

Nep Sidhu, Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded), Mercer Union, Toronto, Audain Gallery, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Nep Sidhu, Divine of Form, Formed in the Divine (Medicine for a Nightmare), Esker Foundation, Calgary

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Nep Sidhu

← *Medicine for a Nightmare*, from the series *When My Drums Come Knocking They Watch*, installation view, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2019.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid

Nep Sidhu & Maikoio Alley-Barnes

→ *Black (W)hole*, video still, 2019, produced with the support of the Esker Foundation Commission Fund.

Photo : courtesy of the artists and Esker Foundation, Calgary

Nep Sidhu

Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded)

Divine of Form, Formed in the Divine (Medicine for a Nightmare)

Curated by cheyanne turions

Beyond the visual impact of an exhibition brimming with outright devotion to craft, what struck me about Nep Sidhu's *Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded)* was its deep respect for the viewer's experience. Despite the highly complex and ambitious nature of the work, there was no assumption of what an audience might feel or be capable of absorbing when viewing it. The generosity of space afforded in encountering each piece allowed the act of viewing to become a fluid process of absorbing smell, sound, texture and inter-dimensionality. My satisfaction with the materiality and presentation of the work sparked an intense curiosity about its conceptual motivation. It was clear to me that Sidhu strongly believed in art's power to embody ideas and affect a living community far beyond any gallery walls.

Sidhu's first solo exhibition in Toronto opened at Mercer Union on February 9, 2019. Numbers provided by the gallery revealed record opening attendance at approximately 1000, and total visitors throughout the run at just over 2500. From the start, the exhibition received extensive media coverage. A reference library was added as it travelled to Simon Fraser University's Audain Gallery in May, and Calgary's Esker Foundation in September, where it opened as a mid-career retrospective under the new title: *Divine of Form, Formed*

in the Divine (Medicine for a Nightmare). With an emphasis on open dialogue, each iteration built upon the one before through expanded work, location-specific programming, and an ever-broadening curatorial context. Sidhu's practice is rooted in the experience of living as a Sikh in both Canada and Punjab, employing intercultural and intergenerational narratives that are rooted in antiquity, but remain relevant to the present. Operating on the premise that art is particularly suited for healing through knowledge transfer, *Medicine for a Nightmare* references events in 1984 which saw the massacre of thousands of Sikhs under the Indira Gandhi-led Indian government. Beginning with an insurgency meant to remove militant Sikh separatist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers from the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, Punjab, the initial attack resulted in hundreds of civilians killed in the cross-fire. Retaliations included the assassination of Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards, which sparked a series of government-sanctioned pogroms that resulted in the death of thousands of Sikhs, the wounding and displacement of thousands more, and the devastation of Sikh libraries and learning centres. One year later, a Sikh terrorist organization blew up an Air India flight from Toronto to Bombay, killing all 329 people aboard,



including 268 Canadians. With prosecutions and reparations still outstanding, tensions are very much ongoing in effected communities worldwide. Sidhu's work consciously chooses not to address these events conclusively, nor does it attempt to summarize or offer any clear answers. Instead, it uses metaphor and abstraction to designate moments for reflection. By combining historical elements with his own experience in a wider contemporary culture, Sidhu has shifted the exhibition's focus away from trauma and towards an empowered approach to remembrance.

With far too many works to mention here, *Medicine for a Nightmare* is an exercise in material and conceptual transformation that does not shy away from the monumental. Conceived in collaboration with Maikoioy Alley-Barnes and Nicholas Galanin, the series *No Pigs in Paradise* (2015–present) is a collection of clothing that uses traditional patterns and processes to speak the language of contemporary fashion. The pieces read as spiritual mediums charged with ancient wisdom that possess a deep connection to the Divine. A short film titled *Black (W)hole* also explores a principle of oneness, in this case addressing the intertwined concepts of a formless unity and the infinity of creation as they are manifest in art, nature, and music. Also produced in collaboration with Alley-Barnes, the film features the human body engaged in ritual, spiritual

