

Bhajan Hunjan.

Bhajan has made continuous prints in response to ideas of homeland, nation and cultural identity.

She was born in Kenya in 1956. In 1975 she came to England to study Fine Art at Reading University followed by a post-graduate course in printmaking at the Slade; she has lived there ever since. In 1989 she visited close relatives in the Indian Punjab for the first time.

Bhajan is a painter and a printmaker. Central to Bhajan Hunjan's work is the representation of herself: as a woman; as a Black woman. She always states her presence within the work usually with figurative images of herself. Her early work is figurative; it includes herself and others, portraits and self-portraits. She is present centre-space, in double-representation or standing on the sidelines; present not as an object of the work, not as a thing seen, but as the seer. Her self-image is both a likeness and generalization: presentation of herself, and a symbol of the Asian woman artist.

This coupling of self and other, of private and public, of image and icon, of traditional and modernity is important to Bhajan's work. She also finds it easy to move between different modes of artistic expression, sometimes representational, sometimes abstract. She describes this changeability of approach as the urge "not to draw strict boundaries", a vital declaration of freedom for a British woman artist who is proud of her Sikh and Punjabi link and aware of the constant need to re-define this complicated identity and to resist categorization by others. As she knows only too well, to be labelled is to be unimportant, and artists can "suffocate within a very narrow slot."

An extension of the painted self-portraits have been portraits of Bhajan's female relatives, of which Mamaji of 1987 is the, most moving - most for her resemblance to Bhajan. "When I look at myself in the mirror, I'm also looking at my ancestral women; they've always been very strong, independent women, open to influences." But their strength has been contained within a traditional and old-fashioned family structure, something which Bhajan is studying deeply since a recent visit to see her family, in Kenya. Mamaji is portrayed in profile, not confronting the spectator with a direct gaze but encapsulated within the remoteness of a photographic representation, and looking sideways into another time and space. Included in the canvas is a piece-embroidered tablecloth done by Mamaji, and there are rich social readings within this slight, torn indication of a real life. As embroidery, the cloth represents an act of making, but the rigid cross-stitch design is that of control and regimentation, not free to make it up as you go along and creativity. As a fragment, the piece of embroidered cloth signifies the difficulty of perceiving the wholeness of other people's lives and perhaps also the partial nature of a traditional Asian woman's participation in the wider world outside of the domestic. Bhajan herself talks about torn fragments "patched over the scars of endurance" and she perceives the collaged embroideries as containing "traces of oppressive elements, as well as striving for freedom and self expression."

In the abstract paper works, and wall and floor composite images, the torn fragment has become incorporated into the printed designs, and segments of design appear to have floated free from the mythic fabric or text, and float across the surface. These works are composed of a grid of square pieces of paper, each carefully torn to express a deckle edge. The layering of imagery and colour that is embedded in these composite works does not imply depth, but a constant reassertion of the surface texture. The paper grid is never joined into a whole, but is mathematically ordered using significant clusters of numbers, particularly 3 and 4.

Outside of these spiritual considerations, Bhajan Hunjan's feminism is dedicated and practical. She has been associated with a women's refuge for many years, and has seen much oppression and misery. Although this has sometimes been distressing she believes it has taught her to look more closely into herself. She has undertaken many community projects working with women, and is able to bridge the gap between the 'fine art' standard of her training at Reading University and the Slade School of Art and the more practical aspirations of community groups with sensitivity and understanding. "I'm there as a role model, for someone who might want to express themselves just a little. I can't resolve anything, but I can sow a seed."

Seeds and natural forms, as well as fragments of script and patterns constitute part of the decorative vocabulary which Bhajan Hunjan developed in *The Open Space* installation wall-piece, and which find a fresh application in the semicircular wall piece which will complement her commissioned *Floorpiece* for Cartwright Hall, Bradford. Linear elements meander above the square grid, contained within a circular form in both these works, and the layerings of colour suggest the glowing, submerged quality of stained glass. She has responded to this incipient quality in the paper and floor works, by designing a gridded installation on acrylic sheets, which will be lit from behind.