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On Sikhi

Unlearning and Learning at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Laura Vigo and Keerat Kaur

ABSTRACT: The opening of the Narinder Singh Kapany & Satinder Kaur Kapany Sikh Art Collection Gallery at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts provides a timely opportunity to explore alternative modalities of caring and curating by giving voice to alternative sense-making. This article conveys some reflections born out of the interactions with diasporic artists who tied their own stories to the historical corpus that was conceived through the collector's own bias and mission. Adopting Sikhi (continuous learning) may provide a meaningful curatorial approach that allows contemporary diasporic artists to assert their agency and modes of self-representation, as in the case of Keerat Kaur's *Sweet Speech* exhibition.

KEYWORDS: Canada, contemporary diasporic art, museums, Sikh art, Sikhi (continuous learning)

Unlearning

At the center of Montreal's historical Golden Square Mile, the current historical building of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) was built in 1912 around the widespread nineteenth-century colonial pedagogy that posited the museum as "a window to the world." Over 6,000 Asian objects were amassed by a few collectors of the Anglophone elite at a time when several Asian countries experienced socioeconomic and political instability triggered by imperial expansionism while their vestiges flooded the secondary market. "Artifacts" were hence chosen according to arbitrary Eurocentric aesthetic values, mainly for their exotic allure and their availability, and were later musealized (Vigo 2022). Aware of its own biased history, the Asian collection was reoriented in 2019 by focusing on its social lives and multiple translocations (Appadurai 1986). [1] The new layout sought to explore different curatorial paradigms, based loosely on an idea of a museum embracing the fluidity, the entanglements and interconnectedness of "things" and "humans" (Hodder 2012), taking risks, while unlearning the colonizing ethos of its forebearers. It was a steep learning curve for a cultural institution originally meant to index and "contain" the world. Only by exploring this modality, can new narratives from a multiplicity of voices, inside and outside the institutional walls and canons be elicited.

With this intention in mind, the Narinder Singh Kapany & Satinder Kaur Kapany Sikh Art Collection gallery opened at MMFA in 2022 (Vigo 2022).[2] Its unconventional presence in a so-called Western "fine arts" museum offered extraordinary potential for community outreach. It also set aside traditional museological approaches in favor of other narratives embedded in Sikh art and Sikhi: a term used by Sikhs to describe a way of living that involves continuous learning and sense-making as opposed to the colonial construct of Sikhism, the religion (Kaur-Bring 2020). It is only in the last 10 years that Sikh-related visual and material culture has been reformulated according to Western art historical paradigms thanks to British and American collectors (Singh 2013), who have taken on the mission to canonize an ad hoc historical

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discourse and address Sikh material culture accordingly. Under the newly adopted Western category of "art," secular objects and more rarely religious relics, whether created in India or other parts of the world, are being described as "artworks." This newly found nomenclature transcends ritual and religious subjects catering to Sikh communities to encompass a large objectscape related to the Sikhs' own envision of a specific past identity, in what Anne Murphy has defined as "museuming" (Murphy 2015).

A larger-than-life figure, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany (1926–2020) left India in 1951 to pursue a career in physics, eventually becoming an entrepreneur in California and one of the key inventors of fiber optics. Known as the foremost collector of Sikh material heritage, Kapany established the Sikh Foundation International in 1967, a nonprofit and nonpolitical charitable organization promoting Sikh culture—past, present and future (Dhami and Taylor 2017). Kapany's unwavering determination to collect Sikh material vestiges for over half a century came to fruition in the first gallery of its kind in a Canadian museum. While the opening of the gallery party reflected the accrued importance of Canada's long-established Sikh population and their contributions to Canadian society, the objects on display provided a compelling reflection of Kapany's own inclinations and mission. Kapany's personal taste and social agenda are evident in the selection of the objects now on display, mostly works on paper dating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whose subject matter spans from guru images to princely portraits and military paraphernalia. Of particular interest is a beautiful yet-undated Janam-sākhī (the prose hagiographies of Guru Nanak).[3] These compendia of oral tales collated into written form were sponsored by different Sikh patrons. Their illustrations are executed in a syncretic style by artists from different traditions, from Mughal to Pahari, reflecting the hybrid, fluid nature of Sikh visual culture (Singh 2014).