dialogue, fabrication, and percussion, with a deeply moving soundtrack that oscillates between melancholy and optimism. An honest calling out to the eternal is present throughout the exhibition. Featuring prominently in all three iterations, *When My Drums Come Knocking They Watch* (2018–2019), is a series of textile works measuring over 200 x 100" each. The title piece, *Medicine for a Nightmare* (2019), presents an array of intertwined geometric patterns, depictions of ornate fabrics, a lineup of *kirpans* (Sikh ceremonial swords), and imagery from the Hazūr Sahib, one of the five holiest temples in Sikhism, and linked in the cycle of devotion to the Golden Temple. The work is alive with the percussive rhythms of daily life, where both temple and kitchen provide platforms for *seva*, the action and intention of community service and selfless giving central to Sikh temple life. Performing as a more direct abstraction of the Golden Temple, Sidhu's 2,800-pound concrete and brass sculpture, *Formed in the Divine, Divine of Form* (2019) is constructed with entrances on all four sides and includes reference to elements of Sikh ritual like water, steel, and scripture. Resting on a bed of soil sourced from both Amritsar and Sidhu's hometown in Scarborough, Ontario, the piece is imbued with the energy of each region, embodying the weight of history while drawing from the present, so that it becomes a symbol of remembrance that is both grounded and charged.



Nep Sidhu

← *Formed in the Divine, Divine of Form*, installation view, Esker Foundation, Calgary, 2019.

Photo : John Dean, courtesy of the artist

Nep Sidhu & Rashmi Varma

→ *She in Bead Form*, from the series *No Pigs in Paradise, Series 2*, 2018, installation view, Esker Foundation, 2019.

Photo : John Dean, courtesy of the artists

Nep Sidhu

→ (left) *SHE in Ride Form*, from the series *No Pigs in Paradise, Series 3*, 2019; with Nicholas Galanin, (right) *SHE in Mud Form*, from the series *No Pigs in Paradise, Series 1*, 2015, installation view, Esker Foundation, 2019.

Photo : John Dean, courtesy of the artists

Instead of dwelling on violence or offering a prescriptive retelling of tragic events, Sidhu's work chooses to honour the strength and resilience of Sikh people through a uniquely personal aesthetic that touches on all aspects of Sikhism. Despite its popular success, *Medicine for a Nightmare* was met with criticism by viewers who felt that it failed to comprehensively address the full extent of its historical premises. Criticism focused on the perception that the original curatorial statement over-simplified the events and their repercussions. In response, curator cheyanne turions took it upon herself to rewrite the text, providing greater detail, and including an annotated bibliography. Mercer Union also acknowledged the criticism, releasing a statement that reaffirmed its commitment to curatorial responsibility and informed exhibition-making.

While facilitating the run of a show that evolved as it travelled across three cities and included peripheral programming, talks, and school visits, Sidhu and turions remained open and readily responsive to inquiries from visitors, media, and writers such as myself. Aside from the fact that the exhibition already extended its reach well beyond the art itself, the expectation that it should offer a complete retelling of history is a demand disproportionate to its form. The role of contemporary art is to process ideas through material metaphor, thereby inviting diverse interpretations from its audiences. In this way, art is uniquely positioned as a tool for communicating complex ideas, particularly where words fall short. As with any history of trauma, the impacts of 1984 are highly personal and tend to extend across generations. *Medicine for a Nightmare* is Sidhu's personal recipe for healing based on his own cultural inheritance. By creating an open and welcoming space for interpretation within this political framework, Sidhu displays confidence in his viewers on a principle of trust that ultimately reinforces the value of multiple viewpoints.

Work from *Medicine for a Nightmare* will be included in a solo installation for Glasgow International, a biennial festival of contemporary art which will run from April 24 to May 10, 2020.

Alex Bowron

Mercer Union, Toronto

February 9—March 23, 2019

Audain Gallery, Simon Fraser

University, Vancouver
May 30—August 3, 2019

Esker Foundation, Calgary

September 28—December 30, 2019

