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## Intercultural and Interreligious Bonds in the Language of Colors

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*Intercultural and Interreligious Bonds in the  
Language of Colors*

Lucy Soucek has completed the requirements  
for Honors in the Religious Studies Department  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the interfaith elements of the artwork of three south Asian visual artists, The Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin, and Arpana Caur. All coming from various religious backgrounds, living in multicultural societies, and navigating the borders and boundaries between different religious thought, these artists create meaningful artwork which explores what it means to live in a pluralistic society. All three artists invite viewers to think differently, formulate opinions, rethink assumptions, and spark associations. They use art as a way to ignite interfaith understanding, reaching broader audiences and asking us to question how we understand our neighbors and ourselves.

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## Chapter 1

### Broadening the Horizons of Interfaith Understanding

I was born into an interfaith family. My father's family is Jewish. My mother's family is Christian. Although I grew up Christian and attended an Episcopal church with my mom, I have always had an interest in learning about other people of other faiths. My favorite subjects in grade and high school were in the Humanities; I enjoyed classes in which we learned about cultures and communities all over the world. When I got to Colby College, I signed up for Global Sikhism, a class focusing on the north Indian tradition and its diaspora movements. That first class in the Religious Studies department sparked a new interest for me: actually studying the different religions of the world and how they interact and exist with each other. That passion for interfaith learning influenced my decision to become a Religious Studies major. Over the years, I have taken courses in various religious traditions, and conducted several research projects on interfaith work. I am drawn to interfaith understanding, and as a senior I am thinking critically about it. I am reevaluating my past experiences and wondering if there are new avenues to promote interfaith understanding.

In this tumultuous social context in which we are scared of the other, worried about difference, and misinformed by conflicting news outlets, interfaith learning is of the utmost importance. The world is divided. Conflicts define boundaries. And through this divided environment, religion plays a huge role in uniting communities. Religion is a reality not just for theologians, but for many people all over the world. Therefore, interfaith learning is an important avenue for the cultivation of a world in which we understand and appreciate difference. Through my own experiences studying interfaith work, I have been inspired by many communities across North America. There are so many hardworking people out there doing what

they can to communicate across difference and create comfortable atmospheres for everyone, regardless of their religion. However, I have also been frustrated with some of the aspects of interfaith work that I find fall short of the goal, and with communities that I thought were more progressive than they really are. Beginning with my own college community, I was astounded at the lack of understanding I found amongst my own peers, and myself.

In my Global Sikhism class, it wasn't until we learned about a recent event in the news that I realized how vital the issue of interfaith understanding really is. On August 5, 2012, a white supremacist, Wade Michael Page, stormed into a Gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and killed six Sikhs, injured four others, and took his own life (Mathias). There was extensive media coverage of this massacre. It was in headlines of major news outlets such as CNN, NYT and NPR. Even first lady Michelle Obama visited the Oak Creek Gurdwara after the attack to visit with families. Before learning about it in my Global Sikhism class, I had never heard of this event, and, after talking to other students at Colby, realized that they hadn't heard of it either. I remember sitting in my dorm room thinking about how something so devastating could be happening while my fellow students and I at Colby were oblivious. I decided to survey my Colby community, the people that I thought were so knowledgeable, worldly, and progressive, to learn about their understanding of Sikhism.

I sent the survey out to the students of Colby, asking them how much they knew about Sikhism, and only 11 out of the 90 students who took the survey admitted that they were quite familiar with the religion. Someone who had only heard of it mentioned, "I think it is maybe a branch of Islam. Or at least found in the Middle East region or around there." One student's response was vague, "I know that there is something to do with men not shaving their beards, and that they wear headscarves." This study led me to question the knowledge about Sikhism

elsewhere. What about a place with a higher percentage of Sikhs? Would non-Sikhs in this place know more about Sikhism? I thought they surely would. I traveled to Vancouver, B.C. where there is a large population of Sikhs and a Sikh suburb, Surrey. I went to four different food courts, gave willing participants this survey, and received a similar statistic to the one at Colby. I was dumbfounded. How could people not know anything about the fifth largest religion in the world? This ignorance and misinformation that I found both on my college campus and in Vancouver, B.C. astounded me, and inspired me to pursue interfaith understanding.

I started to wonder: are there places and forums at Colby that foster this interfaith understanding that I was craving? Are people comfortable talking about their religiosity with their peers? At Colby, we have forums such as Multifaith Council, in which students of different religions gather together for dinner and discussion to talk about issues related to faith, religion and spirituality. However, if one is not comfortable talking or sharing in that environment, there isn't much room for interfaith exploration. I returned to my peers at Colby, and interviewed sixteen students about their willingness to discuss their religion, or lack of religion, with their college peers. Here is a quote from a student of a minority religion:

When I came in as a freshman it was really hard cause if you're not part of a dominant religion on campus, people tend to make assumptions. I strongly feel that it's never the responsibility of the minority or the oppressed in any way to educate anybody else. It would bother me, but I couldn't care to educate the other person, so I just shut myself down. I think Colby is not an open place in general to talk about religion.

This sentiment reflects much of what I found through my interviews. Their religious lives are hidden; their underlying belief systems are seldom shared with others. The forums provided at Colby were not satisfying my fellow students, and therefore, the topic of religion was silenced. I wondered, are there places where forums are successful and where interfaith understanding is



abundant? Places where there is mutual appreciation for difference, and where the community is strong and supportive?

Thinking back to my own experience with religion, the aspect of belonging to a community is one of the most important parts of being religious. Although I am not practicing right now, the memories of belonging to different religious communities still stick with me today. I remember when I was five years old, and my dad pulled out the game Spin the Dreidel. We had several different mini dreidels, each of a varying color. I remember spinning the red, blue and yellow dreidels and competing with my twin sister over whose could spin the longest. Of course, we were young, so we didn't follow the exact rules of the game, but I do remember the sparkle in my sister's and father's eyes when we played this game each year. It was a family tradition, and although I don't play it much anymore, I will always remember how it brought my family together for that one night.

When I was seven years old, I attended a rainy bar mitzvah for a distant relative. A few years older now, I could understand that this was a Jewish tradition. My dad was Jewish, and my mom was Christian, so I bounced back and forth between each tradition when we attended certain family events. I don't recall much about the ceremony, but I do remember the community that the event created. We danced together, sharing food and drinks, and it made the rainy day a little bit brighter. I remember arriving home after the ceremony, staring outside the window at the dreary rain, and looking back in my mind's eye at the bright laughter and swirl of movement from the earlier event.

As I grew older, I mostly attended church with my mom, who was a practicing Episcopalian. My parents were divorced, and I ended up solely spending time with her. We had now moved to Brunswick, ME, where the religious community was small, but still prevalent. I

joined the church choir, and although I was young and inexperienced, I loved being a part of that community. That is where I learned about my passion for singing, and also where my mom, sisters, and I met so many friends who supported us through difficult times. It was where we could go every week, and feel connected, comfortable and loved.

Looking back on these experiences, the most important feeling that I can grasp is the sense of belonging. It's the feeling of knowing that when I played the game of Spin the Dreidel, attended family events like my cousin's bar mitzvah, or sang in the church choir at our Episcopal church that I was wanted, loved, and cherished. Belonging to these communities became a reliable source of comfort in my life. Trying to find this sense of community is what I was searching for in college when researching interfaith work. I wanted to find a place where this communal sense transcends all religious communities; where the sense of mutual belonging and support doesn't stop at religious boundaries. When my professor told me about Fresno C.A., where she experienced this support as a Sikh leading discussions at a Jewish Temple during their Interfaith Scholar Weekend, I knew that I had to visit.

I received overwhelming support for my trip to Fresno even before I arrived. The email communication and trip planning involved more than ten people, all of varied religious faiths. When I stepped off the plane in Fresno, I wasn't even nervous, because the preparation and support from all of these people was so strong. They gave me a bed to sleep in, transportation, and the same love that I receive from my very own family. In just two weeks, I visited the Islamic Cultural Center, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno, Temple Beth Israel, the United Japanese Christian Church, the St. Paul Newman Center, the Selma Gurdwara, Wings Advocacy (a volunteer group), Faith in Community (an interfaith social justice organization) and met with members of all these communities. Just before I arrived, the faith communities in

Fresno gathered together for a vigil to commemorate those who died in the recent Orlando shooting. This was just an example of the many events that they have each year to gather together as not only different religious communities, but as human beings. Everyone I met graciously welcomed me into their faith communities, met me with open arms, and collaborated with each other to make sure I had a warm and fruitful stay. I was so impressed that this small town in Central California could contain such a wonderful and interconnected interfaith community.

Through my experience in Fresno, I learned a lot about how successful an interfaith community can be. However, I also learned that no one community is perfect, and realized that there is still work that can be done to expand the horizons of strong interfaith communities. I found that although they had amazing events where different faith communities got together to learn about each other, the same few people from each faith community attended every event. Sure, the community was small and tight-knit, but in only two weeks, I recognized the same people at the interfaith events I attended, time and time again. How do we expand these boundaries and interest more people in interfaith work?

Having been exposed to a positive interfaith community, I gained interest in organizations committed to studying these types of communities. I decided to intern with the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, a research-based interfaith organization in Cambridge, M.A. My experience with the Pluralism Project was fulfilling and informational, I found that there are many organizations in the Boston that are working to forward interfaith understanding, and that there are databases upon databases of information regarding different religious views. Part of my work as an intern included updating the profiles of religious centers on the Pluralism Project directory by visiting those centers, going to services, meeting the leaders of those centers,

and attending Boston solidarity events with minority communities. One event was called a Muslim-Teach-In, in which congregants of Temple Isaiah in Lexington, M.A. gathered to hear from a few representatives of the neighboring Muslim community talk about Islam.

As my coworkers and I filed into Temple Isaiah for the Muslim-Teach In, I couldn't help but notice how low in elevation we were compared to the speakers. The masses of people sitting beside us were about three feet below the elevated surface where the Rabbi and three guest speakers were sitting. Not only were we physically below the speakers, but the audience also barely got a chance to contribute to the conversation happening onstage. I found that many of the interfaith events I attended during my internship with the Pluralism Project were formatted in this way, as a lecture or panel discussion. Although these sessions are of course valuable and important for the spread of knowledge about different religions, I found the top-down hierarchical organization of the events limiting, as it only allowed a few people to speak and share their experiences at a time. I'm craving new forums in which events like these don't have to mirror the inherent hierarchy of social organization, and in which these events can include more than just the same people each time. How can we expand this work and our communities to people who don't regularly attend these lectures?

Reflecting on my learning about different religions and interfaith communities has helped me recognize exactly why I do this work. It is the thrill and wonderful nervousness I get when stepping into a new place. It is the welcoming that I get from people whom I've never met before. It is the appreciation for those people who want to share their most sacred belief systems and the intricate ways in which they live their lives with someone new. The first time that I entered a Sikh place of worship, I was taken aback with the new scents, sounds, and sights. They filled my life with the exciting sense of exploration that we often crave.

As I stepped into a Gurdwara, I was astounded by the beauty and patterns of the colorful saris all around me, the sparkling jewels and intricacy of the fabrics surrounding the Guru Granth, and the elaborate music welcoming me inside. Greeted with warm smiles and open facial expressions, I felt like I was fully welcomed into this new place of worship. During Langar, the community meal after the service, I was met with full hearts, lovely conversations, and heaping helpings of lentil dahl, rice, chapati bread and warm chai tea. I realized that what I had learned in textbooks and lecture series really didn't have the impact of actually being there.

