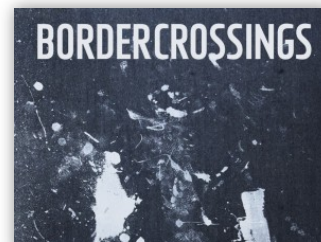


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Nep Sidhu

Esmé Hogeveen · Crossovers · Crossovers · Issue
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Two men face an open door at the top of a small flight of periwinkle-coloured stairs. Beside the opening, a closed door glitters, replete with detailed, golden iconography and a vermilion lintel embroidered with script-like markings. The men and the entrance are framed by billowing cream, yellow, red and blue curtains that recall a royal litter or an extravagant four-poster bed. As viewers, we intuit that the men are not apprehending a domestic space; rather, they appear to be at the threshold of a regal or spiritual location. In fact, the painted figures at the centre of (Nep) Nirbhai Singh Sidhu’s mixed-media tapestry *Medicine for a Nightmare*, 2019, stand in front of Haz̄ur S̄ahib, a Sikh temple in western India and one of the five Takhats, seats of religious authority. The quasi-geometric imagery surrounding the men, which includes references to sound and Punjabi calligraphy, conjures a sense of enshrined reverence common to the works in Sidhu’s ambitious exhibition, “Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded),” on view at Mercer Union.

Though Sidhu has previously shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Aga Khan Museum and the Art Gallery of York University, “Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded),” curated by cheyanne turions, marks the artist’s first solo show in Toronto. Those waiting were mightily rewarded with dazzling



Nep Sidhu in collaboration with Maikoiyo Alley-Barnes, *The Books and the Scripts Were Stolen, Our Steel Is Forever, Mool Mantar Medicine Hat 7b*, 2019, steel, buntal straw, horsehair, 43 x 76 x 43 inches. Metal adornment by Nep Sidhu; hat by Thom O'Brien/ Bona Capello. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. All images courtesy of the artist and Mercer Union, Toronto.

large-scale tapestries, sculpture and metalworks, which together evoke questions about the memorialization of trauma and activations of care, including pilgrimage and prayer. In particular, Sidhu's works respond to the 1984 Sikh massacre, including the events of Operation Blue Star, the code name for an Indian military attack on the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. To wit, the exhibition includes two tapestries: *Axes in Polyrhythm*, 2018, created in collaboration with Nicholas Galanin; and *Medicine for a Nightmare*. Both works, comprised of woven, embroidered and painted sections, as well as resin, cedar, jute and hair, are part of Sidhu's ongoing series, "When My Drums Come Knocking

They Watch," which explores relationships between percussive sounds and ancestral connection. Though catalyzing distinct questioning trajectories, the other works in the exhibition likewise reflect personal relationships with cultural and political histories. These include a sculptural memorial addressing Sikh erasure (*Formed in the Divine, Divine of Form*, 2019), a photograph of the Golden Temple kitchen (*Seva, In Memory, In Practice*, 2019) and busts—or "superstructures"—made by collaborator Maikoiyo Alley-Barnes that support metal adornments and hats owned by Sidhu's fan Erykah Badu.

The work in "Medicine for a Nightmare" is consistently dense yet capacious. Viewers familiar with Sikh

iconography will no doubt have a uniquely rich experience engaging Sidhu's imagery and objects, but the attention to detail in the work itself, as well as the evident care directed toward the exhibition's public programs, makes a strong case for the universal relevance of thinking through historical traumas from deeply grounded contemporary positions. A motif of revelation underscores the work and is perhaps most literally embodied in the tapestry carrying the exhibition's name. In *Medicine for a Nightmare*, large swaths of an ornately patterned fabric assume the shape of having just been drawn open, exposing a row of sacred swords embroidered on the right side of the tapestry. The swords refer the viewer back to the theme of metallurgy as a practice closely connected to Sikh spiritual identity, protection and evolving intergenerational aesthetics. The brass designs, including sets of small engraved blades that decorate the otherwise brutalist poured concrete *Formed in the Divine*, summon different associations from those of the human adornments displayed on Alley-Barnes's sculpture works. Nevertheless, Sidhu's metalworks commonly grapple with material practices as a means to make legible historical violence and loss.

Whether looking to the past, as in the invitation toward sombre reflection provided by the low gong soundtrack and discreet placement of *Formed in the Divine*, or the future, as embodied in the sartorial elements of Sidhu and Alley-Barnes's collaborations, the works in "Medicine for a Nightmare" operate on several temporal levels; after viewing the exhibition, I felt unable to synthesize all of the dynamics at play. *Medicine for a Nightmare* and *Axes in Polyrhythm* both feature disjunctive lines of perspective, and the hybrid symbolism inherent to the exhibition as a whole evokes the potent intersections among history, memory, the present, imagination and futurity. Though it's become a cliché to suggest that an artwork has to be seen in person to be fully experienced, the affect of Sidhu's pieces really do come to life in each other's company,

following an internal logic that resounds more wholly in chorus.



Nep Sidhu, *Medicine for a Nightmare* (from the series “When My Drums Come Knocking They Watch”), 2019, cotton, wool, jute, zari, hair, steel, 220 x 108 inches (installation dimensions 232 x 132 inches). Commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto, 2019. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

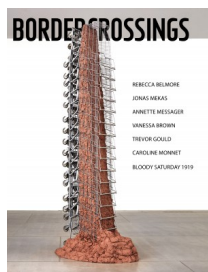
Though very much concerned with acts of community care—in particular, the Sikh concept of *Seva*, or “selfless work”—as a mode of ongoing restoration, Sidhu’s show takes a different rhetorical approach, at least in its title, from that of the popular language around “self-care.”

When I spoke with the artist, he referred to medicine as a means of treating a particular and identified problem. To engage with history, it is necessary to seek to understand not only the events but also your particular relationship to said history. A diagnosis of sorts seems to be required before there can be a remedy, though the idea of a cure or complete restitution for horrific events and attempted erasures may exist forever at a future horizon. As viewers, we are left, then, to consider acts of

recollection and how they situate us in the present. The beauty of the work in “Medicine for a Nightmare” is frankly overwhelming, almost distracting. Yet, walking through the gallery, you notice that the tapestries are hung about two feet out from the walls. Contemplating the busy undersides of the artworks serves as an analogy to the complex labour of remembrance, akin, I can only imagine, to the work of interweaving so many materials to present a coherent image. The immense scale of the tapestries and the concrete memorial help to ground the exhibition, as does the accompanying text written by turions. A book project by Sidhu and turions is forthcoming, and you can imagine it will continue the work of asking how historical violence and reparative care can be rendered legible through a futurist lens.

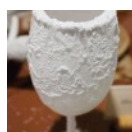
“Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded)” was exhibited at Mercer Union, Toronto, from February 9 to March 23, 2019.

Esmé Hogeveen is a writer based between Tkaronto/Toronto and Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal. She holds a MA in critical theory and creative research from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and is a former member of the MICE Magazine Collective.



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