

PRIMARY

Hardeep Pandhal

Paranoid Picnic: The Phantom BAME

19 JANUARY - 17 MARCH 2019



Introduction



Paranoid Picnic: The Phantom BAME is a new solo exhibition by artist Hardeep Pandhal which confronts post-colonial traumas with testing humour. The exhibition takes place across two sites in Nottingham: New Art Exchange and Primary. This dual setting creates what the artist describes as 'parodic parallel worlds' into which he projects his frustration of societal structures.

Pandhal typically works with non-linear forms of digital video which layer lurid hand drawn cartoons, psychedelic and disorienting narratives with his own deadpan rap music. For *Paranoid Picnic*, Pandhal has created a new video installation to be presented at Primary. The piece, exploring themes of heritage, acts of remembering and nostalgia, samples scenes from the BBC mini-series *Cranford* (2007), a Neo-Victorian adaption of Elizabeth Gaskell's classic fiction.

The works presented at NAE continue this dialogue, drawing on a range of historical influences to further Pandhal's interest in 'dissonant heritage' - the way in which societal stories and identities are subject to conflicting realities that warp and shift through time.

The exhibits at NAE include an oversized hoodie, redefined by the artist as a cloak. Knitted by Pandhal's mother, the cloak was then adorned with his own hand embroidery. Pandhal's suggestive designs pull the threads tightly together, creating bodily-like protrusions. Pandhal and his mother are divided by language, he speaks little Punjabi, while she speaks little English. What is lost in translation is found, hinting at things that are known without being spoken.

The cloak is displayed unfinished, amongst a series of sculptural foregrounds. Perforated with semi-functional head holes, the foregrounds invite visitors to perform and play with identity. However, whilst the sculptures borrow from the distinctly British aesthetic of Victorian era seaside amusements, the imagery at play comprises Karni Bharni (depictions of hell in popular Indian print culture), an adaptation of 2Pac's posthumous album cover *Makaveli* (1996), and an imagined character wearing coattails inspired by fantasy fiction.

Hand-drawings, the mainstay of Pandhal's practice, frame the installation at both NAE and Primary. Ranging from works on paper to doodles-in-the margins type illustrations drawn freely on the gallery walls, the imagery offers a glimpse into Pandhal's wider thinking and extends the social commentary feel of his practice.

Hardeep Pandhal

in conversation with curator Melanie Kidd

MK: In the past we've spoken about your commitment to a decolonising art practice, and we've described *Paranoid Picnic* as an exhibition which confronts post-colonial traumas. What societal situations or personal experiences influenced this to become a driving force of your practice?

HP: My work reflects experiences of racism. I have experienced racism in many ways, throughout my entire life, in every city I have lived. After each incident I find myself going through a mental process to understand each occurrence. I reflect on these incidents a lot and I tend to do most of this reflection on my own. Having come from a predominantly black and brown neighbourhood, I have also been implicated in complex intra-racial altercations.

My environment changed dramatically following my entrance into further education. In the art schools I attended, my classes were exclusively white. I don't recall ever having a tutorial with anyone that wasn't white. I did develop affinities with some white working-class students though. This environmental shift coincided, somewhat fittingly, with my first encounters with post-colonial theory. I learned about imperialism in a more academic context, about how classificatory systems were established to subjugate and exploit people, how museums were erected to display and cultivate a sense of a world in need of knowing and homogenising.





European art and display ideologies have always been implicated in colonialist histories. So as an artist, I am contributing to the expansive practice of decolonising and engaging with identity politics. This involves unlearning and reframing the violence I received during my education as a young person. It also means being aware of my own male power.

MK: The opportunity to develop a cross-site exhibition actually came about quite incidentally – both NAE and Primary recognised we were hoping to work with you at a similar time so we decided to collaborate. What opportunity do you feel the cross-site nature of the show presents?

HP: This exhibition is split across two very different sites. Viewers will not be able to grasp the entirety of the project at once. So, I see them straddling to make sense of it all, which interests me. This image of a straddler could be developed further as a second skin to approach my work.

Straddling can evoke conflict, compromise, indecision, paranoia, and greed. I imagine it as a mode of being, akin to the interstitial, intersectional and the elliptical (gap-between). This straddling is mirrored in the work as well as in the split-site nature of the exhibition at large. Drawing attention to viewing habits encourages self-reflexivity, which I think is important.

