

**Bhajan Hunjan: creating a language of shape and colour**  
**Dr. Alice Correia**

Throughout her career, Bhajan Hunjan has investigated the relation between abstract and representational forms, using a variety of materials and artistic mediums. Although trained as a painter and printmaker, she has also worked in ceramics, metalwork, and stone. Her work incorporates an expressive use of colour, and in union with her use of line, shape, and symbol, reflects particular moods, emotions and sensibilities in non-narrative ways.

Bhajan Hunjan was born in Nanyuki, Kenya, in 1956 and moved to Britain to study Fine Art at Reading University in 1975. On completing her degree, she undertook a postgraduate course in the department of Printmaking at the Slade School of Art, while also undertaking part-time studies in Ceramics at the Central School of Art and Design (1979-81). Discussing her decision to study art, in 1983 Hunjan observed, “ I went to art school to be educated, and once I was there I began to find out more about myself, about where I came from and to question myself through my work”.<sup>i</sup> During her studies Hunjan came across the writings of psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), and her growing self-reflection on broad questions about identity and belonging evolved in tandem with an interest in the subconscious, dreams and the meanings of symbols. In 1981 she exhibited a selection of recent paintings, prints and ceramics in the exhibition, *Four Indian Women Artists* at the Indian Artists (UK) Gallery. These works, with titles such as, *Male and Female* (1979), *The Embrace* (1979), *Intimacy* (1980), and *Maze of Life* (1981), utilised natural forms such as seed pods, eggs, flora and fauna, twigs and branches, alongside abstracted organic shapes and lines. Collectively they addressed themes of regeneration and decay, the possibility of universal ideals or experiences, while also gesturing to questions of how one might find a place for oneself in such a vast and unknowable world. Reviewing the show, artist and critic, Erroll Lloyd noted:

“Prehistoric reptiles like the lizard and snake are recurring images in her work and the textured browns and ochres and reds of her prints give the work an earthy density and warmth which reminds us of early cave paintings. ... Her work has maturity and through a subtle marriage of subject and technique, she manages to achieve a certain universality”.<sup>ii</sup>

Significantly, *Four Indian Women Artists* was Hunjan’s first experience of curating; she organised the show with artist and fellow exhibitor, Chila Kumari Burman. Alongside examples of their own work, Hunjan and Burman included wooden and fabric sculpture by Naomi Iny and ceramic works by Vinodini Ebdon. The show ran from December 1981 until February 1982, and significantly, scholars Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock identify *Four Indian Women Artists* as the first exhibition of Black women artists in their book, *Framing Feminisms: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-85*.<sup>iii</sup>

As the 1980s progressed, Hunjan’s increased self-reflection in conjunction with a growing awareness of feminist politics resulted in a move towards figurative painting. Speaking in 1986, Hunjan stated, “My work at present is about my experiences, women, and in particular Asian women”.<sup>iv</sup> *The Choice* (1985) is divided into two equal halves; on the right is the head and shoulders of woman, who looks directly out at the viewer; she is surrounded by a halo of decorative foliage motifs, and an exotic bird. On the left is a basket, or possibly a ceramic

pot, which is filled to the brim with fruits and vegetables, while decorative floral patterns in the upper left recall embroidered Indian (Rajasthani?) patchwork blankets. The two halves of the painting are held in tension; although the decorative foliage around the woman's head transgresses the divide and links with a cluster of leaves, the painting seemingly seeks to address a sense of division. The woman appears pensive, deep in thought and significantly, Hunjan has painted a grid over her face. She is literally behind bars, and although the caged-lines are thin, and might easily be broken, they nonetheless trap her; the grid becomes then, a signifier of both physical and mental entrapment and together with the work's title, *The Choice*, presents viewers with the dilemma faced by many South Asian women, as they struggle to conform to social expectation and cultural convention, while also wanting to express and explore their own self-identity.

*The Choice* is one of the earliest examples of Hunjan's use of the compositional device of dividing the canvas into two opposing sections, a formal structure that she went on to use and develop in many of her subsequent paintings. Structuring her canvases into two halves perhaps betrays the influence of Frida Kahlo on Hunjan's portrait painting, but she was also inspired by the everyday creative activities undertaken by female family members.<sup>v</sup> Many of these paintings, such as *Mamaji* (1987), feature examples of home-made, functional, yet decorative objects collaged onto the painting's surface. Hunjan has recalled how as a child she was surrounded by creativity and skill, often borne out of necessity.<sup>vi</sup> *Mamaji*, is divided vertically; a portrait of the artist's mother is positioned in the lower half, while hovering above her head is a piece of handmade embroidery positioned atop a checkered red and black background.