Other objects acquired by Kapany highlight the regal and military endowments of the upper echelons of Sikh society. Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa in 1699, developing a distinctive sense of identity based on military affiliation. *Nanakshahi* coins in silver, copper and bronze and military accessories, including a chakar war quoit, suggest the fleeting splendor of the rajas as their political and military power consolidated, expanded and waned over the early nineteenth century. It was at this time that the standard image of Guru Nanak, with a neatly tied turban and all-white garments, was established to highlight his leadership qualities as the forefather of a genealogy of Sikh spiritual leaders whose iconography morphed from contemplative to militant (Lafont 2017). Interested in the Sikh warrior tradition, Kapany collected miniatures related to the later princely states, whose compositions, for instance, often conjugate traditional subject matter with Western focal perspective to create an unconventional sense of depth. This syncretism rather hints at the complex cross-cultural relationship the Sikhs entertained with the British Empire, which they supported.

A noteworthy cross-cultural adaptation is also apparent in the portrait of Raja Bhagwan Singh of Nabha, which hints at the influence of photography at the time of the British Raj.[4] The sick ruler is portrayed holding a cane with his right hand (he eventually died of tuberculosis in 1871). Rendered according to traditional miniature conventions of flatness and detailing, the raja is nevertheless surrounded by a European-style chair in the corner and a richly covered and adorned table on which lies a large clock under a glass dome. In the distance, a slightly ajar curtain opens on to an Italianate garden. The Western-flavored staging drew inspiration from photography. At the time of the British Raj (1858–1947) many black-and-white photographs featured local subjects, from princes to paupers, rigidly posing against Italianate landscapes. The photos were later color painted like miniatures, adding a sense of familiarity to an otherwise alien medium (Edwards 2018). In this miniature, the composition relates to early colored photography that was in turn drawn from Mughal painting.

Related tangentially to the diffusion of photography in India as an efficient medium of imperial information archiving and propaganda, Kapany collected a large and eclectic corpus of nineteenth-century magazines and illustrated books produced in Britain for British readership. These images and texts document the British colonial gaze on the Sikhs. Drawings, prints and photographs of Sikh characters, events and places were systematically and taxonomically ordered according to the well-known British imperial archiving modalities (Richards 1993) before entering British homes loaded with exoticism and stereotypes, again purporting the nostalgic narrative of military resistance and regal opulence at the time of the raja.

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Learning

Canonized images of the Gurus, portraits of the wealthy rajas, vestiges and archival material from the time of the Sikh Empire and the British Raj were carefully selected by Kapany in over 50 years of collecting. In the gallery, they are now being redefined by contemporary diasporic artists, seeking to challenge the mainstream male-led narrative that they purport. Surgical interventions allow us to talk about the shaping of an idea of "Sikh Art," to give space and voice to stories seldom heard before. The artists here voice their concerns and engage with the collection, contributing to the unpacking of the Eurocentric aesthetic paradigm and testing the same definition of what we deem art is and for whom.

Brightly colored cotton cloths embroidered with fine silk, phulkari (meaning, flower work), collected by Kapany may offer a way to prod into a feminine world and narrative that, while neglected in the past, has come to the fore in recent years (Bose 2016; Mason 2017). Traditionally crafted by Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women in rural areas, phulkaris were made to wear or present on auspicious religious occasions or significant life events like marriages and births. They were never intended to be made, sold or gifted to outside markets (K. Singh 2003; and (N. G. K. Singh 2005). Their creation, domestic fruition and later market consumption are all part of the entangled histories of Sikh women, past and present, that need to be told. The centrality of the phulkari in the gallery symbolically reclaims the place women had and still have in Sikh society, history and art-making.