One way to grasp my idea of the straddler is to see it through the lens of heritage studies and the idea of 'dissonant heritage' – the way in which societal stories and identities are subject to conflicting realities that warp and shift through time. To summarise the



opening claim in Laurajane Smith's book *Uses of Heritage* (2006): 'There is no such thing as heritage, rather there is a hegemonic (dominant) discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute what we think. Consequently, this discourse validates a set of practices and performances, which populates both popular and expert construction of 'heritage' and undermines alternative and subaltern ideas about 'heritage'.

Since inheritance implies and entails disinheritance, dissonance is an inherent quality of heritage, not separate from it. This got me thinking about ideas of repatriation, from immigration policies to museum collections. Do the displaced need re-placing, re-contextualising? How can displacement be put to use? Can an art exhibition do it justice? What language would it speak? How would misreading be read?

MK: Let's talk more about heritage, as this, along with acts of remembering and nostalgia are clear interests this show. For example, the new video work presented at Primary samples the BBC period drama, *Cranford*, and the crumbling pillar installation at NAE is inspired by a past V&A exhibition about the collapse of Britain's historical homes.

HP: At NAE, we have altered the appearance of the two structural pillars in the main space, to make them appear like they're in a state of collapse. I was drawn to the design of this 1974 V&A exhibition mentioned above, which also included fake, collapsing pillars. The show was called *The Destruction of a Country House* and was put together to raise awareness of the threats being posed to the growing loss of country houses due to a lack of maintenance

funds. The accompanying catalogue is full of images of destroyed country houses, taken either during their occupancy or when they fell into decrepit states just prior to being destroyed. I wanted to update the potential reading of this V&A exhibition to take into consideration those who might show indifference to the loss of upper-class mansions, or be sensitive to heritage interpretation practices more broadly. So, the pillars could be seen to be in a state of becoming, rather than collapse. Or rather, I am collapsing one idea with another, by shifting my viewpoint, my interpretation. I also wanted to give voice to and to indulge in what I describe as the generative space of disinheritance. This is further explored in the video installation at Primary.

MK: When we began this project you were exploring Victoriana and steampunk, and you went on to do some further research at the Whitby Goth Festival and within Nottingham's Lace Archives.

HP: Victorian anxieties concerning the loss of the empire got fed into stories by authors like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Their science fictions, which are still widely cherished, also served to temper this sense of loss. This got me thinking about steampunk as an adaptive mode and as a potential corrective space. However, after learning a little more about it, I feel it does more to damage than to heal the wounds inflicted by colonialism. It can too easily come across as a space to revel in Victorian fantasies, despite genuine attempts to undermine it, notably via empowered women characters in some steampunk fictions. I was also thinking that some of my existing work could be rethought as something steampunk could and should be, particularly my drawings of sepoys – British-Indian soldiers.

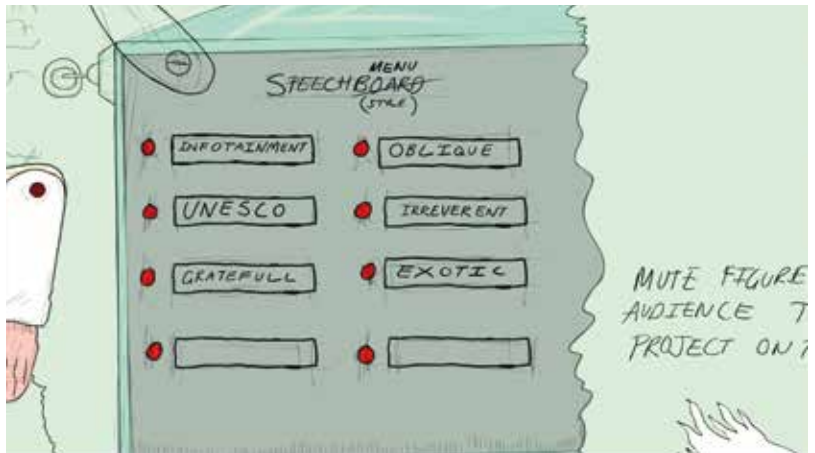


MK: Returning to your interest in Victoriana, and also the act of bringing the past into the present day, in the video work shown at Primary, we see a specific scene from the first episode of *Cranford* being played on your iMac computer screen.

HP: Yes, this particular scene in my video intends to draw attention to the impact of growing consumerism on the status of women during the Victorian era for a contemporary audience. The BBC period drama *Cranford* is a good example of popular Victoriana. Here, Victorianism is refashioned and brought forth through modern technologies, which mediate the past in a nostalgic and aestheticised manner.