Amongst her peers, Hunjan's work was valued for its thoughtful and meditative contribution to feminist debates.<sup>vii</sup> While many feminist artists working in the early 1980s were explicit in their politics, Hunjan approached the issues facing women with a quieter sensitivity and compassion. Much of her approach to art making was rooted in her experiences of working at a South Asian women's refuge in Reading, where she was confronted with the realities of the daily struggles many women faced. *Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur – Victims of Domestic Violence* (1986), is perhaps, a good example of how Hunjan participated in those debates. Divided into two parts, on the left of the canvas is a framed image of a woman, dressed in a shalwar kameez, looking out directly at the viewer. She is upright, dignified, and seemingly self-assured. Adjacent to her on the right of the canvas is an orb of glowing orange, emanating rays of red-orange light, positioned on a deep purple-brown ground. In this contemplative work, the figurative and symbolic reflect each other. Balwant Kaur was murdered by her husband at the Brent Asian Women's Refuge in 1985, and Gurdip Kaur (no relation) was murdered in Reading by her brother-in-law in 1986. The campaign group Southall Black Sisters organised protests "to ensure the proper prosecution" of those who had perpetrated these murders.<sup>viii</sup> By overtly identifying these tragedies in her work, Hunjan may be regarded as being in-step with feminist activism at the time; Shaila Shah noted in 1988 that "The Asian women's movement in Britain has, for some years now, targeted domestic violence as a prime focus of their fightback for liberation".<sup>ix</sup> While domestic abuse was not exclusively experienced by Asian women, a host of culturally specific factors meant that it was (and remains) a problem that particularly needed to be addressed; language barriers, institutional racism, and the perceived role of traditional

culture and religion within the home, all impacted on how Asian women were mistreated by organisations including the police and social services. Although the orb could pessimistically be regarded as symbolic of the blood shed by victims of domestic abuse, it could conversely be a torch or guiding light: the spirits of these women burn brightly in our memories.

By 1989, Hunjan was working as a teaching assistant in the Printmaking department at the Slade School, where she and a group of South Asian artists met to discuss the specific challenges faced by diasporic artists. Following a number of conversations at the Slade, Hunjan, Shaheen Merali, Symrath Patti, Allan deSouza and Shanti Thomas came together to form Panchayat. During its period of existence, Panchayat advocated the work of Black and South Asian artists, and organised exhibitions including *Crossing Black Waters*, which toured Leicester, Bradford and Oldham during 1992. Hunjan's contribution to *Crossing Black Waters* was the large acrylic on canvas painting titled *Confrontation* (1990-1), which presents two female figures standing opposite each other; on closer inspection it is evident that the figures represent the same person, the self confronting the self. This doubled representation of the artist's self-portrait meditates on questions of agency and personal identity within an intimate space. The audience is forced to observe the subject in the act of looking, watching, even scrutinising herself. And although the figures establish themselves/herself as the focal points of the painting, it is the space between them that is significant. Hunjan has positioned her figures towards the outer edges of the canvas so that the central third of the painting is arguably, empty space. However, what is presented in this space is a delicately painted wall of blue and white decorative tiles. Reflecting on her painting practice, Hunjan explained, "Pattern is very prominent in the work, it acts as an enclosure, a screen, surrounding openings, an outlet and at other times as a barrier". The interweaving patterns and loops in the decorative space of *Confrontation* at once connect the figures and keep them at a distance, perhaps suggesting that estrangement need not be caused by some violent schism but might be creeping and quotidian.

Hunjan had major solo exhibitions at the Horizon Gallery, London, and Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, in 1989. These shows presented selections of her figurative and non-figurative paintings; Discussing works such as *Two Sisters* (1988), which is an evocative presentation of two blue vases positioned in a shallow space of swirling blue, Allan deSouza suggested that "as containers they [the vases] also form a kind of prison. They become metaphors not for women but for the roles which women have been forced to adopt - as nurturers and emotional absorbers, as empty vessels to break the emotional burdens and desires of others".<sup>x</sup> Presenting such ideas in a painting comprised of luscious blue tones, Hunjan is perhaps seeking to subvert expectations of how complex and potentially provocative themes might be addressed; as deSouza went on to suggest, "There is value in beauty, strength in gentleness: And beauty can also contain anger, gentleness can be synonymous with action. By such means the stereotypes are firmly grasped and effectively dismantled".<sup>xi</sup>

Hunjan's investigations into the emotional effects of colour and shape continued into the 1990s, and as the decade progressed, she increasingly moved away from figurative works, returning to her original interests in decorative design, colour forms, and repetitive motifs. Her exhibition, *Colour Dialogues* toured to Cartwright Hall, Bradford, in 1994 and Bracknell Gallery, Bracknell, in 1995, and showcased her interest in murals and large-scale floorworks.