This experience emphasizes what I think is especially important in interfaith learning: not just observing, but going beyond that to experience the real emotional and visceral aspects. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the first interfaith scholars, writes, "Interreligious understanding is not merely an intellectual or academic or 'objective' question; it is also a religious question. To ask about other men's faith is in itself to raise important issues about one's own" (Smith 82). Of course, my experiences in the classroom and with interfaith organizations such as the Pluralism Project were valuable and meaningful, but I want to move beyond factual research to a deeper exploration of each others' religions. I want learning that goes beyond literary sources and stretches across different fields of study. Visual art is an avenue through which we can explore interfaith understanding in a new light. I have in mind the works of three South Asian female artists: The Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin, and the Arpana Caur. These inspiring artists bring their personal identities to the forefront, depicting interreligious spaces, and igniting critical thought through powerful imagery.

## Chapter 2

### A Visual Venture: the Functionality of Art in Interfaith Understanding

“Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it’s a revolution” (Rushdie 4).

Over the years, I have taken Religious Studies classes on the Old Testament, I’ve studied the Bhagavad Gita, and I’ve close-read the poetry of the Guru Granth, trying to concretely understand theological concepts. It is important to read the sacred texts of others’ religions in order to learn about the origins and the deep values of each religious community (Singh 211). However, my religious studies classes are small. We are often daunted when reading other peoples’ scriptures, doctrine, and theological concepts. Although they are so central and important to understanding the core of many religions, they are also seen as unapproachable, too important, too sacred and distant. These boundaries are exactly what keeps us from learning about each other. In my Religious Studies classes, I wanted to go deeper than just the doctrinal and literary level. I wanted to find the experiential level that I discerned in my double major in Theater and Dance.

Through the process of collaboratively choreographing a dance piece, I cultivated purposeful community with six other female dancers. During this process, we explored what our individual femininities and experiences driven by our gender mean to us in our society. We worked for six hours every week for the whole school year. This was a difficult process; it was both emotionally and physically taxing. But that is what I think is important for the cultivation of interfaith understanding. The community formed between the dancers was strong; it was fueled by a mutual understanding and acceptance of their personal pain, struggles, and experiences of discrimination. The results of the writing exercises, deep conversations, and our sense of mutual

understanding will forever be seared into my mind's eye by images from the piece: the long, bright colorful dresses that the women tore off of themselves, the thousands of colorful buttons shaken throughout the entire stage, creating a channel down the center of the stage where they found themselves again and again twisting, twirling and winding down, the tossing of the dresses up, up, up and finally running to catch them at the last moment, repeatedly throwing their tired bodies to the ground and yet willing themselves to try again. It was not only the community between the dancers that was so meaningful. It was the community spirit between the audience members and the dancers that allowed this work to expand from an inward focus to an outward focus. The audience members were there to learn about the experiences of the dancers, the space became an open place to shape subjective opinions and observations, a mutual space to make new discoveries sparked by the art onstage. This open space, vulnerability, willingness to share and make new discoveries, and full sense of community is what I aspire for in interfaith understanding.

Oftentimes, religious spaces do not offer the mutual space that I discovered on stage. When we visit the religious spaces of others, we want to be considerate. We are nervous, we are timid, and there is an inherent hierarchy between visitor and host. However, in spaces where art is shown, the environment is equalized, open, and inviting. With art pieces, our opinions and reflections are subjective. We are forced to look back on ourselves and what led us to think about the conclusions we are making. One of the first major scholars in the interfaith field, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, discusses the importance of reflecting on our own guiding principles and assumptions while we are learning about others (Smith 82). This internal reflection is fostered by artistic learning, and the inherent need to bring yourself into the learning process. We don't necessarily feel a pressure to understand and articulate the meaning of a piece of art, but we do

feel invited to explore different possibilities of what it means. And the spectator brings new discoveries, offers different interpretations, and opens up the scope of the artwork. When one watches a dance piece, walks into an art museum, peruses an art showing, or opens a book of art, the structure is completely open. You are there to make your own subjective discoveries; the artwork is yours to look at, to watch and to learn from.

We are not just learning about ourselves as observers, but we are learning about the personalities and experiences of the artists that made their work so meaningful. The six dancers in my piece brought their own vulnerabilities; their own experiences of stereotype and discrimination, into this work. They contributed them to each other and to me, and then together, we made a piece that allowed them to take control of what had happened to them, and to explain it and share it in a new light. In the case of the three South Asian painters that I'm studying for this thesis, it is their own cultures, religiosities and genders that shape what they put on paper. They expose their deepest personal beliefs to others who may not share the same thoughts. That is terrifying. It calls for a vulnerability that we tend to shy away from. However, as Shahram Karimi explains, "Art functions as a language and the artist as a speaker communicating a personal interpretation of the world by means of a particular accent" (Neshat 58). Throughout my time studying their paintings, I not only got a glimpse into their various artistic styles, but I learned something intimate about their multicultural and multireligious lives. Just as art is subjective, a person's own individual experience with their religion is specific and uniquely different for each person (Smith 18). These paintings were made by specific people, beautifully portraying their multicultural and multireligious lives, and allowing me as the observer to learn a little bit more about them and the characters they painted.



All three painters grew up with different visual languages, shaping how they view the world and how they respond to it. The Singh Twins were born in a diasporic Sikh community in London, attended a Roman Catholic Convent and now explore the intersection between modern Western media and traditional Indian miniature painting styles. Siona Benjamin grew up in Bene Israel, a Jewish community in India, attended Christian and Zoroastrian schools, and lived among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, developing close relationships with those of different faiths. Arpana Caur, a Sikh from the cosmopolitan city of Delhi, India, is influenced by the collective memory of events of mass religious disunity. Specifically, she draws from the tragic Partition of India in 1947 in which Hindus and Sikhs were forced to move to India, and Muslims were forced to move to Pakistan, causing bloodshed and riots, and the death of more than a million people (Dalrymple). She also recalls Operation Blue Star in 1984, in which Hindus and Sikhs were now pitted against each other. During this tragic event, the British stormed the Golden Temple, the most sacred Sikh Gurdwara, massacreing thousands of innocent Sikhs in broad daylight. Following this disaster, more than 3,000 Sikhs were killed in anti-Sikh riots after two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indira Ghandi, the Prime Minister of India (It's Time). These events caused major fractures in the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities throughout India and Pakistan, and Caur works to foster open communication between these groups of people, recognizing that although traumas affect everyone in different ways, we all can contribute to the active repairing of broken relationships.

The artwork of the Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin, and Arpana Caur transcends language boundaries, speaking to all regardless of what language they speak or what tradition they follow. If we allow ourselves to think about and experience this artistic world first, see the spaces where different religiosities are expressed in the same work, and enjoy the beautiful depictions of

religious figures dear to our hearts in the same spaces, we will notice that the language of colors gives us different feelings compared to just written or spoken words. Language barriers create miscommunication and contribute to the inability to hear and understand each other because translations can get so muddled. In terms of religiosity, the close reading of scripts, verses, and religious texts sometimes block our communication. Depending on the language, different versions are created and interpretations are separated by how much one can understand. However, new and more open forms of dialogue can be sparked through art. Throughout history, we have used illustration as a way for us to describe something in a different and more accessible, palpable, and upfront manner. The language of illustration gives us avenues and opportunities to describe ideas that our divisive languages don't allow. Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the picture a, "speechless *language*," in which we can use iconography and motifs that change meaning based on the visual contexts of the images themselves (Bernasconi 83).

Since the beginning of human history, people have created works of art to create unity and community, connected by effective imagery. The people who view works in museums and showings gather together to share the same, open spaces. The sharing of that space in quiet observation, in careful contemplation of the art before them, ignites a fire deep within the viewers to discuss, share and question their opinions on the art. This sparks conversation, disagreement and mutual interests in learning about something different from what they've seen before. The top-down hierarchical structure of learning is eliminated; everyone contributes their own opinions equally. Art is a way to bring people together; it is, "a means by which humanity progresses towards union and blessedness" (Tolstoy 202). Unfortunately, human history teaches us that religion and art have been in conflict too, and can create disunity, bringing out the darkness of the human condition.

There have been many times in which religious groups destroy others' art, specifically religious art, on the basis of disagreement, misrepresentation or fear. For example, Islam is an aniconic religion, meaning that many Muslims do not support the material representation of religious icons. However, some become overwhelmed with the fear of religious imagery, causing them to revolt against many forms of religious art (Singh 124). I am reminded of the time when the Bamiyan cliff Buddhist statues were destroyed by the Islamic extremist group, the Taliban, in Afghanistan in 2001 (Islamabad). I am also reminded of ISIS destroying ancient artifacts, bulldozing Shiite mosques, and blowing up shrines to Sunni Arab and Sufi figures (Hartmann). This fear causes hate crimes fueled by art; art becomes the tool through which one can show fear, disapproval, and even violence. There is so much emotion, passion, and weight in works of art. And yet, the Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin, and Arpana Caur choose to use art as a medium to not only recognize difference, but to allow it to become a space of unity.

These three artists depict female figures with aspects of different religiosities in the same spaces, putting emphasis on females as subjects and as informative and authentic agents. Commonly, female figures have been used as muses for white, male artists. They are historically portrayed as the objects of Orientalist thought, conquerable women who have little agency, painted with passive body languages as half-naked sex objects, permeating negative Western opinions of Eastern women (Kahf). But, The Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin and Arpana Caur are South Asian females. They depict strong, multi-religious female figures with agency, reclaiming the histories of many who have been unwillingly painted and used for male consumption.

And yet, in reality, the canon of religious art that has become famous is comprised of mainly Western Christian art. Westerners emphasize the work of white, male artists, those who have been chosen to represent the major strides in artistic expression, artistic movements, and

style. Through the study of art, we get to learn more about artists' identities, how they see and have experienced life. But if we only get to hear from one demographic, from one portion of the population of artists, how will we ever learn about those different from what is accepted in the mainstream? Even my own art museum at Colby College, the biggest art museum in the state of Maine, does not contain a substantial amount of art from South Asian artists. The Singh Twins paint images of their own family, sporting turbans, living in contemporary London spaces. Much of Siona Benjamin's work emphasizes the female body, painting female figures of different religiosities. Those who bring art coming from deep within the person, those who are deliberately and purposefully sharing their worlds with us. Christine Downing writes, "We are starved for images which recognize the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of the female energy" (Downing). And not just images that recognize the female energy, but images that bring global awareness to our global world. We need those who are exploring concepts, such as interfaith work, and who are depicting strong, multicultural, religious women have been previously shoved aside.

The depiction of different religious aspects in the same spaces goes beyond exposure to images that are new, or religious and traditional dress that is unfamiliar. Unfortunately, many of us are unable to recognize the multiple facets of religious dress. As Gadamer reminds us, we often look without seeing. We let our own previous assumptions guide misconstrued judgements; "it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition" (Bernasconi 270). Clothing and the ways in which people choose to present themselves in public is judged and critiqued so harshly, and we get uncomfortable when we see something we don't recognize. Diana Eck, the pioneer of interfaith work, rightly says that visual differences are how people recognize and make room for our separations: "after race, the most visible signal of

difference is dress, and this is where religious minorities become visible minorities” (Eck 297). The actual depiction of unfamiliar religious dress in a piece of art makes it beautiful. It normalizes it. It puts it in a space where it is okay to be different, innovative, new, imaginative, open, and non-judgemental. We see dress of different religions and cultures in the same spaces, which sparks new knowledge about what it means to be a multi-faceted member of society.

Sadly, even in our pluralistic world, we know little of each other. Nikky Singh beautifully describes the importance of relationships between flourishing communities of different cultures: “As different ethnic, cultural, religious, and political groups came together, the intrinsic spirit of Punjab’s soil was colored with vibrant new patterns, new worldviews, and new languages” (Singh 2). This expansiveness, once present in the Punjab, is now all over the world. Diasporic communities exist everywhere, and where it has become increasingly important to share and learn about our neighbors. Films, songs, and art pieces exist on the edge of what is accepted, and are deliberate spaces where these new conversations can be explored to create a foundation for interest, tolerance and greater understanding.