They also provide a point of departure for Canadian Sikh artist Jagdeep Raina's (b. 1991, Guelph, Ontario) socially engaged exploration of gender, sexuality, caste, labor and the environment. His practice includes the categories of drawing, embroidery, writing, video animation, photography and ceramics. In *Chemical Cotton Flower* (2020), traditional textiles and socioeconomic issues merge (figure 1). For Raina, engaging the aesthetic and cultural traditions of phulkaris—which originated in the rural villages of Punjab before being vastly diminished in the aftermath of the violent 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent—speaks of colonialism and globalization; it celebrates rural life and connects to Sikh heritage. His embrace of this tradition reflects how South Asian textiles play an important role in the production of art within and beyond immigrant communities. As he says in his own words, Jagdeep is interested to "think about deconstructing the myth of something that might seem pure or homogeneous, and look closer to the dirt behind the shine" (quoted in Cicerone 2020). His works stand as powerful commentaries to social and political issues that may have been overlooked for too long, speaking often to the inherent violence of European cultural extraction and exploitation while casting a critical eye on the museum's own past and historically white gaze (Lau 2022).

The subject of his embroidery work at the MMFA brings to the fore the story behind the so-called Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, which caused severe environmental and health impacts on Sikh communities in Punjab. At the time, Indian and US officials sought to transform India into a food-secure economy. They persuaded farmers that new technologies would transform Punjab's economy. However, the long-term impact of this initiative had severe consequences on the land and the people, contributing to new patterns of economic debt for most of the agricultural communities involved. In Raina's work, the emphasis is on the women's relationship to earth, through detailed articulations of their bodily gestures, dress, and presence in the fields. Two women extend their hands, their colorful *salwar kameez* blending into the green fields. The cotton ball in their hands is a symbol of their important labor in India's cotton economy, as well as of their deep knowledge of the soil. Raina's inscription "Please strip them of these chemical cotton flowers / Let them cling to peace" reminds the viewer that the hands of labor are marked by the chemical footprints of the Green Revolution, in a community wrangling with its environmental aftermaths.

The two photographic works by Gauri Gill (b. 1970, Chandigarh) in the gallery (figure 2) are also a painful commentary on the cost of exploitation in the process of migration and displacement. Nevertheless, the artist's choice of subject matter in a diptych of Sikh women on the job also suggests a feminine narrative meant to question the mainstream male discourse in Sikh traditional iconology. Whether in Yuba City, California, home to the oldest settlement of Sikhs in North America, or in a grocery store in Punjabi-dominated Queens, New York, these images offer a poignant statement on gender and labor within Sikh migrant communities. They belong to the series *The Americans*, and directly reference Robert Frank's 1958 *opus magna* with the same title. Frank traveled through the United States and captured the ordinary lives of



Figure 1. Jagdeep Raina, *Chemical Cotton Flowers*, 2021. Cotton, silk and metallic threads. Photo: Jean-François Brière. Courtesy of MMFA.

American people in photography as a critique of mass culture, materialism and social conformity. Nearly five decades later, Gill embarked on a similar, solitary journey, guided by the web of material and spiritual cartographies connecting South Asian migrants, as they retain their traditional signifiers of Indian identity while merging within a larger American plurality (Bakirathi 2010). An intimate insight into the particularities of diasporic Sikh life, these subjects find resonances in shared, human experiences—of factory work, of grief, of shame but also, and more importantly, of women's pivotal role in diasporic resettlements.

The works by Jatinder Singh Durhailay (b. 1988, London, UK) build on the same drawing conventions as a number of important miniature paintings from the Kapany Collection. Yet he injects his characters with the transnational pop culture that infused his youth in London. His images speak of his own Sikh heritage and beliefs as much as his in-betweenness as an immigrant in London grappling with the absence

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Figure 2. MMFA Sikh Art Gallery. A view of the wall with the diptych from Gauri Gill's series *The Americans*, 2004. Photo: Jean-François Brière. Courtesy of MMFA.

of role models that could feel familiar. In *Ryu and Hari Singh Nalwa* (2019), the artist brings the popular street fighting character from the video game franchise Street Fighter into dialogue with Hari Singh Nalwa (1791–1837)—commander-in-chief of the Sikh Khalsa Fauj (the army of the Sikh Empire) and governor of Kashmir, Peshawar and Hazara—placing into dialogue two militant masculinities operating within divergent, yet interlocked contexts (figure 3). Growing up, Jatinder observed that British TV and American cinema were predominantly a white person-run industry; however, video games in the 1990s were primarily a Japanese industry and introduced a different culture. As Durhailay reaffirms: "Ryu was and still is my favorite character as he represents a journey of self-discovery, and I always liked his colors and the way he moves" (personal communication, September 2019).