Victoriana researcher Cora Kaplan states: 'The Victorian, at once ghostly and tangible, an origin and an anachronism, had a strong affective presence in modern Britain in the supposedly libertarian 1960s and 1970s, when the nation was thought to be on its way to becoming a classless and multicultural society. Its idiomatic function was enhanced in the 1980s and 1990s when Victorian Values - thrift, family, enterprise - were brought back as the positive ethic of Conservative government. It was then I began to seriously consider the curious appropriation of the Victorian for disparate political and cultural agendas in the present, to see Victoriana's peculiar role, not simply as that always selective and unreliable thing, historical memory, so easily cloyed with nostalgia or soured into persecution of the dead, but as what we might call history out of place, something atemporal and almost spooky in its effects, yet busily at work constituting this time - yours and mine - of late Capitalist modernity.'





MK: In both the video work at Primary, and also the sculptural works shown at NAE, there are references to Victorian era mechanisms and objects.

HP: In addition to the *Cranford* reference, the video at Primary also reimagines a drawing by Gaganendranath Tagore (1867 – 1938), depicting an Orientalist automaton preloaded with speeches. It's an absurdist and somewhat delusional satire on the way Indian politicians and rulers are able to change their speeches and modulate their voices to suit occasion. Perhaps this image could now be seen as a comment on the way aspects of colonial rule have been inherited and re-performed in post-partition India?

At NAE I've made new works inspired by the comic foreground, Victorian-era freestanding head-in-the-hole cut-outs associated with the British sea side.

MK: However, as opposed to illustrating couples clad in swimwear or seaside paraphernalia, your comic foregrounds refer to depictions of hell taken from popular print in India from the 19th and early 20th century, as well as characters adopted from western pop culture. Tell us more about the illustrations and characters we see on the comic foregrounds and throughout the show.

HP: I believe this Karni Bharni hell imagery I've adapted for the comic foregrounds was intended to be morally instructional. Looking at this imagery, I was interested in the manner in which the fruits of action perform, through resemblance, their originating sin. So those who in this life cook animals and birds alive are thrown into a hell where they are cooked in boiling oil; a person who



indulges in illicit sex receives the hellish recompense of having to embrace red-hot models of men or women (though sometimes it's hard to tell). Here, the mechanics of mimesis are played out, to ends that unintentionally (in my view) poke or question the status of the pure, the unadapted, the original, the sin.

This idea lies at the heart of the cartoons of the British Sikh soldiers that populate my pen and ink drawings, which are directed at the causes of racial profiling. Copies corrupt originals. The comic foreground format implies interactivity, however it is not always so obvious how and in which way to participate in my versions, if at all. Perhaps the performativity of heritage performance is (comically) foregrounded, rather than the valorisation or fixation of a heritage object. I have adapted some of the hell imagery and borrowed from other sources too, exploring embodiment and social justice through the lens of fantasy writers of colour; a growing interest of mine, after learning about *Racefail 09*, the internet fandom debate around representation in fantasy fiction which appeared in 2009.

MK: In the video at Primary we see a shot of your bare chest, revealing a homemade tattoo of a swastika and a portrait of a new character, Bhagat Singh. Can you introduce who Bhagat is for those who don't know.

HP: Bhagat Singh is an iconic figure in parts of India, who famously disguised himself in western garb to plot revolutionary acts to destabilise British rule in India. Most people only ask about the swastika as the image of Bhagat Singh's face is crude, plus his image isn't iconic in the west as it is in India (and in the West he

would probably be described as a terrorist). As I recall when I had the tattoo done 10 years ago by a friend, I wanted to reclaim the swastika as a symbol of prosperity before it was appropriated by the Nazis, by placing it next to Bhagat Singh, who is seen as a revolutionary martyr in Indian history. However, I knew I couldn't locate the swastika anywhere too visible on my body, as the symbol is easily misinterpreted. Mutability is inherent to tattooed images, they change as one's skin gets older.

Thinking about my intentions for getting the swastika/Bhagat Singh tattoo further, I am reminded of the writer Paul Gilroy, who once described British postwar tendencies in mainstream media to champion its military campaigns as a symptom of decolonisation (and perhaps to distance itself from being implicated in imperialism), something he called post-colonial melancholia. It's a difficult subject, but something I am interested in as I think it's relevant today.