Artistic styles and trends have changed and are shaped by historical, social and cultural movements. Throughout history, people have talked about art in many different ways. There is the “art for art’s sake” argument, in which art should be viewed outside of association with social, moral, cultural, historical, political movements, that it should not be required to have a meaning or purpose. Whereas, the Indian nobel peace prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore writes, art is the field through which we can explore life’s “perpetual creativity,” and that, “man has a fund of emotional energy . . . this surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of art” (Tagore 228). Tolstoy argues that art is the, “transmission of every kind of feeling,” that can serve as medium to unite different people (Tolstoy 213). Most important, art creates revolutionary spaces, where

we reimagine aspects of our society where we want to change. In the words of British Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, “Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it’s a revolution” (Rushdie 4). Mark Stevens writes of the “Artist as the Creator of a Better Future,” someone who is able to “create new alternative worlds” and envision different futures (Stevens 115). In art, there is an expansion, a room for metaphors, for different interpretations of the same thing. We have a hard time accepting that people might have different interpretations and manifestations of the same religious scripture, text, proverb, poem, hymn, or tradition. But in art, those interpretations are welcome and are, in fact, valued. Art doesn’t necessarily bear the burdens of explaining the universe and prescribing ways to act within it, and therefore there is a freedom to express radical ideas through art. It is an open avenue through which we can learn about one another, with one another.

### Chapter 3

## Getting to Know You: Twin Individual Collaboration of the Singh Twins

Amrit and Rabindra Kaur encompass aspects of interfaith work through all parts of their lives. Growing up in a Sikh family in London and attending Roman Catholic Convent for their early education, their childhood involved interfaith and multicultural exposure. As artists, they draw upon the ancient Indian miniature style of painting and blend this style with aspects of modern day Western media. They create a new, artistic form that spans across time, cultures, and religions. Their experience as twin sisters working together as artists proves their patient and deep collaboration essential to appreciation and understanding of the other. Through their art and life experiences, they make connections across different religiosities, cultures, genders, races, time periods, and artistic styles.

Their father is a Sikh doctor. He emigrated from the Punjab to North England. The Twins were born in London in 1966 and later moved with their family to Wirral, Merseyside in 1974. Raised with their conservative Sikh extended family, they grew up in a Sikh diaspora. As young adults, they attended the Holthill Roman Catholic Convent in Birkenhead and were the only non-Catholics at the school. Although they were not required to attend the chapel services, they insisted on going (Mirani). As outsiders exposed to a different religion, their attendance not only increased their multi-religious understanding, but increased their interest in and sensitivity to difference.

As they continued on to higher education, their interest in multiculturalism and multi-religiosities grew. In 1985, they attended Liverpool University Art College in Chester, and received BA Honors degrees in Comparative Religion, Ecclesiastical History, and Twentieth Century Western Art (Mathur). Having been exposed to mostly European art, they visited India

for the first time in 1980, and fell in love with the rich patterns and colors of Indian art (Swallow 14). Influenced by their different cultural and religious upbringings, most of their art combines aspects of different cultures and religions. Insistent on combining themes of the old and the new, Britain and India, religious and secular, at home and diasporic, and famous and familial, they use the ancient Indian Miniature style of painting to inspire meaningful, even revolutionary, interfaith arabesques.

Indian Miniature painting dates back to the 11th century in Persia, when illustration and calligraphy were important to the Islamic tradition. In the 15th and 16th centuries during the Ottoman and Mughal empires, secular book illustrations became popular, increasing the need for illustrations (Swallow 15). These illustrations were detailed and intricate, accompanying writings to present a more complete storyline. As Mughal conquerors established courts in India, the passion for illustrated books came with them, and these styles changed and adapted to depict Hindu models and gods (Kelley 48). However, as British rule spread in India during the 18th and 19th centuries, the miniature tradition declined, and the painstaking methods of the miniature tradition were compromised to meet the demand for Western commercial painting production (Pal 10). According to Deborah Swallow, “Those rulers whom the British permitted the trapping of power were heavily influenced by Western taste and commissioned large-scale academic portraits in oil on canvas” (Swallow 14). As a form that began in the Islamic tradition, changed and adapted to the Hindu tradition, and then was buried by the British rule in India, the Twins are reviving the artistic tradition to bring Indian styles to the forefront of Western thinking.

They have spent years focusing on these techniques (Mathur 38). The complicated and intricate aspects of the Indian Miniature style, such as the use of bold colors, elaborate ornamentation, repeating patterns and flattening of perspective takes well-developed technical



skill to master. They are also illustrators, writers, filmmakers, designers, and even digital media experimenters (Kaur Singh). They describe their art as “Past-Modern” instead of “Post-Modern.” Thus, the Singh Twins use the Indian miniature style of painting in combination with aspects of modern technology to produce revolutionary work. Their art is an intimate reflection of themselves, acting as both an avenue to share their own Sikh roots and a commentary on the mainstream media in Britain and the United States of America. They are analogous to sculptor Nancy Bowen, who, “formed a deep appreciation for the care brought to the making of objects both sublime and mundane and encountered contemporary sculptors who continued to find validity in ancient forms while responding to the complexities of contemporary life” (Myers 32). Using ancient forms, they respond to contemporary religious and cultural divisions.

As identical twin artists who call themselves “twindividuals,” they work together to produce beautiful and intricate art. The two individual people make art that reflects both of their identities as identical twins. They refer to themselves as a single artist using the pronoun “she” and sign each other’s work. During their early education, their teachers tried to convince them to be individualistic with their art practices. However, in retaliation to these role models, they explain, ““our tutors didn’t seem to understand that in being twins, we were being ourselves in a way that was natural to us and that to make a conscious effort to be different from one another would have been totally false to who we were as artists and individuals”” (Mathur 53). They are comfortable with sharing who they are and how they like to work. As a twin myself, I can only imagine the amount of patient collaboration that it takes for them to work so well together. While I have struggled to form my own identity in relation to my twin, I also can’t imagine living without her. Having another human on this Earth who has known me longer than I’ve known anyone else, who shares my same birthday, my same background, and even shares the time

before I was born is uniquely special and something to be cherished. The Singh Twins bring their unique identities and their connection as twins to the table, employing patient collaboration needed for their arduous work, a basic impulse needed in our divided and fearful world.

An important aspect of their work is that of exposing elements of different faiths to viewers who may not be familiar with them. Importantly, they frame different faiths harmoniously in the same space. The original version of *The Last Supper* was a fresco by Leonardo da Vinci. It is an iconic painting for those of Christian religions, and contains layers of meaning and history, depicting a night during which Jesus and his disciples dined before his death. In a celebration of multiculturalism, the Singh Twins draw from the deep history of this painting to create a version involving their own family. When I first glance at *The Last Supper*, I'm struck by the bright red and green colored details, which symbolize Christmas to my Christian-influenced mind. I'm immediately drawn to the Christmas dinner table, with a wreathed bowl of fruit, and the window with snow in the background that lies behind it. If I look closely out the window, I can just make out a snowman with a little turban and a brown beard, smiling back at me. At first, I recognized a Christian household, but as I look closer, I notice Sikh practices, clothing, and images.

In *The Last Supper*, there are aspects of Christianity, Sikhism, and Hinduism painting religious and cultural symbols out in the open for viewers who may not be familiar with these symbols

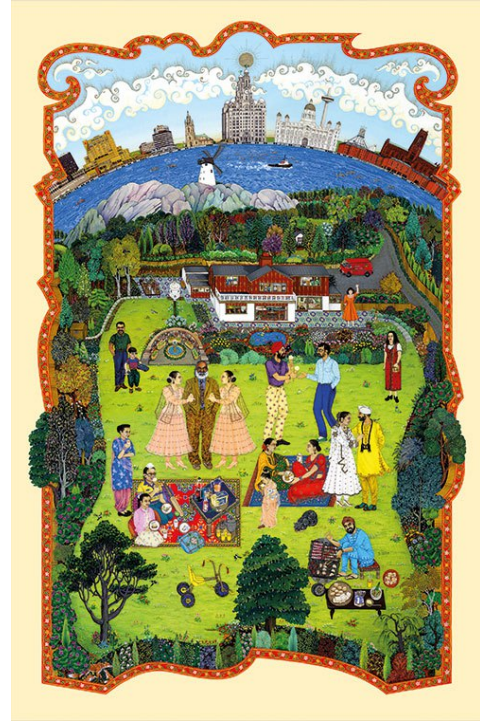


*The Last Supper*

to immediately see them. The statue of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, on the right side of the room is standing right next to the statue of Ganesh, the Hindu god of Good Fortune. Behind the Christmas table is an image of the Last Supper, notably rendered in a Sikh home. On the left side of the room is a painting of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, who bestowed the Guruship onto the Guru Granth Sahib, the external identity and book of faith to Sikhs.

Along with sharing these important figures in the same space, the spaces in which they choose to share them are community oriented and non-hierarchical. The space in *The Last Supper* is at a dinner table, where everyone sits dining as equals. Even at the head of the table, a man and women are both seated. The multiple perspectival systems within this painting are significant, alluding to the point that one can see the same room, or idea, at different angles. They use one-point linear perspective in the upper part of the image, and then reject it in other parts, toying with the ways in which we think through and make sense of the image. A significant aspect of this table is that the degree of religious dress varies. The family surrounding the Christmas table is Punjabi, some wearing turbans, sporting beards, and dressed in Indian saris, practices that many Sikhs follow. However, some are also dressed in suits, ties, and sweaters and have their heads uncovered, touching upon the both traditional and modern interpretations of what it means to be Sikh. Indian sweetmeats are on the table with Christmas cake; a Christmas wreath with a red bow hangs on a dresser across the room from a decorated stuffed elephant. These aspects of the West meeting the East, the ways in which culture and faith fuse together, are proved by this image of a lived experience: the Christmas table that the Singh Twins remember enjoying as children. They are an intrinsic part of the multicultural reality. This coming together of culture and faith, West and East, family and community in a non-hierarchical setting is a major theme in their works.

In *Indian Summer at Dhigpal*, we find the same sense of community, of bringing people together through love and faith that is true for people of all different religions. Again, this painting beautifully and intricately brings together the Christian tradition, the Sikh tradition and the Hindu tradition, proving to the viewer that one can find calm balance among vibrant difference. Located in their family home's backyard, *Indian Summer at Dhigpal Nivas* depicts a summer barbecue, a light-hearted event that many London and American families



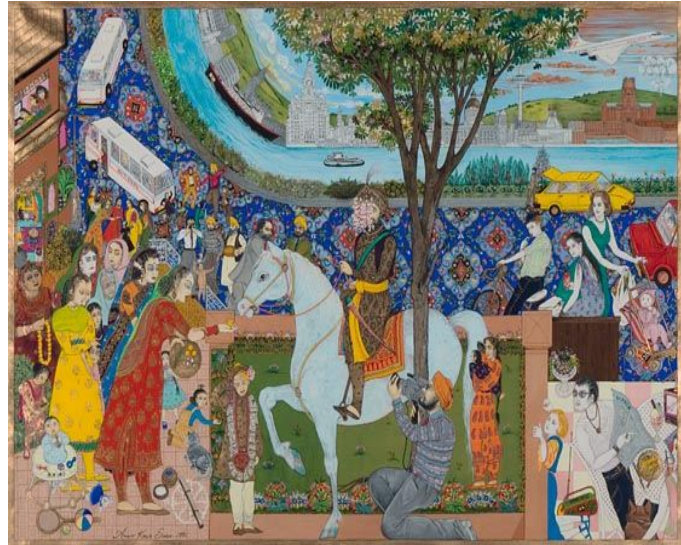
*Indian Summer at Dhigpal*

enjoy, regardless of their religious or cultural background. Similar to *The Last Supper*, aspects of a multicultural community are highlighted. The attendees enjoy Indian samosas and Chai tea along with ice cream and Coca Cola soda. Like the previous painting, some people are wearing traditional saris and turbans while others are in suits or sweaters. Even a little boy is wearing a Sikh Rumal, the cloth that covers his topknot. The depictions of these Sikh practices are a way of exposing those who may not recognize the Turban or the Rumal as friendly practices. Those who do not know much about why Sikhs wear Turbans or Rumals are often misguided by ignorance or the assumption that they are dangerous. However, the depiction of these practices at a friendly family barbecue places these practices into the regular sphere of family life; bringing these practices into a light-hearted and non-hierarchical scene normalizes them. However, just as not all aspects of interfaith work are easy and straightforward, the Singh Twins introduce a character

in this painting that ignite questions for the viewer to ponder about different aspects of interfaith work.