Keerat Kaur (b. 1991, London, Ontario), a Canadian-born artist with Sikh–Punjabi roots, and coauthor of this article, is interested in tangential stories and poetic tales. From painting, illustration, sculpture, and music to architecture, she creates surrealist images with underlying messages of spirituality and fantasia that exude an oneiric feel and capture the complexity of the ideas presented in the Sikh holy texts. In *Zahari Kala* (The Art of Revelation) (2020), she broaches the subject of the expansiveness of the universe as envisioned by Guru Nanak and conveyed in the 36th poetic ballad written by Bhai Gurdas. Guru Nanak is depicted midair, holding the hand of the son of a Muslim saint and flying over the infinite universe in a blink of an eye. As the ballad goes, Guru Nanak met a Muslim saint in Baghdad to whom he began reciting the Japji Sahib, speaking of infinite suns, moons, planets and the creatures that inhabit them. As the saint staunchly believed in the spatial limits of the universe, he commanded the Guru to prove his claims. In response, the Guru flew the saint's son over the expansive creations in the blink of an eye (figure 4).

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Figure 3. Jatinder Singh Durhailay, *Ryu and Hari Singh Nalwa*, 2018. Gouache. Photo: Jean-François Brière. Courtesy of MMFA.

Kaur uses the imagery of the heart—a typical symbol for the universe in Sikh writing—to hold together vast worlds. For the artist, the heart and subworlds of its arteries and veins further stand as a symbol for our emotional universe. The heart in the center of the composition morphs into a spacecraft floating in the cosmos. It is filled with motifs reminiscent of the British textile designer and artist, William Morris. While Morris's patterns were deeply indebted to Indian textiles crafted during the height of the colonial period, Keerat here reappropriates them, overwriting the British designer's colonially informed visual references with direct Indian folk art and pop culture motifs. Anthropomorphized and composite animals in the painting are drawn from Punjabi folktales evoking different worlds and realities. An anthropomorphic feline creature plays a string instrument (*taanpura*) in the shape of a pomegranate, another important symbol in Kaur's universe. Music is key in Sikh culture, central in the Guru Granth Sahib, and in Kaur's

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Figure 4. Keerat Kaur, *Zahari Kala (*The Art of Revelation*)*, 2020. Acrylic, gold ink, Indian ink and gold leaf on cardboard. Photo: Jean-François Brière. Courtesy of MMFA.

own artistic practice. As a piece exploring the Sikh tradition of literature, calligraphy and illustration, *Zahari Kala* provides a vibrant commentary to the historic works from the Kapany Collection. Tradition and innovation here converge, offering an alternative take on Sikh iconography and its potentials.

Since 2015, much ink has been spent on how the Western canon in the museums could be deconstructed from within (Coombes and Phillips 2015). The Kapany gallery provides a timely opportunity first to allow for the voice of those historically marginalized to reclaim agency of self-representation, and second to challenge the often stale museum narrative on inclusion and accessibility.[5] Inviting artists to activate the space may potentially address and partially resolve those visceral challenges intrinsic to an idealized Western museum (Lee 2022), whose nature is essentially colonial and intrinsically resistant to change.

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Learning Through Sikhi: In Conversation with the Artist Keerat Kaur

After the gallery was inaugurated, local scholars researching Sikh visual, material and oral cultures were invited for a panel discussion organized by Sajdeep Soomal (a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Toronto), where they proposed using the concept of Sikhi as a viable curatorial modality. Today, the collaborative project with Keerat Kaur allows us to explore further how this pivotal concept informs and resets the way we tell stories in an idealized Western museum (Lee 2022). Kaur clarifies the importance of Sikhi in her forthcoming exhibition (at the time of writing), *Sweet Speech* at the MMFA, opening in April 2026. Our exchange offers a glimpse into how to unlearn and learn anew to encompass the many voices our world is made of. What follows is the conversation we had online in January 2025.

Laura Vigo (LV): We met in 2020 when we acquired your work *Zahari Kala*. Some time has passed, of course, but we have kept talking. Your solo show is finally scheduled in April 2026. "Unlearning to learn anew" is here based on the concept of Sikhi (which can be translated as "constant learning"). Can you tell me how you define and experience Sikhi, and if it transcends religion?

