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HARDEEP PANDHAL

Castlefield Gallery, Manchester

The feeling of slight unease – of not being sure whether to be amused or appalled – that I experienced when walking round Hardeep Pandhal's debut UK solo exhibition, wasn't entirely unexpected. The show's title, 'A Joyous Thing with Maggots at the Centre' – a phrase coined by the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner and also the title of a chapter in Michael Taussig's *Defacement*, his 1999 book on the subject of 'public secrecy' – provided appropriate preparation for this tightly-packed collection of work spanning drawing, video, sculpture and the artist's mum's knitting.

It's the latter that Pandhal – a 2013 graduate of Glasgow School of Art's MFA – is perhaps best known for. In last year's Bloomberg New Contemporaries, he showed jumpers emblazoned with barely recognizable representations of the rapper 2Pac and the documentary maker/explorer Bruce Parry. Here, an oversized white synthetic wool sweater depicted the decapitated Sikh saint and martyr Baba Deep Singh, his severed head at the end of the left arm, a bloody sword stitched to the right (*Baba Deep Thing by Mum*, 2014). Legend has it that this holy warrior continued to battle his Afghan enemies even as the blood drained from his headless body. But just as the distance is vast and difficult to grasp between the artist – a second generation, Glasgow-based British Sikh who grew up in Birmingham – and this 18th-century tale of martyrdom, the process of making the unwearable garment offered up its own great divide. Pandhal's mother speaks Punjabi and knows little English; her son is the exact opposite. What's lost in translation is gained in a curious sub-plot of identity and difference, of things known and not needing to be said.

In two film pieces, this shaky sense of shared cultural 'secrets' and unresolved or unexplained actions is played out again, with Pandhal placing himself centre-stage. Or, at least, a version of himself. In *Joboboy*s (2014) he is a young boy aged seven, in a grainy home video that makes you feel increasingly uncomfortable as it progresses. Sitting in the living room of the family home, Pandhal smiles and laughs as he messes around with a pet rabbit. But what begins as rough playfulness crescendos to something more unpleasant,

the screen blanking out as his handling of the animal becomes crueler.

In the two-screen film installation, *Profane Illumination* (2014), Pandhal sits on his bed and reads, falteringly, from a laptop. 'This is a man's initiation ceremony,' he says, directing his words at an unseen cameraman who occasionally interjects as the narrative develops. We're in the realm of ritual and mysticism in which meditation-induced trances transform men into malevolent spirits while the women are required to play along with the illusion – or else. Things are a little confused and, after a few minutes, the film's subtitles get confused, too – when Pandhal says 'men' the text says 'women', and male and female roles in this patriarchal conceit become blurred. All the while, the other screen shows a blurred home video of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, a Sikh religious site with its own complex and bloody history.

Pandhal is interested in sociologist Georg Simmel's maxim that 'secrecy magnifies reality' (another chapter heading in Taussig's book). What the artist magnifies here is the way in which the stories and identities that societies create are subject to different, often competing, realities that warp and shift through time. He addressed this most directly in a series of four lamppost banners, originally displayed in the street during last year's Glasgow International festival (also titled *Joboboy*s, 2014). On them, Pandhal reimagines the imagery of the Camp Coffee label, which features a kilted Gordon Highlander and a turban-wearing Sikh. Dating back to 1876 and originally made in Glasgow, the Camp Coffee branding has gone through its own series of historical revisions, from showing a standing Sikh waiting on a seated Highlander to the current version, which has the pair sipping happily together. Pandhal strips away the delicate tiptoeing around colonial history and turns these sanitized symbols of empire into absurd and cartoonish caricatures, with offensive doodles in the margins.

Though part of the Asia Triennial Manchester programme and clearly contextualized in relation to the artist's Sikh background, Pandhal's exhibition avoided polemic or protest to deliver something that was purposely slippery in its exploration of cultural identity. It was an approach typified in a comment to camera near the end of the *Joboboy*s film: 'This whole thing about being British-Asian is a kind of a bit weird ... Because it's the truth, but, you know, it doesn't need to be the truth.'

CHRIS SHARRATT