When I look deeper into *Indian Summer at Dhigpal*, I notice something that is unexpected. In the middle-right hand side, there is a white woman, standing with her hand on her purse and a stern look on her face. She is obviously not used to being in this setting, and seems intimidated by the different people she sees around her. Is this just the typical awkwardness that is present at a family or community event? Or is this a metaphor for the hardships that they have experienced as Sikhs in a systemically dominated Christian and white person's world? This aspect of *Indian Summer at Dhigpal Nivas* breaches new territory not obvious in *The Last Supper*: the idea that contradiction, ignorance, and reluctance to accept difference still exists, and that interfaith work is not all that straightforward. Taking a second glance at this painting, I notice the whimsy of the scene. The fantastical border with swirling edges echoing the puffy clouds, the boulders that look like large gems surrounding the windmill on Bidston Hill, and the beautiful Indian rugs that compliment the colors and designs of the floral background exude a dream-like state. The small white woman staring at this lively scene is a clue that among the smiles and laughter, the rich tastes and smells, this community event isn't all that perfect, and that work still needs to be done to ensure acceptance of all religious practices. This aspect of introducing someone new to aspects of a religion they've never known before is vital to interfaith work.

The Singh Twins also portray this positive introduction of people of different religions and cultures in their painting *Wedding Jange II*. As my eyes span across the commotion and activity in this painting, I immediately notice an English woman in a sari, standing amongst Indian women. I am reminded of my first time at a Sikh wedding; I was the only non-Sikh there. Attending the wedding was different from any description of the



*Wedding Jange II*

ritual that I had studied. In person, it was more vibrant, more celebratory and indescribably beautiful. Through this painting, I am reminded of the welcoming attitudes of the attendees, the happy celebration, and the wonderful smells, sights, and sounds that I experienced at the wedding. In the painting, there is a man playing the *Dholak*, an Indian drum, there are people dancing in the background, and almost everyone is dressed in traditional Indian clothing. This painting allows people who have never attended a Sikh wedding to learn about what it feels like to be there. The wedding is an important ritual not only to Sikhs, but also to people of many religious traditions. Getting to know what a Sikh wedding feels like brings non-Sikhs even closer to learning about this important ritual, that they are probably already familiar with through their own religious wedding traditions.

The wedding is one of the four major rites of passage in Sikhism. Several of the Singh Twins' paintings depict different stages of a Sikh wedding, all of which commonly add up to a week of celebrations. The stage that is depicted in *Wedding Jange II* is the preparation for the



*jange*, which is the procession of the groom to the bride's house, traditionally on a white horse. Through this painting, the Singh Twins are sharing a ritual that is still very much a part of their lives, even as British-Sikhs. The scene is vibrant with everyone dressed up; it is an explosion of jewels and colors and decorations. The wedding is portrayed differently in *Marriage to a Swiss Bride*, because this time the Singh Twins focus on the Christian tradition.



*Marriage to a Swiss Bride*

At first glance, I'm struck by the differences between *Marriage to a Swiss Bride* and *Wedding Jange II*. Although both depict wedding celebrations, this painting is much simpler and depicts aspects of a Christian wedding. It doesn't include the vibrant colors, the swirling and busy movement, the Persian designs, and the family and friends gathering together to celebrate the momentous occasion. Instead, it contains serenity, pastel colors, and the white gown and veil and the church steeple in the background. The only Sikh element that I see at first glance is the man's

turban. Although it is a beautiful portrayal of a Christian wedding, I am left wondering: why didn't the Singh Twins include other aspects of Sikhism in this photo, if the man being married is a Sikh?

*Marriage to a Swiss Bride* was painted as part of a series commissioned by the National Museums of Scotland. The series commemorates the retired businessman Lord Iqbal Singh, who is a symbol of intercultural identity for many Scotsmen. Born in Lahore, now the capital of Pakistan, he moved to Scotland and fell in love with Gertrude, the Scottish woman in the

painting. Among his various inspiring intercultural and interfaith movements, he had poetry by famous Scottish poet Robert Burns translated to Punjabi, and he created a “Singh” tartan. If Lord Iqbal Singh was such an intercultural sensation, why does this painting contain almost no aspects of his Sikh identity?

After doing more research about the painting styles, and noticing some subtle details in the painting that do in fact point to intercultural appreciation, I am conflicted. Is this really an interfaith painting, commemorating intercultural appreciation, or is it dominated by Western traditions and opinions of what makes a wedding beautiful? Is it a negative commentary on the influence of British colonialism? This style of painting is part of the Kangra and Guler schools of Indian miniature painting (Kaur Singh). The subtle colors, pastel pink, and oval frame surrounding the people and landscape are characteristic of this style. Nestled hidden in the tree are two birds: a Punjabi parrot and a Swiss cuckoo, representing the union of the two cultures through this marriage. However, these different religious and intercultural aspects are hidden. Is it really an exploration and appreciation of the two cultures and religions of these two people? Or, are the Singh Twins perhaps making an ironic comment on how interfaith and intercultural exploration is often dominated by Christian and Western practices? I don't know that there are definite answers to these questions. However, this painting asks that these questions be pondered, and it introduces inter-racial and interreligious marriage. This introduction itself is a huge step. This split between Sikhs and non-Sikhs and the question of how to balance partnerships of different religions is explored in other Singh Twins paintings through the use of architecture as a device for explaining these boundaries.

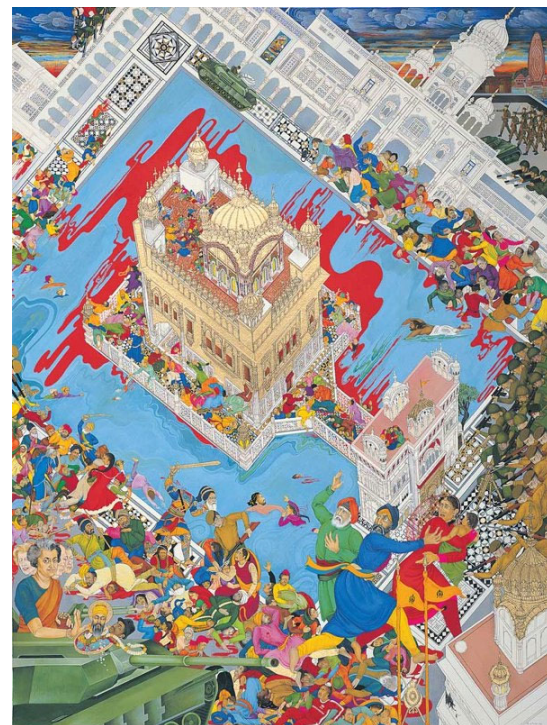
Turning my attention back to *Wedding Jange II*, what is perhaps most apparent for me in this painting is the architectural structure of the flooring, which seemingly splits up the non-



Sikhs who are watching the celebration and the Sikhs who are part of the celebration. While the square tiles lining the bottom of the photo on the right are solid pink and white, the square tiles on the left are tan with a curly cued design echoing the blue Persian fabric lining another part of the painting. The smooth river and blue Persian design rounds up on the Sikh side while it runs straight across the non-Sikh side. These subtle differences in architecture may signify that there are differences in the backgrounds, cultures and religions of the Singh Twins' family and friends. However, there are subtle aspects of this painting that cross the boundaries that these differences create and that indicate that there are interfaith possibilities present in this multicultural image.

First, the tree that marks the split between Sikhs and non-Sikhs has taken root on the non-Sikh side and is flowering on the Sikh side. Therefore, although the tree has different ways of sprouting and growing, it is flourishing on both sides. The bright red and yellow sari-clad women on the Sikh side are balanced perfectly with the bright red yellow cars on the non-Sikh side. At a macro level, this scene is a union between the East and the West. The sense of equilibrium among the chaos of this image makes my heart swell. Among all of our differences, we have similarities, we have love, we have vibrancy and we have celebration.

The architecture that is so important to *Wedding Jange II* can be also found in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, a beautiful celebration of interfaith appreciation and dissolution of class difference. The Golden Temple, the gold plated building in



*Nineteen Eighty-four*

the middle of this painting, is sacred to Sikhs for several reasons. Located in the middle of a pool of water, it is reminiscent of a lotus flower, an important symbol for both Buddhists and Hindus. There are four doors, each one located on each side of the temple. These four doors symbolize acceptance and equalization of anyone in the four different classes. As is the case with all Sikh Gurdwaras, anyone is allowed to come into the temple, attend Sikh services and enjoy Langar, their community meal, no matter what gender, religion, or class.

As is evident from the sweeping channels of blood and severed bodies in the painting, *Nineteen Eighty-four* depicts a devastating event for the Sikh community. During Operation Bluestar in June 1984, the military killed more than 1000 Sikhs defending the Golden Temple, their most sacred shrine. Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India at the time, commanded the military to remove Sikh militants, including Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who were holding weapons inside the Golden Temple. The purpose was to regain control, however the violent attacks and bombings of the Golden Temple committed by the military resulted in sweeping devastation for the Sikh community.

Specifically in this painting, the Singh Twins emphasize the interfaith aspects of the Golden Temple, even through the immense devastation. The bird's eye view enables the observer to see the four sides of the Golden Temple, and therefore the four doors symbolizing the acceptance of everyone. The tangled mess of bodies echoes the swirls of blood seeping out from underneath the Golden Temple. Designed by Muslim architects, the rectangular nature of the architecture of the Golden Temple is strong and unwavering, juxtaposed against this winding bloodshed. The gold of the temple is faded against the peoples' clothing, signifying that if the people aren't there to have access to the temple, the equalizing aspects of it are useless. However, even among this misery, violence, and devastation, the Golden Temple is still standing

with no visible destruction. It is strong, powerful, and still magnificent; the power of interfaith work and the action of equalizing and getting rid of class distinction lives on past any violence and devastation.

Through *The Last Supper*, *Indian Summer at Dhigpal Nivas*, *Wedding Jange II*, *Marriage to a Swiss Bride*, and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the Singh Twins prove that movement, excitement, celebration, memory, and faith can be portrayed all at once, and that it can be beautiful as well as chaotic. The busyness of these paintings is a metaphor for the different, and sometimes conflicting, faith practices and beliefs in the world. So many colors and patterns can sit in the same space, and can even bring out the beauty in each difference and intricacy. Their depictions of a Christmas memory in a room decorated with Indian and Sikh objects, a summer memory with a backyard barbecue with both Indian and Western foods, two wedding memories of different religious traditions, and the devastating memory of Operation Blue Star are active sharing of their multicultural and multi-religious lives. They are explanations of how they practice and explore aspects of the Christian religion even though they are Sikh, and of how they can share Sikhism to those who aren't Sikh. It is okay to learn about other religions and cultures. In fact, art can be an imagining of new relationships on our global stage.

## Chapter 4

### Kosher Coconut Curry: a Taste of Siona Benjamin's Art

It is the symbols, stories and rituals, much more than official Church doctrines, which feed the religious imagination . . . it is through stories and symbolic images, handed down from generation to generation, that we come to understand who we are, where we come from and the nature of our place in the universe (Heartney).