Keerat Kaur (KK): Yes, it does. I have always understood and experienced this path through the arts. Even its core tenets of oneness, justice, and devotion are deepened through artistic expression. Sikhi offers a way of seeing the world through the lens of poetry, where adages and metaphors become vessels for memory and reflection, bridging the material and the spiritual. It has taught me introspection, creativity, and a deep reverence for both the tangible and the transcendent.

LV: How would you define yourself, as an artist and as a person?

KK: I see myself as someone who is both a preservationist and an innovator. I find beauty in meticulous craftsmanship but embrace the fluidity of personal and cultural evolution. I carry my traditions in my hands, yet I interpret them through the eyes of someone shaped by the West. I believe that my approach allows me to connect with a broader spectrum of people and ideas. I approach the world as a fusion of opposites: tradition and innovation, introspection and expression, grounded yet ever-expanding. This tension isn't something I seek to resolve, but rather something I embrace as part of the artistic process. It's in this space of continuous growth and reimagining that I find my true expression as an artist and as a person.

LV: How does Sikhi play out in your artistic practice?

KK: Sikhi informs my work both conceptually and aesthetically. I am continually engaged with its poetic and symbolic nature through *shabad* (sacred compositions), historical narratives and mythologies, or visual motifs imbued with spiritual significance. My practice often explores the interplay between the physical and the ethereal, reflecting on themes of transience and devotion that are pivotal in Sikhi. Many of my compositions reference historical figures, translating their presence into a visual language that bridges past and present. I am particularly drawn to rituals of reverence and the ways devotion is expressed through space and form. This manifests in my work through the creation of arrangements that honor both memory and presence. When working in two dimensions, my paintings are often accompanied by sculptural counterparts, positioned in a way that suggests an altar-like assembly, inviting contemplation and ritual engagement.

LV: Your upcoming project at the museum has an endearing title, *Sweet Speech*. How did it come about?

KK: *Sweet Speech* is inspired by the concept of ਮਿਠ ਬੋਲੜਾ (miṭh bolaṛā), a titular excerpt from a shabad by Guru Arjan that extols the virtue of gentle, kind speech. In this piece, he envisions a dialogue between himself and the Creator, where the Creator speaks with unwavering sweetness, regardless of circumstance. More colloquially, in Punjabi, this idea is expressed as ਮਿੱਠੀ ਬੋਲੀ (miṭhī bolī).

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Speech holds immense power as it shapes both our external world and our inner landscape. In Sikh thought, the spoken word is sacred, with language carrying the potential for both creation and destruction. The 2016 film *Arrival* directed by Denis Villeneuve left a deep impression on me with its exploration of how language shapes our perception of reality and time. It suggests that even something as seemingly fixed as time can shift and transform depending on how we articulate it and navigate it within our minds. The written word is a linchpin of my work, whether through calligraphy or the stories woven around my pieces; there is always a narrative at play. If I work with ancient poetry, I seek verses with poetic devices that are rich in aesthetic beauty. And when I write my own, I am deeply intentionally striving for grace and resonance.

LV: Lyricism exudes from everything you do, Keerat, even in your words. What are the themes that you wish to explore in the exhibition? What are your sources of inspiration? How do they evolve?

KK: The works in this project navigate between history, myth, and personal memory, all anchored to lyrical writing, sometimes in conversation, sometimes in literal form, calligraphed right into the work or embedded in titles. They bring forth stories that are often overlooked, whether historical episodes from Sikh history/mythologies, literary references, or moments of personal or collective remembrance. My interest lies in how narratives shift over time, how myths are created, how they become layered with meaning, and how symbols evolve in different contexts. The project plays with this idea of pentimenti, where traces of past images and ideas remain visible even as new ones emerge.

LV: By looking at your past works and seeing where you are heading in your next project, you seem at ease with layering past and present ideas but also with transcending pictorial boundaries as you move between mediums and motifs still retaining your distinctive style.

KK: Currently, I work across painting, sculpture, video, architecture, digital drawing techniques, often combining traditional techniques with contemporary approaches. I hope that my toolbox continues to evolve and that a decade from now, I will be exploring new mediums that I couldn't have dreamed of today. My visual language and style have been informed by a few key art forms: Indian miniature painting, particularly its architectural compositions and symbolic use of color; fresco and mural traditions, especially their ability to narrate layered histories; surrealism, in the way it merges dreamlike imagery with reality; calligraphy and illumination, where text and ornamentation become integral parts of the composition.

