into the distance as he slowly spins round. The live Indian Dhol drumming that accompanies the performance is thrown into sharp relief by a very different musical score: a cover of legendary British electro-pop band Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus* (1989). Lyrics from the song are spelled out in the neon ring Judge wears: 'Pick up the receiver and I'll make you a believer'. Especially recorded for the performance by upcoming London-based indie rock band The Bookhouse Boys, their cover of the Depeche Mode anthem fuses Judge's passion for British independent music with traditional Indian instrumentation and rhythms. The combination is a powerful one, bringing the Generation X religiosity of *Personal Jesus* into a harmonious confrontation with drumming that might be associated with Hindu festivals such as the Durga Puja or with Sikh celebrations such as Baisakhi.

Impressively choreographed lighting in seemingly limitless patterns and configurations takes the audience from darkness to light via an array of bright colours, from heavenly pinks to ethereal greens and foreboding reds. The soundtrack gradually evolves from meditative abstraction to religious pop fervour. This post-modern son-et-lumière is a spectacle, an audio-visual extravaganza, but by Judge placing his own body in the centre of his Indian heritage and British upbringing, and by presenting this to the audience, he is also inviting us to consider our own beliefs, heritage, religious backgrounds and the things that have meaning for us, whether cultural or spiritual. How do we as individuals assimilate diverse influences and information, how do these things become part of our personalities and how do we project these ideas and opinions back out into the world? As with the Depeche Mode neon lyrics he wears, Judge questions evangelical approaches to communicating one's own beliefs and identity to others, proposing an open-ended, dialogical relationship with cultural and religious difference, even within oneself. The *Modes of Al-Ikseer* is both a celebration of difference and an invitation to personal and communal engagement with it, whatever we may bring with us to the table.

In two new works created for the exhibition called *Dragon* and *Lamb* (2010), two life-size fibreglass sculptures of tigers are placed in the exhibition space on separate, revolving, aluminium jagged plates. The rotation, as with the *Modes of Al-Ikseer performance*, allows the viewer to see the entire piece from one viewpoint while simultaneously generating a vaguely unsettling awareness of the world constantly spinning. The tigers, animals with significant spiritual and symbolic status in India,

are identical, apart from the multicoloured neon letters that are mounted on masts attached to their backs; on the first is the word 'Dragon' and on the second, the word 'Lamb'. Inspired by the Book of Revelations, the lamb and dragon appear in the form of a beast that emerges from the earth with the horns of a lamb and the voice of a dragon. The creature symbolizes a false prophet – one who sets himself up as an idol to be worshipped through deceit. The beast, a manifestation of the devil, has the horns of a lamb so as to seem righteous. Those who chose to follow a lamb stood on top of Mount Sion are redeemed. Judge's *Lamb* and *Dragon* are already a semantic deceit, their banners misrepresenting the tigers on whose backs they rest. Like advertising gimmicks or promotional displays mixed with religious iconography, Judge's mislabelled tigers warn, in a playful manner, of false idols, and suggest how marketing, the media and publicity can try to sell us ideas with an almost evangelical zeal.

Continuing Judge's interest in the Book of Revelation is a work entitled *John the Revelator* (2010). A traditional gospel song, the title refers to the author of the Book of Revelation. First recorded by blues legend Blind Willie Johnson in 1930, it has been covered or referenced by dozens of famous musicians since, including Nick Cave and Depeche Mode. For his sculptural installation, Judge has made a compilation of cover versions of the track that is played on a loop inside a specially constructed wooden hut. Inside the hut, the walls and ceiling are covered in polished aluminium; a disco ball and bulb send beams of light flowing around the hut, which is itself installed in a tray of white liquid resembling milk. A musical form with its origins in Christian spirituals and the malaise of African Americans in the Deep South at the end of the 19th century, the blues is an interesting example of how a popular musical genre can emerge, in part at least, from the Bible and in response to specific social, political, cultural and economic conditions. Judge's hut, which could, in principle, only comfortably accommodate a couple of people at any one time is somewhere between a shrine and a garden shed – a place for personal retreat, reflection and contemplation. It's as if Judge is looking to create a space in which to house his own thoughts and the work of those he admires. Neither a church, mosque, hindu temple or Sikh Gurdwara, it is nonetheless a spiritual, if humble, place that is actually inspired by a small shrine in Judge's family village of Uttowal where workers pray in the morning before they begin work.

The notion of how religion is marketed and disseminated through music is a key concern in Judge's work. In addition to *Self-portrait after Kali and Gene*, *The Modes of Al-Ikseer* and *John the Revelator*, the theme is also explored in *Jagstang Crucifix* (2010) – a work that features two guitars designed by the late cult rock legend Kurt Cobain configured on a large wooden cross mounted on the gallery wall. Originally devised to promote the guitar manufacturer Fender, in Judge's work the guitars make an analogy between the dead musician and the crucified Christ, such is the mythical status of the former Nirvana front man.

Harminder Singh Judge's practice encompasses performance and live art, sculptural installation, music and digital media to explore notions of personal identity, religious traditions and modern subculture. While his own spiritual beliefs remain unclear, his

work reflects the polyphony of belief systems that characterize British society today and opens up possibilities for the meeting of ideas from different perspectives, often with unexpected juxtapositions. Many young British people today are not affiliated with a particular faith or belief system, but instead turn to subcultures as a way to connect with society, with others and with themselves. With a built-in critique, Judge acknowledges and shares in the Generation X and post-Generation X subscription to musical idols and in a way that encourages engagement with issues such as good and evil, creation and spirit, the soul and the afterlife. It is an intercultural, interdisciplinary approach for contemporary multifaith societies. With his trademark materials of neon, aluminium, fibreglass, lighting, sound system and wood, Judge's toolbox is a surprisingly effective means of raising issues of personal and communal significance in a time of late capitalist marketing and commerce.

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