Siona Benjamin's art, influenced by rich religious and cultural traditions, fully encompasses the idea that our stories and belief systems shape who we are. Her art is a blend of her own background and the different images from Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. She writes, "I want to blur the boundaries between cultures, to be able to take from the specifics of my Indianness, my Jewishness, my Americanness, and make something universal . . . what I like to do in my art is to see all sides" (Brawarsky). This seeing all sides, recognizing that we all have stories to tell, and that we all have different belief systems important to us forms the very backbone of interfaith work.

Born into the Bene Israel community in Mumbai, the oldest Jewish community in India, Siona Benjamin spent her early childhood learning about what it means to belong in a multicultural and multi-religious world. As a Jew in a city with Hindu and Muslim majorities, she grew up eating Kosher Coconut curry while her mother lit the Shabbat lamp every Friday. She spent time with her two best friends of different religions, a Muslim and a Portuguese Christian, and attended a Catholic grammar school and a Zoroastrian high school (Soltes 1). Even before she graduated from high school, she connected with people of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Zoroastrian faiths. This early interfaith exposure would shape her artistic career.

After receiving a diploma in Fine Arts and a diploma in Metals from the J.J. School of Art in Bombay, India, she moved to the United States of America where she received an MFA in Painting from Southern Illinois University and an MFA in Theater Set Design from the University of Illinois (The Art). She married an Eastern European from Connecticut. She taught in Connecticut and New Jersey, and then moved to New York City, one of the most diverse cities in the USA (Soltes 1). With family all over the world in Israel, India, and America, she has learned that religious and cultural communities can span across both time and place. She writes that her husband and her, “try to raise our children in the mosaic of all that we can bring to them from our backgrounds,” emphasizing the importance of interfaith work even in her own family (Heartney).

Her original Bene Israel community is a prime example of interfaith and intercultural appreciation spanning across generations. The Bene Israel community is a Sephardic Jewish community that traces back to 500 CE. People of the Bene Israel community observe Jewish practices, rituals, festivals and dietary laws, but like any religious diaspora, they also belong to the culture of the country in which they live (Standhartinger). They blend Jewish traditions and cultural Indian traditions to create new ones, specific to their unique community. At a wedding, for example, a bride will traditionally wear both henna and a white sari, while the groom sings the Bene Israel “groom song” from the podium (*Bimah*) in the synagogue (Standhartinger).

However, religious and cultural misunderstanding can emerge in vibrant, multicultural communities. When she first moved to America, members of her community were surprised that there were even Jews in India. During graduate school, she was told to paint large abstract paintings to be successful, and to avoid the small, miniature-style paintings that she was interested in. After experimenting with these large paintings, she realized that she was yearning

to take her own path. She thought, “What is good for me? I’m an Indian, Jewish, American woman, living and trying to find myself and who I am. And if I’m going to make paintings according to somebody else’s formula, it’s not going to work” (Amouyal). This idea of going against the grain, looking for new paths, making new discoveries, and finding different ways to live and interact with people of various religions is what interfaith work requires. She writes, “I like to put disparate elements together and be able to do more than just pack them in. It shouldn’t be like a patchwork quilt, it should be seamless” (Amouyal). Working to forward interfaith understanding and appreciation in both America and all over the world, she incorporates aspects of various traditions in her work to “blur the boundaries between different religions so that you cannot make out where my characters are from. They can be Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian. They could be one of each of all of the above” (Blue Like Me).

This blurring of boundaries might not be supported by interfaith scholar Diana Eck, who writes, “Pluralism is not just the enumeration of difference, and pluralism is certainly not just the celebration of diversity in a spirit of good will. Pluralism is the engagement of difference in the often-difficult yet creative ways that we as scholars can observe, investigate, and interpret” (Eck 16). Eck firmly believes that we must not just ignore difference and create hybridity; we need to recognize difference and find ways to engage together among our difference. However, I believe these two ideas are not mutually exclusive. Benjamin creates art fueled by her personal experience of living in a multi-religious and multicultural community. She is reflecting on her own self and her own identity in order to depict figures that engage these different parts of her identity. They do not reflect a perfect pluralistic world or pluralistic identities, and that is okay. They do reflect figments of her own imagination coming from her own experiences, which need to be recognized. They make me think critically about religious dress, about political issues,

about biblical stories, and even about my own place in this multicultural and multi-religious society. This critical thinking is exactly what Eck emphasizes in her definition of pluralism. Benjamin's artwork sparks thought through which we can engage with our differences, and think about interfaith understanding in different ways.

Through her art, she draws upon Biblical subject matter, Indian mythology, Bollywood posters, Roy Lichtenstein inspired comics, and uses gouache, 22K gold leaf, acrylic paint, and mixed media to create her intricate interfaith masterpieces. She uses artistic styles from various religions to prove that it is possible to draw from these different practices to make powerful work. She employs the Indian Miniature style, Midrash (rabbinical interpretations of the Torah), Rajput (Hindu) art, Byzantine (Christian) icons, Sephardic Jewish icons, the colors, geometric, vegetal and floral patterns of Persian art, and the female energy and power found in Tantric art of ancient India. Through these different forms, she introduces us to a rich and expansive landscape of artistic work.

Retracing her history as a Jewish woman, she focuses on the notion of Tikkun Olam and uses Midrash in her work. She studied with Burton L. Visotzky, Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York to get to the root of what stories from the Torah mean to her. Close reading those sacred texts allows the reader to dig deeper into the meanings, similar to the way close reading of Siona's paintings allows for intricate meanings to be realized. In this way, she uses not only stories and characters from the Torah in her art, but she combines multi-religious aspects in her intricate art. The Jewish notion of Tikkun Olam, Hebrew for "Fixing/Rectification," adds important meaning to the purpose of her work. It speaks to the idea that the once broken world can be restored by human acts of kindness. She writes, "As an artist, I make an attempt to 'reconstruct' this shattered world/vessel

— the reconstruction is symbolically enacted through the process of conceiving and making my paintings” (Benjamin 62). In order to piece together this broken world, she draws upon aspects of different traditions and myths of different traditions to show universal humanity.

Touching upon her Indian culture, she uses the Indian miniature style to influence her work. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the Indian miniature style has been adapted by both Muslims and Hindus. The Mughal style, typical of portraiture, careful observation and scientific naturalism, was synthesized with the Rajput style focused on myth, epic literature and poetry. The Rajput style emphasized the importance of *rasa*, or “emotional flavor or taste evoked by an aesthetic experience” (Dalrymple). Glimpses of both styles can be found throughout Benjamin’s paintings, giving light and remembrance to the two traditions’ ancient styles. The *rasas* that were so important in Hindu art were also important in Hindu theater and dance, and Siona recognizes that by venturing into the field of theater and dance, literally choreographing her characters to exist as three-dimensional figures. In her newer work, characters that can be found in her paintings also perform onstage. Drawing from various art forms is a process of finding affinity with others, an act of collaborating with different traditions to create something that accentuates aspects of them all.

Building upon her Christian education, she also includes aspects of Byzantine art, which evolved from late classical forms of Early Christian art (Byzantine Art). Typically in Byzantine art, there are themes of disembodiment, three-dimensional human figures replaced by spiritual presence. However, Siona Benjamin draws upon these aspects by bringing human figures back into her work, but replacing the skin with a blue color, emanating a spiritual presence. Her central themes focus on what shapes physical and spiritual identity, as she continues to search for her home as an immigrant with family all over the world. She draws on both ancient myths from



several religious traditions and modern pop cultural references, creating a dialogue between ancient and modern themes.

The following quote from Elinor Fuchs describes much of what I see is so special about Benjamin's work:

We must make the assumption that in the world of the play there are no accidents. Nothing occurs 'by chance,' not even chance. In that case, nothing in the play is without significance. Correspondingly, the play asks us to focus upon it a total awareness, to bring our attention and curiosity without the censorship of selective interpretation, 'good taste,' or 'correct form.' Before making judgements, we must ask questions. This is the deepest meaning of the idea, often-repeated but little understood, that the study of art shows us how to live. (Fuchs 6)

Siona Benjamin sets up a stage in which the characters are figments of a new world, like the one in Elinor Fuchs's explanation of a play. This world is multicultural, it is multi-religious, and it is a world where interfaith understanding is of utmost importance. She brings our attention to moments of conflict, moments of question, moments of fragility, and moments of universality. She invites us to imagine what it means for Jewish, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Muslim identities to be in the same space. Through the inclusion of biblical references, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Jewish clothing and accessories, Hindi and English words, and the juxtaposition of the Persian miniature style with modern Western comic style, Benjamin proves that being multicultural and having interfaith understanding can be both vibrant, beautiful, and, alas, misunderstood. Even through the clothing worn by the characters in her paintings, she invites aspects of different religions to exist together, either in the same scene or on the same person. Her series, *Finding Home*, contains more than 52 paintings. And yet, there is a blue woman in almost every painting. These women are both a reflection of herself and of other women in the world; they are ambiguously painted and can be of any religious tradition and of any culture. The blue skin is an allusion to Krishna, a Hindu God, but is also a commentary on how she feels as a

Jewish woman of color, forever trying to figure out where she belongs.

Benjamin's *Finding Home #61 Beloved*, is an iconic interfaith image, a spectacle of the affinity of a Jewish woman and a Muslim woman.

Centered in the painting *Finding Home #61 Beloved* are two women in an embrace, even though they are wearing clothing of different religions. The woman on the left wears a *kippah*, a Jewish custom. She has *Tefillin*, a pair of black leather boxes containing Hebrew scrolls, wrapped around her arms. *Tefillin* is also a Jewish custom, common in Orthodox and Conservative congregations. Meanwhile, the woman on the right wears a *hijab*, a Muslim custom. Reminiscent



*Finding Home #61 Beloved*

of Siona's childhood Muslim friend, the tight hug is a representation of the communication and interreligious understanding that is possible between these two religions. As the bloodshed materializes on their lower bodies, the religious clothing is eliminated and blends together, alluding to the idea that hate crimes are commonly fueled by ignorance and have little to do with actual religious differences. The two characters are intertwined, holding each other for support, with calm facial expressions. Even all the way down to their feet, it's as if they are one person, creating the idea that regardless of our religious or non-religious affiliations, we are tightly bonded humans.

In *Finding Home #61 Beloved*, Benjamin breaches time and place by bringing biblical characters into a modern day setting. In the biblical story, Sarah is Jewish and Hagar is Muslim. Hagar is Sarah's servant, but is banished by Sarah after Abraham makes love to Hagar and they

produce a child, Ishmael. After Hagar and Ishmael are banished to the desert, “An angel called to Hagar: ‘Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying.’ He reminded Hagar of God’s blessing and provided a spring of water” (Sarah, Hagar and Abraham). Hagar has a different reputation in different faiths; Although she is depicted as a negative character in the Old Testament, she is a revered woman in Islam. Retelling this well-known story in an artistic and modern day context, Benjamin moves past the outcomes of the each story and instead focuses on reuniting Sarah and Hagar. In this painting, they turn to each other, a Jew and a Muslim in a tender embrace, while others contribute to their destruction.

In this modern day context, Benjamin depicts universality, both at the physical and emotional levels. Specifically, the droplets of blood and outlines of soldiers immediately remind us of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, especially because the female figures are Jewish and Muslim. It also reminds us of the hate crimes and violence that result from ignorance surrounding Muslims and Sikhs in the United States. The soldiers and amputees have no obvious religious affiliation, but they are standing side by side, making the allusion that they are never ending. The camera directly points at the soldiers and obviously sees them, but does not point at the real people in the middle who are affected by this bloodshed. Within the context of the soldiers, it seems as though the two women are holding onto each other for dear life, but are unnoticed by outside forces. The soldier and amputee outlines go beyond the frame, step outside of the box that the two women are stuck inside. These foundational women, belonging to two different religions, hold each other for support. By including suicide bombers in the painting, Benjamin paints the idea that to be religiously biased and violent is to contribute to one’s own destruction as well as the others’.