One never-ending source of inspiration comes from the frescoes at Gurdwara Baba Atal in the Harimandir Sahib complex in Amritsar. Every time I visit, I see something new, and I'm inspired differently. Their vivid colors, stylized depictions of nature, and unexpected humor are captivating, to say the least. Originally instructional, the text labels identifying characters add both a comical and pedagogical quality, emphasizing language while disrupting traditional hierarchies. There is no ambiguity: the viewer is guided to understand who and what is being depicted.

LV: It seems this is what also drives your practice. One can often find humor in your depictions. What kind of reaction are you hoping to spark?

KK: Initially, I want my work to captivate the senses. It must feel both exquisite and delicately opulent: visually rich and inviting. I want to create beautiful imagery in a world that is plagued by a lot of ugliness. Beyond this initial allure, my art carries embedded stories, encouraging deeper engagement. By pairing unexpected elements, I aim to challenge perception and spark new dialogues. I invite viewers into a space of reflection, where history is not distant but a living, evolving force that shapes identity, resilience, and spirituality. My hope is to evoke wonder and connection, with a little bit of discomfort to prompt reconsiderations on what is assumed to be familiar.

At the same time, I want to carve out space for humor in my work: an element often dismissed in the finer things of life and art. My sense of humor is quirky, sometimes subtle, sometimes playful, but always intentional. I see it as a way to disarm, and to warm; a way to invite people in, and to create unexpected

moments of delight amid deeper contemplation. In a world that often takes itself too seriously, I want my art to hold space for both reverence and irreverence, for the grand and the absurd to coexist.

LV: Let's talk about symbols and their place in your practice.

KK: Symbols form the foundation of my visual language, shaping the way I construct meaning in my work. Certain recurring motifs are drawn from Indic and Sikh poetics, while others emerge through my own lived experience and artistic lens. The moon: symbolizes cycles of time, quiet beauty, wonder, mysticism, and feminine energy. It has been vividly immortalized in the writings of the poet Surdas in connection to Krishna. The lotus: a recurring symbol in Sikh sacred scripture, embodies growth, perseverance, and transcendence, rising unstained from murky waters. The anatomical heart: speaks to devotion, collective love, and spiritual longing. By depicting it anatomically, the complexities of human emotion are acknowledged; I am sincere, my work is not purely an intellectual exercise, it has heart in it. I'm an emotional girl, and my art embraces that unapologetically. The pomegranate: one of my most cherished; difficult to distill into words. My relationship with it began as a simple experience, a "sensory arrest," if I may, while tasting it for the first time on trips to Punjab. Unlike other fruits, it requires effort to access, its hardened husk guarding glistening ruby seeds requires a ritual and time commitment. Much like any pursuit, it demands patience and persistence. This act of extraction, of never quite being satisfied, mirrors an insatiable thirst or longing.

I engage with symbols not as fixed entities but as living, evolving forms that accumulate meaning over time. They shift depending on who is engaging with them, revealing different facets in different contexts. In my practice, symbols do more than convey metaphor; they reshape our relationship with nature, add a dreamlike dimension to it, and challenge us to reconsider how we interact with the world around us.

LV: Let's talk about another important aspect of your artistic practice: your research on the often overlooked women's contribution in Sikh traditional texts.

KK: I have focused not only on historical women but also on the broader feminine aspects within Sikh narratives. Much of their history remains undocumented, requiring me to extrapolate from existing texts and traditions to illuminate their presence. For instance, I have been inspired by the language and subject matter of *Nanak Prakash*, which led me to interpret the strength of Mata Sulakhni, the wife of Guru Nanak, in new ways. I often compose my own responses in Braj, imagining untold stories. Braj is a language originating in northern India, playing a significant role in the Sikh literary tradition. My writings are often akin to a "director's cut," highlighting moments that history may have overlooked. This writing is then brought to life through various mediums. More broadly, I seek to highlight the poetic and intellectual dimensions of Sikh womanhood: roles that extend beyond the conventional binaries of militancy or sacrifice. Through historical texts, oral traditions, and *pahari* paintings, I look for traces of these narratives, reimagining them in ways that acknowledge their erasure and their enduring influence

LV: Poetry and performance are also an integral part of your artistic practice.