In addition to the seeds and natural forms that can be found in early prints, Hunjan increasingly used torn paper, swirls, scrolls, fragments of script and floating linear strokes. Many of these works, such as the commissioned floorpiece for Cartwright Hall, combine the structure of geometric shapes with layers of colours and shapes that are reminiscent of stained glass.

Hunjan has worked with community art groups and run workshops for school children, and adult learners throughout her career; She wrote in the feminist journal *Spare Rib* of her desire to offer South Asian girls the tools with which they could present themselves,<sup>xii</sup> and later reflected, "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".<sup>xiii</sup> In the 2000s much of Hunjan's work was in the public realm as she undertook commissions for hospitals, schools and public spaces. In these public commissions, such as her granite floor design for Drayton Road housing development in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2010, and granite street bollards for St Paul's Way, Tower Hamlets, London, 2012, she undertook public consultation workshops and participation activities. These projects were part of larger urban regeneration schemes, and for Hunjan central to her commission was the need to include local people in the creative process. Facilitating artistic workshops and working in response to the interests and ideas of participants, Hunjan has sought to ensure the inclusion of local people in the design of their public community spaces. In 2008, Hunjan was commissioned by Leicester City Council in collaboration with Leicester Print Workshop to create eight 'floorscapes', or floor murals for the city's designated Cultural Quarter. Each mural includes visual symbols and texts that draw on the historical and contemporary identity of the city. As part of the project, over 100 local people, including artists from Leicester Print Workshop, created designs on small pink granite squares which were inserted into a thread-like linear design in the public space outside the Curve Theatre. Although a seeming departure from her studio-based work, Hunjan regards these activities as having the potential to expand the parameters of her creative practice, offering opportunities to work on large scales and in a range of different materials.

Bhajan Hunjan maintains her studio practice and many of her public commissions have their origins in the processes of printmaking, and the ways in which she activates that medium to layer colours, forms and shapes. In her laser cut acrylic lightboxes, colours glow and forms overlap, seemingly floating in and out of each other's orbit. In these, and more recent collographs, monoprints, and embossed paper works, Hunjan's use of symbols, pattern and colour is at once evocative and elusive. She has returned to her early concerns, probing the possibility of universal forms and the limits of language. In works such as *Floating Text 1* (2016) characters from the Latin and Devanagari (Hindi) alphabets intermingle; the forms dance and swirl around a central empty blue space raising questions regarding the nature of communication; does it always have to be linguistic? Can colour emote or convey ideas in more intimate ways? In her *Floating Text* series Hunjan explores the notion that the meaning of form and shape can change according to familiarity; so that readers of English will perhaps overlook Hindi characters in favour of those used in their everyday lives, and vice versa for Hindi readers.

Over the course of her career Bhajan Hunjan has developed an artistic vocabulary that draws on our familiar visual environments – whether the natural world, domestic space, or written language – as points of reference, and has combined structure and containment with free-floating forms and lines, to create works that resist any fixed meaning. Certain colours or shapes may be symbolic of specific moods or emotional states, but they are never explicitly stated or translated for the audience. Instead, we are encouraged to allow ourselves to be enveloped by and within poetic spirals, arabesques, and tonal gestures; to meditate and reflect.

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<sup>i</sup> Bhajan Hunjan in, Chila Kumari Burman and Bhajan Hunjan, “Mash it up”, *Spare Rib*, no.128, March 1983, pp.52-5, p.52.

<sup>ii</sup> Erroll Lloyd, “Four Indian Women Artists”, *Echo: Living Arts in Britain’s Ethnic Communities*, newsletter published by the Minorities Arts Advisory Service (MAAS), No.48, April-May 1982, p.14-15, p.14.

<sup>iii</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-85*, London: Pandora, 1987, p.64.