The bright background in *Finding Home #61 Beloved* references the ways in which

Mughal and Rajput painters used flat color backdrops in depictions of natural environments to highlight the *rasa* of the subject. There are eight fundamental emotions that one can taste in a work of art, each associated with a different color (Bharata). The *rasa* that Benjamin focuses on in this painting is made clear by the bright yellow background: *Adbhutam*, or wonder and amazement. However, surrounding this bright yellow color is a dark red border, alluding to the *Raudram* *rasa*, which means fury. This allusion to *rasas* is not only a reference to the Mughal and Rajput practice, but is also a way of exploring the different emotions that the characters might be feeling. The background guides my focus towards the two characters in the middle which are highlighted by the bright yellow color behind them.

In *Finding Home #62 Asnat (Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes)*, a female stands in the middle of the frame wearing clothing and accessories from Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim



*Finding Home #62 Asnat (Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes)*

traditions, inviting the viewer to notice her multicultural and multi-religious identity. A revolutionary aspect to this painting is that the elements of clothing and accessories that she wears are traditionally worn by men. However, Benjamin is questioning the binary to which we are so accustomed, creating a female version of these powerful figures. On top of her head, she is wearing a *Kippah*, the head cap traditionally worn by Orthodox Jewish men (Soltes 695). She is carrying a sword on her body, and is wearing a sheer veil and skirt, which

are items of clothing depicted in Mughal imperial art. The long sheer skirt was commonly worn

over *churidar* pants, tight pants with extra fabric at the bottom, depicted in the painting. The sword and the clothing are references to male Mughal imperial portraits. The female is standing on a circular surface, similar to that of a globe, a standard image referencing the universal rule of the Mughal empire. Because the Mughal empire was a Muslim dynasty, these pieces of clothing are directly derived from Muslim traditions. The cloth hanging from her skirt seems to be part of a *dupatta* that is commonly worn in India. The cloth can be worn as a scarf, a veil, or a shawl, depending on one's religious or cultural values and preferences. However, the woman in the painting has chosen to wear her *dupatta* as a cover over her sheer skirt. The *dupatta* is in the pattern of an American flag, connecting the various religious aspects of her clothing to an American identity. By wearing aspects of different religious traditions literally on her person, the female in this painting fully encompasses the different parts of her identity that she holds dear, even though they may be of different faiths. The leaves and roots in the inner frame are intertwined with twists that resemble DNA, perhaps noting that what makes up the female's persona is shaped by her surrounding cultures and religions. This character serves as an autobiographical Benjamin, and also an identity that is a reality for many people around the world. She is a spectacle of multi-religious embodiment, proving that different religious identities do not have to exist in separate realms.

The character in *Finding Home #46 Tikkun ha-Olam* wears a *lehenga* (skirt), *choli* (blouse) and a *dupatta* (scarf), which are all pieces of Indian



*Finding Home #46 Tikkun ha-Olam*

clothing. These religious outfits in the same spaces give the sense that we can have different religions in the same places. Another powerful aspect of Benjamin's paintings is her use of language. She only has a few words in each painting, but they expand the meaning of each painting to whole new levels. Benjamin includes script from multiple languages, inviting us to question what these words mean, to see words of different languages and traditions in the same space, and to think a little bit harder about our different forms of communication across religions.

An interesting dynamic comes into play when I focus on the speech bubble above Asnat's head in *Finding Home* #62 "*Asnat*" (*Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes*). It reads "What?" in Hindi. The second part of the title, "Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes" is written on the bottom of the inner frame in English, intertwined with the twisting leaves and roots decorating the frame. This statement is referencing the fact that Benjamin grew up in a community where the Jews didn't speak Yiddish. Benjamin was brought up with Devanagari, the Sanskrit alphabet used for writing Hindi. This sentiment is reminiscent of the confusion, discrimination, and out-casting that Benjamin experienced as she moved to other Jewish communities, because she didn't speak Yiddish. She writes in the caption of this painting, "You see, Yiddish comes from the German language and Arabic is spoken by the Jews in the Middle East and Marathi by the Jews in India and Amharic by the Ethiopian Jews and Spanish by the Jews in South America" (The Art). In this painting, this figure who is confident, poised, sporting many aspects of different faiths, and comfortable with her identity is juxtaposed with this huge speech bubble that forces us to question ourselves and our world. There is a yearning for change, a need for education, interreligious and intercultural understanding and acceptance that is poised from the tip of her finger to the edge of her sword.

In *Finding Home #46 Tikkun ha-Olam*, the title of the piece is written on one side of her body in Hebrew, and on the other side in Devanagari script. Tikkun Olam is an important concept in Judaism; it means “repairing the world,” a call to try to make the world a better place. By including both translations in this painting, split by her body in the middle, we see these different religious translations of this important Jewish idea in the same space. Benjamin gives us a glimpse of what it is like to work across language barriers and to see the same idea translated to different languages. We all have love, we all have pain, and we all have visions of how to make the world a better place.

Benjamin depicts shared symbols that are universally applicable to many different religious and cultural traditions. As it is especially important to recognize and accept each others differences, it is also important to recognize that we are all human, and we have similarities as well. In all four of the paintings that I’ve discussed, the female characters have blue skin, referencing the blue skin of Krishna, a Hindu deity, in Indian miniature paintings. This blue skin makes their locations and their identities timeless and placeless, and invites the viewer to focus on the similarities of the paintings rather than their skin colors.

In *Finding Home #62 Asnat* and in *Finding Home #46 Tikkun Ha-Olam*, both female characters are wearing a *Hamsa* hand necklace. The Hamsa hand is a symbol of protection for Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. In Islam, it is called the Hand of Fatima, in Judaism it is called the Hand of Miriam, and in Christianity it is called the Hand of Mary (Hand of Fatima). In Hinduism and Buddhism, the five fingers symbolize the five chakras, the energy flow of the body. This Hamsa hand has different meanings in different religions, connecting the religions although they might have different interpretations of the same symbol.

Another symbol found in Benjamin's paintings that is meaningful in many religions is the lotus flower. In *Finding Home #62 Asnat*, Asnat is holding a pink and white lotus in her left hand, and in *Finding Home #46 Tikkun ha-Olam*, the female character is balancing on another pink and white lotus. In Hinduism the lotus symbolizes life and purity. In Buddhism, a pink lotus flower represents the history of Buddha and a white lotus flower represents the purity of mind and spirit. Asnat's thumb and forefinger holding the lotus flower together are making the Buddhist *Vitarka mudra*, which is the mudra of discussion. Mudras are symbolic or ritual gestures, important to both Buddhists and Hindus, and this specific mudra that she makes presents me with the idea that cross-cultural discussion and appreciation is of utmost importance. Oftentimes, we get stuck in our own ideas of what it means to be an authentic member of a religious community. That to be authentic, one has to be purely mono-religious, to follow the exact traditions of that specific religion. Through this symbol of the lotus, Benjamin is inviting the idea that to be pure does not mean one has to be mono-cultural or mono-religious. In fact, in order to achieve an authentic life and religious identity, one must embody a multivalent approach to pluralistic thinking. They must learn to think about others with the same dedication as one thinks about oneself.

Looking deeper into these paintings, Benjamin includes aspects of fragility among all of the characters, speaking to the idea that we are all vulnerable and we all experience pain. In *Finding Home #46 Tikkun ha-Olam*, the female character's body contorts into the seven candles of the menorah, a symbolic item in Judaism. Among the aspects of different traditions in this painting, I can't help but notice her troubled facial expression. She seems to be trying to master a balancing act: literally holding up the seven flames of the menorah with her bare fingers while forming her lower body into *Vrkhasana*, or tree, a Hatha yoga pose. She is clearly carrying an



enormous weight on her shoulders, both literally and figuratively. She is stuck inside the Persian miniature style frame, and the way in which Siona painted it makes her look like she's trapped in a box.

In *Finding Home #62 "Asnat,"* Asnat is also stuck in a liminal world, looking towards the West for answers, prayers, and acceptance of her multi-religious and multi-cultural identity that clearly has not been granted yet. However, her gaze towards the West is a mockery, because the West is in fact no further along in interfaith appreciation and understanding than the East. Her watch is set to 8:46 AM, the time that the first World Trade Center tower was hit during the September 11 terrorist attacks. She is fully aware of the current events surrounding her, and is urging us to question why these events are happening. The watch symbolizes the time that is running out, if the world continues on as disjointed and imbalanced as it is now. Benjamin invites us to think about the lack of interreligious understanding. She includes aspects of both fragility and strength through her beautiful juxtapositions of different religions in the same space. I want to revisit the word, "What," written in the speech bubble of *Finding Home #62 Asnat (Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes)*. Benjamin is deliberately inviting us to think about the bigger picture. Through her artwork, she sparks thoughts about issues of femininity, vulnerability, interreligious understanding, and the cross between tradition and modernity, just to name a few. And with the word "what?" she invites us to ask, "What now?" How do we move on from just looking at these artworks that are sparking ideas in our own brains. She is inviting us to share, to discuss, to argue, to critique her work so that we can move forward in the work of making this world more pluralistic and understanding. It is now our responsibility to share these works, to contemplate them with those different from us, and to engage in critical discussion and thought.

Benjamin reminds us of the realities of society, both using modern day visuals and by quoting scripture to urge us to recognize unsettling aspects of tradition and modernity that we may shy away from discussing. The purpose for this is to bring the traditional into the modern day context, and to invite us to realize that aspects or ideas that haven't actually progressed as much as we might assume. Benjamin writes, "Yesterday's wars are still fought today, recycling the same problems, the same anxieties and dilemmas. Nothing seems to have progressed. . . . Therefore these heroines of yesteryear are resurrected in my work and have become warriors of today, questioning our measure of love, for passion, for *Ishq*" (Soltes 715). In order to connect tradition with modernity, Benjamin includes different biblical characters in her paintings.

Looking deeper into, *Finding Home #62 Asnat (Why I don't get the Yiddish jokes)*, I notice that the woman is a Midrash reference: she is Asnat, the Egyptian wife of Joseph. Asnat encompasses the cultural struggle as an outsider married to a Jew. This universal idea of feeling like an outsider in your own culture, present in biblical times, is also prominent in modern day times. It is something that Benjamin experienced as an Indian Jew and that she now experiences as an immigrant in the United States of America.

In *Finding Home #79 'Ishq' (Fereshteh)*, the figure is contorted into a *swastika*, a clearly uncomfortable and unnatural position (Soltes 715). With its origins in Hinduism, originally translated as "extreme well-being," the *swastika* now has a negative connotation after the Nazis appropriated and transformed it during the Holocaust. The character in this painting



*Finding Home #79 "Ishq" (Fereshteh)*

embodies this devastation; she has clearly lost control of the sword dripping blood, which emphasizes her misfortune. The swirls surrounding her body compliment the seemingly twisted atmosphere in which she is stuck.

The character Lilith in *Finding Home #79 "Ishq" (Fereshteh)* is a prominent character in Jewish midrash, thought to be Adam's first wife before Eve. Here is a quote from the midrash interpretation: "They immediately began to quarrel. Adam said: "You lie beneath me." And Lilith said: "You lie beneath me! We are both equal, for both of us are from the earth." And they would not listen to one another." (Hammer) Benjamin brings this idea of a prominent female character that confronts her male counterpart and refuses submission into a modern day context, layering the image of Lilith over a military map of the Middle East.

At the bottom of *Finding Home #79 "Ishq" (Fereshteh)*, Benjamin has blended English with Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, to create a hybrid font, recognizable in both languages. The title of the work, "Ishq", is inscribed in the Devanagari script in the upper righthand corner. The word, Ishq, means divine or powerful love, which is a human concept, regardless of religion. Benjamin's *Finding Home #79 "Ishq" (Fereshteh)* goes beyond interfaith understanding of the other, but turns towards the embracing of the other through love, a vital force in every religion.