KK: Yes, they are and I see them as a continuation of my visual work, giving an actual "voice" and adding a sensory layer to what remains unsaid in the visuals. I approach all facets of my practice with a sense of rigor, drawing from my training in *dhrupad* and *khayal* vocals to merge traditional techniques with contemporary sound production, creating something both rooted and renewed. I am eager to incorporate live poetry recitations and vocal performances as a way to engage with and activate the works, transforming the viewing experience into something immersive and dynamic.

LV: Your exhibition will be the first dedicated to the Sikh diasporic artist at the museum.

KK: Having an exhibition at MMFA is a significant moment for me. It provides an opportunity to engage with a broader audience in a space dedicated to cultural dialogue. It allows me to position my work within

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global contemporary discourse while remaining rooted in my own lineage of storytelling, aesthetics, and philosophy. The museum context brings new curatorial perspectives to my work, expanding its reach and impact beyond the South Asian or diasporic communities. I hope to awaken the narratives within my work through an experience of painting, sculpture, performance, and poetry…

LV: And, of course, Sikhi!

Conclusion

The 2019 reinstallation of the Asian collections within the Art of One World project at MMFA, conceived through a transhistorical, cross-cultural, and thematic framework, was fundamentally aimed at decolonizing curatorial paradigms prevailing in a so-called Western fine arts museum. It sought to critique the traditional historiography of a collection built on the colonial vision and material acquisitiveness of early twentieth-century Western collectors of exotica. Confronting the epistemic obstacles inherent in a cultural institution founded upon the concept of the idealized museum proved to be a challenge.

Nonetheless, the opening of the Narinder Singh Kapany & Satinder Kaur Kapany Sikh Art Collection gallery offered another more inventive platform to decolonize the institution by giving access and agency to new voices. The dedicated space, the first of its kind in Canada, not only provided a rare opportunity to present archival and material artifacts from one of the world's most esteemed collectors of Sikh material culture but also, more significantly, enabled a critical rethinking of the traditional, often masculine-centered narratives that have dominated Sikh exhibitions in recent years. This shift in perspective has been enhanced through the collaboration of transnational artists from the Sikh diaspora, whose timely reflections and interventions actively question the collector's inherent biases and sociopolitical agenda. By doing so, they can illuminate contemporary artistic practices that have often been marginalized in fine arts institutions. This dedicated gallery also allows alternative approaches to care and curating, debunking the authority of traditional museum narratives as it amplifies diverse forms of knowledge and learning. By embracing Sikhi (continuous learning) as a guiding curatorial principle, the gallery may empower artists like Keerat Kaur to assert their presence, contribute to the collective knowledge, dictate their own modes of self-representation, and ultimately change our museum from within.

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■ **KEERAT KAUR** is a Canadian-born artist of Sikh-Panjabi heritage and a licensed architect with the Ontario Association of Architects. Her multidisciplinary practice spans painting, sculpture, music, writing, and architecture, drawing deeply from Sikh philosophy. Blending the ordinary with the dreamlike, she uses metaphor and symbolism to explore nature and spirituality. She holds a BA (2012) from Western University and a MA (2016) from the University of Toronto, and studies Indian classical music. Fluent in Panjabi, French, and Hindi, she is also learning Braj and Shahmukhi. She lives and works between Burnaby, British Columbia, and London, Ontario.

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NOTES

1. Following the concept that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. See Appadurai (1986).
2. The official name of the collection is Collection d'art Sikh | Sikh Art Collection Narinder Singh Kapany & Satinder Kaur Kapany, Sikh Foundation International L'honorable / The Honorable Baljit Singh Chadha & Roshi Chadha. https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/news/sikh-art-collection/.
3. Illustrated in https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/news/sikh-art-collection/.
4. Illustrated in https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/works/79535/.
5. As stated by Armando Perla in his blog on some visceral challenges of visibility in a fine arts museum with a Eurocentric canon. https://activehistory.ca/blog/2020/08/31/the-museum-sector-is-in-crisis/.

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