<sup>iv</sup> Bhajan Hunjan, as cited in Naqi Ali, “Sauntering through the Gallery of Creativity”, *Asian Times*, 11 April 1986, p.14.

<sup>v</sup> Bhajan Hunjan, in conversation with the author, 24 August 2020.

<sup>vi</sup> Bhajan Hunjan, in conversation with the author, 24 August 2020.

<sup>vii</sup> See Maud Sulter (ed.), *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen’s Creativity*, Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1990.

<sup>viii</sup> Ranu Samantrai, *AlterNatives: Black Feminism in the Postimperial Nation*, Stanford University Press, 2002, p.150.

<sup>ix</sup> Shaila Shah, “We will not mourn their deaths in silence”, in Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar (eds.), *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988, pp. 281-291, p.281.

<sup>x</sup> Allan DeSouza, “Bhajan Hunjan”, *Bhajan Hunjan*, London: Horizon Gallery, 1989, unpaginated [pp.1-4, p.2].

<sup>xi</sup> DeSouza, 1989, unpaginated [p.2].

<sup>xii</sup> Hunjan, 1983, p.53.

<sup>xiii</sup> Deanna Petherbridge, “Bhajan Hunjan” in *Bhajan Hunjan Colour Dialogues*, Bracknell: Bracknell Gallery, 1995 unpaginated [ pp.1-4, p.4].

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**Bhajan Hunjan**

Born Nanyuki, Kenya, in 1956; Lives and works in London.

**Education:**

1975 – 1979 University of Reading BA Honours in Fine Art

1979 – 1981 Slade School of Art, University College London

1982 – 1983 PGCE in Art Education, University of Reading

Artist; known for printmaking, painting, and large-scale outdoor public art.

**Notable Exhibitions:**

1982 Four Indian women Artists, IAUK Gallery, London (group show)

1982 Between Two Cultures, Barbican Concourse Gallery (group show)

1983 Reading University Gallery (solo show)

1986 Jagrati: Asian Women Artists, Citizens Gallery, Woolwich (group show)

1989 Horizon Gallery, London (solo show)

1989 Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth (solo show)

1990 Let the Canvas Come to Life with Dark Faces, Herbert Art Gallery and touring (group show).

1991 Table of Four, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, and touring (group show)

1992 Crossing Black Waters, City Gallery Leicester, and touring (group show)

1994 Colour Dialogues, Cartwright Hall, Bradford (solo show)

1995 Colour Dialogues, Bracknell Gallery, Bracknell (solo show)

2001 Meeting Point, Leicester City Gallery, Leicester (duo show)

2007 Dancing lines Glowing Spaces, Wallingford School of Art & Art History, Oxfordshire (solo show)

2015 Arranging Re-arranging, Bow Arts Foyer Gallery and Courtyard, London & Media Galleries, Cornerstone Arts Centre, Didcot, Oxfordshire (Solo show)

**Artworks in Public Collections:**

Cartwright Hall Art Gallery – Bradford Museums and Art Galleries

Peter Palumbo Art Collection

Reading Museum and Art Gallery

Reading University Art Collection

University College London – Art Collection

Royal Brompton Hospital, London

British Museum, Printrooms, London

**Selected Public art and site-specific commissions**

1994 Colour Dialogues Floor piece, Cartwright Hall, Bradford.

2007- 2008 Eight Street entrance floorscapes in the Cultural Quarter, Leicester, for Leicester City Council

2006 – 2008 Commission for the Town Square 'Art at the Centre' project, Slough,

2010 – 2012 St Paul's Way Transformation with Tower Hamlets Council Highways Team

and Bow Arts.

2013-2015 Lead artist, Tower Hamlets Council Highways for the Bethnal Green High Street Improvement Scheme

**Selected Bibliography:**

Chila Kumari Burman and Bhajan Hunjan, "Mash it up", Spare Rib, March 1983, no.128, pp.52-5

Allan DeSouza, "Bhajan Hunjan", Bhajan Hunjan, London: Horizon Gallery, 1989.

Nadir Tharani, "Bhajan Hunjan, Horizon Gallery", Artrage, Spring 1989, p.11.

Maud Sulter (ed.), Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity, Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1990.

Deanna Petherbridge, Bhajan Hunjan Colour Dialogues, Bracknell: Bracknell Gallery, 1995.

Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds.), Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent, London: Saffron Press, 2001.

**Website:**

<https://bhajanhunjan.com/>