## Chapter 5

### Conflict, Fragility, and Universality: Arpana Caur and the Mending of Religious Fractures

The devastating Partition of India in 1947 has long been a source of cultural and religious trauma. This event continues to haunt and characterize relationships between families, communities, religions, and countries in South Asia. Memories from this horrific event have been shared through generations. During the Partition, power was transferred out of the hands of the British Empire, and the Muslim League called for a separation of states, one for Muslims and one for Hindus and Sikhs. The partition line was hastily drawn by British judge Sir Cyril Radcliffe, separating these two countries based on religious identity, a form of segregation that was previously nonexistent. Hindus and Sikhs were forced to move to India, East Punjab, and Muslims were forced to move to Pakistan, West Punjab. This border, known as the Radcliffe Line, cut through little towns where Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims had been living harmoniously together for years (Singh 155). About fifteen million people were displaced, becoming refugees in their own country (Sharma). Seventy-five thousand women were raped and abandoned, and over a million people died (Sharma). These cross-country treks were littered with countless massacres and riots, destroying homes, fracturing families and communities, and creating divisions that would define religious relations in India for years to come. Arpana Caur was born just seven years after this traumatic event, and as Sikhs, her own grandparents made the trek to Delhi. Because of the horrific Partition, she has spent her artistic career exploring what it means to reimagine possibilities for religious unity. From the image of her own grandfather carrying the Sikh holy book on his back, to the depiction of cracks in the dirt floor of India and Pakistan, Caur illuminates memories of collective cultural trauma through her artwork, and sheds possibilities of religious unity in a new light.

As a young child, Caur was brought up listening to her grandfather read Sikh, Sufi Muslim and Hindu sacred texts. In contrast to the religiously divisive political atmosphere, her family made it a priority to emphasize an appreciation for all different religions and their sacred texts. She writes, “because one is not one person, there are so many aspects to yourself, you discover it every day. So I think this, because I’ve grown up with all this kind of Sufi tradition, and the Bhakti, and the Gurbani, and everybody right from my grandfather reciting from these verses and all that, so this in part is my wanting to express this” (Caur 15). This studying of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh texts enabled her to not only learn about the sacredness of each religion, but to focus on the importance of having an appreciation for multiple ways of worship.

During her childhood, Caur also experimented with different artistic and literary traditions, drawing from each to mold her own artistic identity. Her mother was a Punjabi author among a family of doctors, a role model for Caur as an aspiring artist. Influenced by her mother’s literary and artistic interests, and the ability to do what she loved regardless of familial trends, Caur experimented with various art forms starting at a young age. By the time she went to college, she was interested in pursuing both literature and art. Caur received an MA in literature from Delhi University in 1961, and was given a scholarship to take advanced painting courses at St. Martins School of Art in London (Caur 218). Now with her Arpana Caur Academy of Fine Arts and Literature in New Delhi, she supports the arts and literature for the public. The academy contains a free library of more than 5000 books, an exhibition gallery and three Museums containing her work and the work of many other prominent artists (Caur 86).

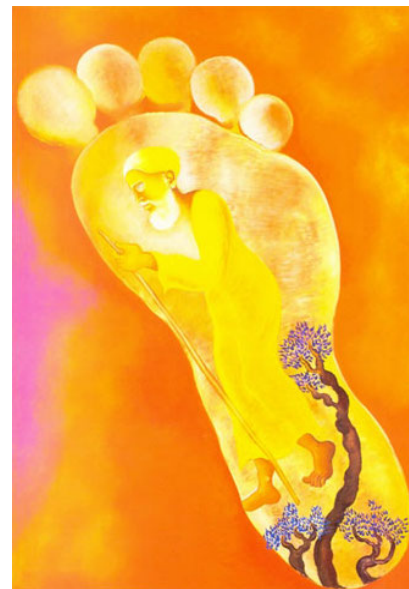
Caur draws from different artistic and religious styles from the past to influence her multi-religious work in the present. She uses the Hindu Madhubani form, traditionally revolving around Hindu deities such as Krishna, Siva, and Rama. She is influenced by the Mughal styles of

Deccan and Pahari miniature painting, which have Muslim roots (Kaur 86). She uses language and inspiration from Kabir, a prominent Indian mystic and poet whose writings can be found in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Many of her paintings resemble the two and three paneled diptyches and triptychs, which are common in Christian churches and cathedrals (Caur 48). She draws from different Indian folk art styles, such as Warli painting (Caur 8). She also gets inspiration from European abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, dabbles in post-cubist expressionism and uses elements of graffiti in her work (Caur 47, 48). Clearly, her artistic style incorporates many historical and modern movements, religions, and styles across cultures and countries. Beginning with drawing on bits of paper and then transferring those images to large, life-size canvasses, Caur employs the use of contrast and surprise in lines and color to enhance her masterpieces (Caur 16, 17). She admits, “I have been juxtaposing folk art with contemporary motifs like cars, and gun, chair, trees. There is a way of saying the India lives in two times simultaneously. It lives in the past and present” (Caur 15). Through her art, she reaches into the past and translates it to the present, commemorates national disasters, transcends religious boundaries to express basic human victimization across all religions, and juxtaposes Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh aspects.

Caur’s recognition of her family’s devotion to Sikhism and the ways in which the practicing of this religion shaped their migration to Delhi during the Partition has shaped much of the art that she creates. A core Sikh value is the acceptance of the idea that there are many different ways to find your Truth, an important pluralistic value that was missing for many during the devastation of the Partition. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, born in 1469 in Talwandi, India, emphasized the acceptance of all different forms of worship in his founding philosophy. This excerpt from the Japji in the beginning of the Guru Granth expresses this idea:

Countless are the ways of meditation,  
 and countless the avenues of love,  
 Countless the ways of worship,  
 and countless the paths of austerity and sacrifice.  
 Countless the texts, and countless the Vedic reciters,  
 Countless the yogis turning away from the world,  
 Countless the devout reflecting on future and knowledge,  
 Countless the pious, and countless the patrons,  
 Countless the warriors, faces scarred by iron  
 Countless the sages sunk in silent trance,  
 How can I express the Primal Power?  
 I cannot offer myself to you even once.  
 Only that which pleases You is good.  
 You are for ever constant, Formless One. (Singh)

Caur also draws from artistic works that depict the interfaith nature of Sikhism, and that fully embody the ways in which people of different religions can collaborate. The Janamsakhis, a collection of 57 paintings depicting the travels and biography of Guru Nanak, portray the Guru pictured meeting people of all different faiths: Muslim saints, Sufis, Hindus, and Siddhas (Singh 40). He is painted, “as a genuine pluralist who does not simply accept or tolerate diversity but courageously reaches out to others” (Singh 40). During his travels, he actively engaged with people of different religions, and the artists who contributed to the Janamsakhis were local Hindu, Muslim, Buddhists and Jain artists. Influenced by their own faiths and cultural upbringings, they created an interfaith portrayal of the Sikh Guru.

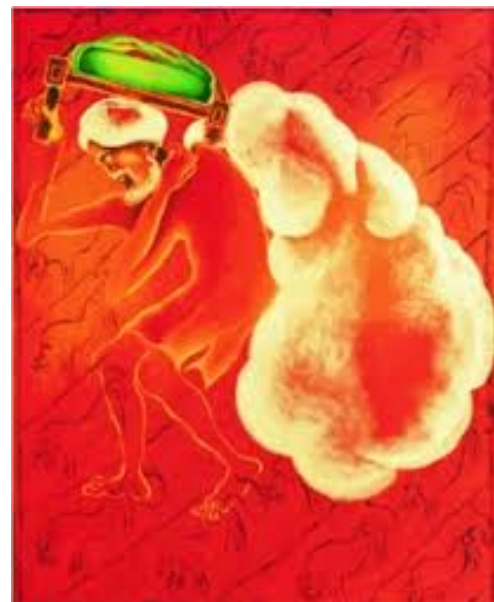


*Journeys*

With this as her subtext, she paints images of Guru Nanak throughout her paintings. Her painting, *Journeys*, draws upon imagery from the Janamsakhis, paying homage to the travels of Guru Nanak while also referencing the long treks of millions who had to leave their homes

during the 1947 Partition. The outline of the foot with the image of Guru Nanak walking inside of it reminds me of the saying, “Never judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” In just one painting, Caur beautifully depicts the fatigue of traveling and the blurry bliss of arrival. The cloudy orange and yellow tones exude feelings of hopefulness and possibility.

As reminders of the all too common devastations we humans experience, Arpana Caur paints powerful pieces that reflect upon national disasters and the people of different religions affected by them. Drawing from an event particularly close to her heart, her painting *1947*, commemorates the Partition of India. In *1947*, a Sikh man with a turban is depicted struggling to carry a heavy load on his shoulders. The heavy load is the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth, wrapped in a green cloth. The male figure that she depicts her own grandfather, struggling to make the difficult trek to Delhi, carrying the weight of the religious text on his back. A large white cloud swirls behind him, surrounding him with another



*1947*

burden. This white cloud symbolizes all of the emotional and psychological burdens that the Partition added to not only her grandfather, but thousands of other Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs throughout India and Pakistan. In the painting, her grandfather wears a disappointed and frustrated expression on his face. This is a vivid image of displacement, reflecting the sentiments of many people during the Partition.

I’m reminded of the poet Amrita Pritam, whom Caur was influenced by during her early years. Amrita Pritam especially writes powerful poems about the devastation of the Partition and



the importance of interfaith appreciation. Through her work, “she powerfully protests the violence against Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women — victims of abduction, rape and carnage during the fateful events of 1947” (Singh 193). Her poem, *Today I Ask Waris Shah*, is a response to the devastation of the Partition and calls to Waris Shah, a Sufi poet adored by Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus:

Today I ask Waris Shah to speak from his grave,  
And to turn the next page of his book of love.  
You saw one Punjabi daughter weep, you wrote page after page,  
Today countless daughters weep, they cry out to you Waris Shah:  
Rise! O sympathizer of the afflicted! Rise! Look at your Punjab!  
The land is sheeted with corpses, the Chenab is full of blood.  
Somebody has poured poison into his five rivers –  
And their waters are irrigating our farms and fields.  
Each pore of this lush land is bursting with venom:  
Redness flares up inch by inch, wrath flies high. (Singh)

The wording in Pritam’s poem evokes the never-ending nature of the devastation of the Partition. The phrases, “Page after page,” “countless daughters,” and “flares up inch by inch,” allude to the infinite nature of the country’s treks and horrible massacres. Caur’s *1947* presents a specific image through which we can view these powerful words. The hunched over posture of her grandfather in this painting exudes fatigue, his body fading into the red background during the long trek. The bright redness reminds me of the last two lines of the poem: “Each pore of this lush land is bursting with venom:/ Redness flares up inch by inch, wrath flies high.”

Her painting *Smouldering City* commemorates deadly anti-Sikh riots and pogroms in 1984. During the Partition, Hindus and Sikhs supported each other, but thirty-seven years later they were pitted against each other during these horrible massacres. This quick change from allies to enemies shows how powerful and sudden religious division can be. In response to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s order for a military assault on the Golden Temple, possibly the

most sacred Sikh Gurdwara in the world, two of her Sikh bodyguards assassinated Gandhi. This assassination sparked anti-Sikh massacres all over India; many of the anti-Sikh mobs contained Hindus, pitting the two religions together in political revenge. In *Smouldering City*, Caur depicts disjointed brick buildings, fallen smoke stacks and outlined rectangular architecture, all features that are reminiscent of these horrible massacres.