MK: For the new video piece shown at Primary, you worked with a company who make adverts and promotional films in commercial contexts. Your choice to engage this company was partially influenced by conversations we'd had about creating an interpretation film or artist's interview to accompany the exhibition.

HP: For me, this footage (shot in my studio) is partly a record of the awkwardness that usually accompanies filming situations like these. But this is not so obvious in the video piece overall. I wanted to slow down the articulation of a thought process, make it more nuanced, to redress or disturb some of the trends I see in promotional material accompanying exhibitions these days. It's also



a reflection on some of the video interviews that I have undertaken myself for past exhibitions. When looking back at these old interviews I am often reminded of things that I forgot to mention, or of the discomfort I felt at being asked personal questions, even though this line of questioning is elicited by the type of work I make. Perhaps I am aware that these exhibitions are always going to be incomplete.

In this video, I wanted to embrace the interminable (the never-ending), to show that ideas and artworks are not fixed, that they can be edited, repurposed, refined, reduced. Here, having control over the editing process is key. Perhaps it's more of a reflection on the historicisation process, or of recuperating the past.

MK: References to rap and hip hop culture feature in your ongoing practice, and lyrics and sound has become increasingly dominant in this particular exhibition as the project has progressed over recent months. What interest does rapping hold for you, and please elaborate on the exhibition title.

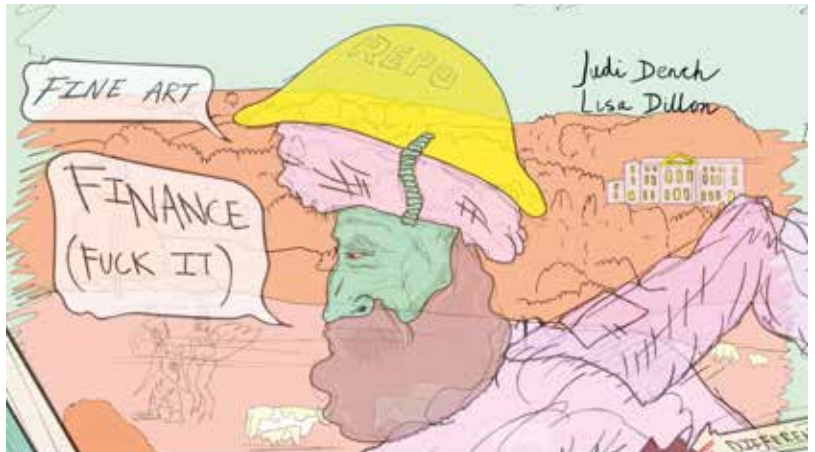
HP: The title of the exhibition is spilt into two parts. *Paranoid Picnic* is more poetic, propositional and not so derivative. Alliteration (the literary device where a series of words begin with the same consonant sound) is abundant in the exhibition as a whole, more obviously in the lyrical voiceover in the videos at Primary. I see rapping as a succinct way of communicating my notes and the music has roots that I politically identify with. Oral transmission also feels more natural to me when I think about my relationship to my parent culture.





BAME is an acronym for Black and Asian Minority Ethnic. *The Phantom BAME* is a play on the medical term phantom pain, which is used to describe the pain that an amputee feels from a body part that's no longer there. It's also a reference to the last instalment in the gaming franchise *Metal Gear Solid*, *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*, a franchise known for its intricate plot twists and heightened in-game stealth mechanics.

The song being played at NAE samples the music from a well-known scene in the gaming franchise *Metal Gear Solid*. In the cut-scene, a baddie (a telepathic, floating ex member of the KGB called Psycho Mantis) reads the main protagonist's mind by referencing the player's game save data stored on the player's memory card. This is followed by a demonstration of Psycho Mantis' mind control abilities as he asks the player to place the controller on the floor, which he then moves by triggering the rumble technology inside the controller. It was a real fourth wall moment for me as a 12 year old gamer. The lyrics to the song, which appear in the exhibition also, relate to surrealist writings on insect mimicry as a form of nonproductive loss, rather than adaptive survival, referring to the mating habits of praying mantis' and stick insects that confuse other stick insects for food. Surrealists tried to compare these biological phenomenon to psychological experiences of subjects who perceive themselves becoming absorbed into, or mixed up with, the physical space surrounding them (for example the fear of the dark). I was thinking about the comic-foregrounds in relation to this, as threatsapes, spaces that have the potential to break away and transform into hellish counterparts at any given moment.



MK: You've described in the past how your practice circles around concealment, mimicry, obliquity and double speak.