Not only does she paint about her own faith's cultural and religious history, but she expands her work and awareness to the experiences of those belonging to other faith traditions. In her painting, *Where are all the flowers gone*, Caur commemorates the Hiroshima bombing that marked the end of World War II. The title references the Zen Buddhist poetic reflection, *Flowers in the Sky* written by Zen Master Dogen Zenji in the 13th century. It also references the anti-war song, "Where have all the flowers gone?" by Pete Seeger, which was made famous by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Commissioned for the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art, the painting beautifully depicts



*Smouldering City*



*Where are all the flowers gone*

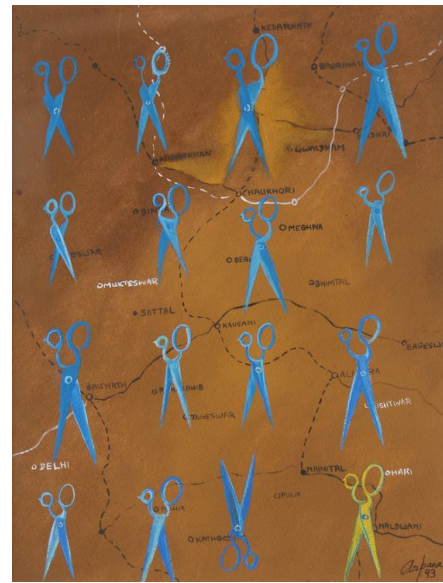
the different levels and stages of the devastating attack, which killed 80,000 people (Bombing). In the first panel, there is calm flowing water and lotus flowers, symbolic to Buddhists and Hindus. This inclusion of these

flowers in a painting commemorating a devastating event in Japan's history points to Caur's recognition that Buddhism and Shinto make up the two majority religions in Japan. In the second panel, there are lines of soldiers with stern faces seemingly motivated by an outside force. Their bodies form neat lines across the page with their heads facing to the right instead of right-side up. They create the illusion that they are many and widespread, continuing forever even outside the painting. In the last panel, there is a woman crouching below an atomic bomb cloud. The dark black of the cloud and the woman's clothing and hair are contrasted with the yellow background, making these dark features even more prominent. Through these paintings, Caur recognizes the devastation that can take place in any community, regardless of religion, and especially emphasizes the conflicts between the East and the West. She commemorates these devastating events and displays them for communities to see, understand, and empathise with as cautionary tales. In many of her other paintings, she depicts the boundaries that are often caused by this violence and ignorance regarding religious differences.

Shaped by her religiously pluralistic upbringing and her rich artistic influences, Caur uses her art as a way to speak across time and religious boundaries. She utilizes the scriptures of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam to create powerful social commentary about the importance of interfaith appreciation across time. She writes, "I think artists in particular are conscious of the flow of time. And in a way art kind of arrests time" (Caur 10). Drawing on historical events of her past and present social issues, she uses her art as a way to abstract real life events and social crises to imagine new ways of living and existing among difference. Suneet Chopra, an author from Lahore, writes about her work: "All this is not a nostalgic return to the past but its reconstruction to build a present that can pierce through the dark age of colonialism and tap its real cultural roots once more in a modern context" (Caur 48). This breeching of time

is evident through the sightless gazes of many of her figures (Caur 184). They are meditating, oblivious of time and place, and are reminiscent of the gazes of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sculptural figures (Caur 146).

The images of scissors and thread recur throughout many of Caur's paintings, symbolizing the endless cycles of life, which can be quickly snipped at any second. In *Boundaries*, sixteen pairs of scissors are evenly spaced across the page, reminding me of the soldiers in *Where are all the flowers gone*. These scissors are placed over a background of a closeup map of India, with the countries separated by threaded seams. The scissors are splayed out in open positions, prepared to cut the boundaries between these different cities. This powerful image of scissors and thread overlaying the country of



*Boundaries*

India reminds us of several different moments. First, it is reminiscent of the 1947 Partition, in which these boundaries were particularly prominent between Hindus and Muslims. Second, it can be symbolic of what happens when we create such strong boundaries between us as humans. It speaks to the strict borders we've formed between different religions, and how reluctant we are to cross them. These scissors are all blue, except for one yellow pair. This blue shade is the same shade of blue of Krishna, a Hindu deity. Therefore, Caur is personifying the scissors, and enabling us to take this concept of cutting boundaries to the human level. Through this painting,

she invites us to reflect on: “How do we maintain important boundaries without letting them define our existence together?”

This image of scissors overlaying a map of India is portrayed in her painting *Yogi and the River of Time*. However, this time the scissors have grown and the countries are abstracted, taking this concept to a new level. The scissors in *Yogi and the River of Time* are reminiscent of a Hindu theme; “The over-scaled scissors was presented as an overbearing symbol that echo ancient texts and stories reiterating the



*Yogi and the River of Time*

belief that Yamaraja cuts the thread of life when it is time to leave” (Caur 152). Yamaraja is the Hindu god of death, and the scissors are painted in jet black, which gives me an eerie and intimidating feeling.

As a Westerner who grew up attending an Episcopal church, I immediately recognized the flowing water as a Christian symbol of life and redemption, therefore putting it in contrast to the Yamaraja reference. Seeing this flowing water, I am reminded of the practice of baptism, and of biblical stories regarding water as an escape and a life-saving entity. However, taking a step back from my own initial observations, I realize that the flowing water in Caur’s painting can symbolize many other religious associations. It could be a portrayal of the Ganges, a sacred river to many Hindus, the Islamic practice of *ghusul*, which includes gargling water to gain ritual purity, or even just a secular association. For the purpose of this discussion, I am going to discuss Christianity references in Caur’s portrayal of water because it is most recognizable for me.

However, I want to note Caur's inclusion of a symbol that can be applied to many different faiths, creating the possibility for people of many different religions to see personal associations. The Christian reference and the Hindu reference in one space actively recognizes that the two religions both have ideas of life and death, both seek to explore the dualities of life, and both want explanations for humanity, and yet proves that they can occupy the same space. As scholar Yashodhara Dalmia explains, "So this thread of life had been woven, embroidered by one, and cut, because within nature are the dualities of creation and destruction, life and death," (Caur 11). Especially in this painting, the scissors are personified and stand in line with four different trees and a human, emphasizing both the uniqueness and universality of humanity.

Pluralism is the subtext of many of her paintings. Caur juxtaposes different religions themes and stories together, acknowledging that they can exist in the same space. As seen in *Yogi and the River of Time*, I initially recognized the Christian use of water as a symbol for redemption. The explanation of water as cleansing can be found throughout the New Testament, "Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (The Access Bible, Hebrews 10.22-23). On the bottom of the painting, there are waves of water with five feet walking upside down along the ground. These feet remind me of the Christian parable in which Jesus walked on water to prove to his disciples that he was the son of God: "And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea" (The Access Bible, Mathew 14.25-26). This theme is juxtaposed with the Hindu Tree of Life (*Kalpavriksha*) mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita and the Katho Upanishad, both Hindu texts. To abstract this symbol, Caur painted four trees, all starkly different shapes, but all the same height and in the same space. These trees and the presence of water speak to both symbols of life in this painting, either from the Christian or Hindu tradition.

There is also another tree in the painting: the human in the tree pose, or *vrkansasana*, a Hatha yogic pose, which comes from the Hindu tradition. The roots of the trees compliment the waves of the water. This beautiful painting recognizes the commonalities between two religious themes that symbolize similar ideas, but that are individualized through their own traditions, emphasizing the multivalency nature of religious thought.

Revisiting the triptych, *Where are all the flowers gone*, I notice different religious themes in this painting as well. In the first panel, there are pink, white and green blooming lotus flowers, significant symbols for Buddhists and Hindus. Right next to the lotus flowers is flowing water, painted in the same way as in *Yogi and the River of Time*, which again reminds me of the Christian idea of water as life-giving. These two objects are mirrored in the last panel with the black mushroom cloud and the woman. The black cloud is reminiscent of the petals of a lotus, except it's now dark, round and looming. This paradoxical pairing emphasizes the poignancy of the bomb. The woman is crouched and tightly wound, the exact opposite of the sprightly lotus flowers. This juxtaposition of different religious themes in one painting commemorating the Hiroshima bombing also points to how important human life is, and how devastating events can affect human life, regardless of religion.

In many of her paintings, she dresses, shapes, and adorns the human body with different religious themes and aspects, depicting them in the same space. In her painting, *Body is Just a*



*Body is Just a Garment*



*Garment*, the faceless blue body, reminiscent of Hindu deity Krishna, is filled with entangled bodies from different religions. I can spot the face with a long white beard of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and the Muslim musician, Mardana, who traveled with him on his divine journey to Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist centers of worship. There are faces with long earlobes, reminding me of the Buddha. The limbs of these bodies are splayed out everywhere; they are naked, some tangled up and some in tender embraces. These bodies are uncovered and vulnerable, relying on each other for support. This painting is enlivening, it is a visual exploration of the different identities and religions that make up the world. However, the title could also be read as an ironic question. Is the body just a garment? Or do the ways in which we carry, portray and curate ourselves to look and act certain ways matter?

Looking back on *Smouldering City*, the yogi in the middle of the painting has long earlobes like the Buddha, but is also wearing uncut hair, a Sikh practice. The sword that she is holding reminds me of the *kirpan*, a small sword or knife carried by some Sikhs. The figure is poised with the knife against her hair, about to cut it. This position is intriguing, because in this painting the figure is frozen and will never cut her hair. The knife will forever be held against her locks, her angular elbows always matching the angularity of the buildings falling apart behind her. The swirls of hair juxtaposed against this angularity matches the billows of smoke coming out of the smoke stacks. This image is a commentary on the dichotomy between past and present, modern and traditional which is disputed in many religions.

Caur's shy nature contributes to an ability to display vulnerable and traumatic memories on paper. Her sense of interfaith understanding enables her to reach across religious boundaries; drawing on the different parts of her religious and cultural influences, she is able to confidently explore them through bold strokes and powerful images. She writes, "it is when there is an



exhibition that you are out in the open and totally vulnerable. When a painter is exhibiting, your feelings, your thoughts are there for all to see” (Caur 219).

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The Singh Twins, Siona Benjamin and Arpana Caur are vulnerably sharing their own backgrounds and identities with us through their work. They are inviting us into their backyards for a barbecue, or giving us a spot at their own Christmas dinner table among their Sikh family. And drawing upon each of their influences and what shaped them, they share their backgrounds and opinions in different ways. The Singh Twins and Arpana Caur are both Sikhs, and yet they come with different styles, varied interpretations of what it means to be Sikh, and place different emphases on each of their artworks. Both young artists care about the pillars of Sikhism, and the message of equality that is grounded in Sikh scripture, but the Singh Twins focus on the diaspora while Arpana Caur focuses on highlighting the historicity grounded in the scripture.

We can also draw comparisons between Siona Benjamin's paintings and Caur's paintings. Much of Benjamin's *Finding Home* series revolves around the depiction of female bodies and the garments that they wear. However, Caur's painting, "Body is Just a Garment," supposedly negates the idea that what you wear on the outside is what matters. And yet, both paintings are powerful, and both cause me to think about what I emphasize in my own life. That is the beauty of this artwork. No right or wrong is highlighted. What is highlighted is the invitation to question, the invitation to think differently about something, the invitation to formulate opinions, assumptions and judgements and then to ask why those were formulated.

As I think about my own Colby College Art Museum, I'm realizing how rarely we feature artworks by South Asian women. These painters, who bring artworks to the world of immense beauty, meaning, and controversy, are not highlighted. I yearn to share the hope that I get from these artists with students and community members around me. They are using art as a

way to ignite interfaith understanding, reaching a broader audience, and inviting people to learn, feel, and react to their stories and the issues that they care about. Through these paintings, we think about the past, present and future. Although these paintings may not be perfect representations of a fully pluralistic society, they make us think critically. I believe that is one of the goals of art: to make us think about the society in which we live, and the aspects that we want to challenge and question. These artists inspire us to use the gift of our human imagination to think about our shared human heritage. In the language of colors, they offer a dynamic intersection of the past, present and future, and ask us to question how we understand our neighbors and ourselves.

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