HP: Yes, perhaps this comes from my position as a straddler, between my parent culture, as a translator, which means reading between lines. This is actively explored in my ongoing embroidery work with my mother, with whom I share a language barrier.

There's reluctance, narrative restraint and space for empowering misreading. For example, I recently read that the word thug comes from a sanskrit word for concealment and was used to name the cult of assassins operating in India known as the thuggee, which were suppressed by the British. I began to renew the idea of 2pac's oft misinterpreted idea of *Thug Life*, a code of conduct to deal with authoritative corruption. It involves taking matters into one's own hand. In some new sketches for a narrative work, I adapt the thuggee cult's genesis story (they spawned from beads of sweat dripping of an incensed Kali) and have started to write a gritty fantasy that is as much about developing worthwhile character profiles as it is about reframing and dealing with experiences of racism.

Paranoid Picnic: The Phantom BAME,
is a cross site exhibition by New Art Exchange
and Primary. Curated by Melanie Kidd and
Niki Russell.



new art exchange

PRIMARY

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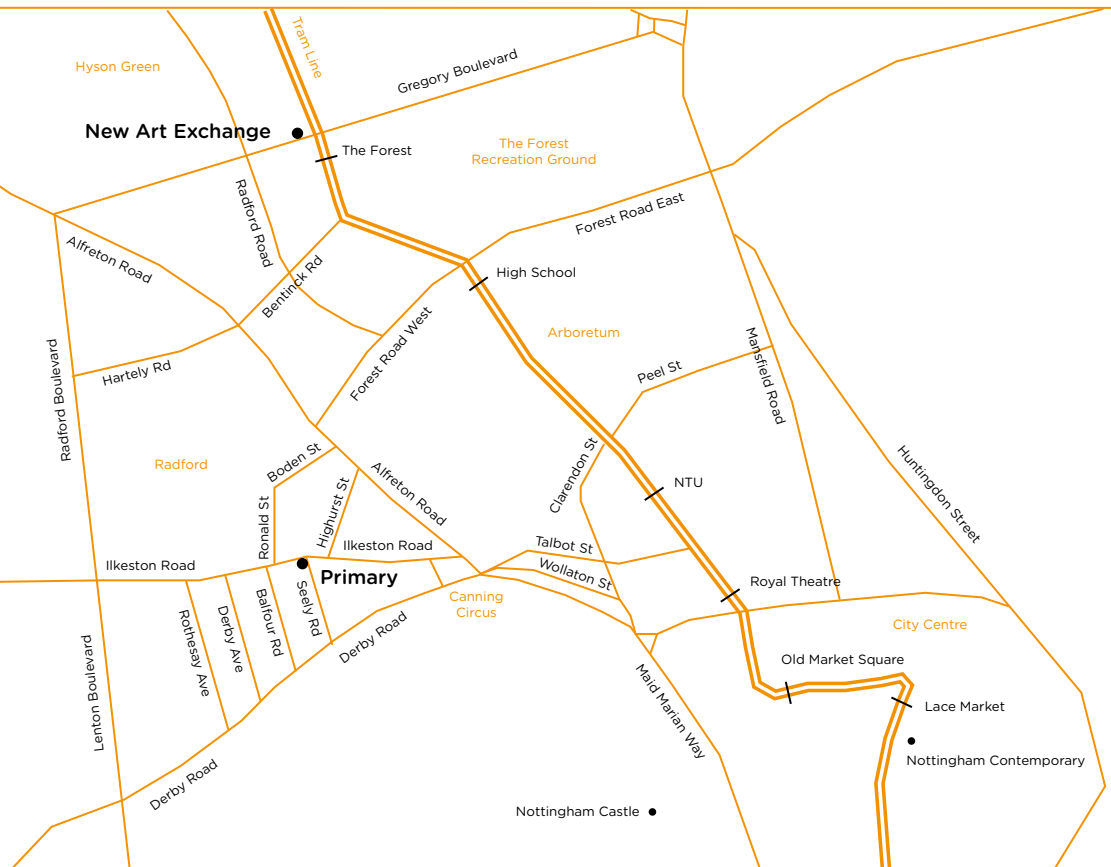
Images throughout are video stills taken from
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Courtesy the artist.

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Exhibition Locations

Primary and NAE are a 15-20 minute walk between each other.



New Art Exchange

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Sun: 10am – 4pm

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Fri: 11am – 6pm
Sat: 11am – 6pm
or by prearranged appointment