In a conversation with MANMEET K. WALIA, last year's Turner Prize winner JASLEEN KAUR reflects on her journey, her practice, and the struggle to understand the separation between the personal and political.

I NOW DESCRIBE MYSELF AS AN ARTIST

Named after the English painter JMW Turner, the eponymous Turner Prize is presented to a British visual artist annually. Last year, it was presented to the Glasgow-born Jasleen Kaur, making the 39-year-old the first artist from the South Asian diaspora to receive this prestigious award.

Kaur's practice is rooted in the poetics of memory, where tradition becomes a lens to explore both intimate inheritance and wider historical entanglements. She questions inherited power structures, favouring lived experience and practical gestures over detached theory, and holds firmly that art must remain embedded in the realities from which it arises.

Since being awarded the Turner Prize, while there is sufficient curiosity and chatter around her, Kaur hopes to "put her head down" and continue working on projects, including a commission with a new museum in the east of London, a major international exhibition in the United States, and her first solo show with Hollybush Gardens, London, later this year. "I'm working on two permanent public artworks in the United Kingdom and excited to be taking part in the 2025 Istanbul Biennial," she says, when we meet at her studio in London, adding: "I am dreaming of sublime, intimate spaces... That is the kind of space I find myself making from at the moment."

MANMEET K. WALIA (MW): You're the first artist from the South Asian diaspora to receive the Turner Prize. However, for our readers in India, who may be encountering your work for the first time, how would you introduce yourself?

JASLEEN KAUR (JK): I now describe myself as an artist, but that wasn't always the case. I didn't come through a formal fine art or contemporary art route. I studied metalwork and jewellery design. I was young when I went straight from secondary school to the Glasgow School of Art, and from there to the Royal College of Art for my Masters in Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery Design. I was supported by the Scottish Government to study for free twice in the early 2000s, which was significant. But, to be honest, many of those decisions were quite naïve—shaped more by having a teacher tell me what to do than by any grand plan.

For a long time, I leaned into design because it felt more egalitarian. As a student, particularly during my Masters, I was thinking a lot about use and use-value, the idea that objects could carry meaning and still be accessible. It felt like the things I was making offered an easier point of entry for people than what I saw in more traditional contemporary art spaces.

So, no, I haven't always called myself an artist. In 2015, though—around the time of the Jerwood Makers Award, a residency at Cove Park, and a commission with Baltic 39—something shifted. I realised I wasn't making the work I truly wanted to make. I also began to see artists—Black and Brown—making work that was unapologetically theirs. That was incredibly important for me.

Now, I describe myself as an artist who works across objects, installation and sound. At the core, it's about making sense of power, histories

[Right]
Jasleen Kaur at her studio in London
Photograph by Akshay Samarth

and intimacies, and constantly working through what it means to make the personal public.

MW: You were born and raised in Glasgow, in a Sikh household—an experience layered with inherited traditions and the cultural dichotomies of growing up in the West. How did this environment shape your understanding of the world, and in what ways do those foundations continue to inform the questions you explore in your practice today?

JK: Massively... in more ways than I probably understood at the time. Growing up in a Sikh household in Glasgow, in the 1980s, meant living within overlapping worlds and not always knowing how to reconcile them.

My mother moved from Ludhiana in the 1960s, when she was seven. My father moved from New Delhi in his early twenties to get married. At home, there were traditions, languages, rhythms, and values that were grounding.

Around the age of 14, I began to engage more consciously with these lineages. At the time, there seemed to be a resurgence in the UK, particularly in London, although I was in Glasgow, where people were trying to preserve and sustain pre-colonial Sikh devotional music, and I found myself drawn to it.

Over the years—and into adulthood—I have maintained a strong and profound relationship with those songs composed in traditional raag, those poems, and the way in which they are sung. For me, the connection lies in the fact that they were performed collectively. They were not solitary expressions, but part of a shared, communal practice—something that took place across Muslim bards and Sikh gurus alike. There was a great deal of beauty in that, but also a certain tension. That entanglement has continued to shape the work. There is a beautiful quote by the musician Asher Gamedze. Speaking from the South African context, he describes tradition as "people grappling with their present." That was a real anchor for me when I was making works for my exhibition, *Alter Altar* (2023), as it allowed for a sense of play, of disidentification, of transition, of something not fixed.

MW: You've spoken about your visits to the gurdwara near your home in Glasgow—a space that, like many Sikh temples around the world, centres community service at its core. What does community mean to you, as a subject, a collaborator, or even as a quiet witness in the making of your work?

JK: How I understood the world was really shaped through a place of worship. It was where I first encountered ideas of justice, land, borders, history, and how history shapes the present. My understanding of these things came through storytelling, through praise, through collective memory held in those devotional practices.

I do not take that for granted. There was a sense of togetherness, and a generative sense of community-building. It raises the question of where one learns their politics. Who is responsible for your political awakening? For me, it came from there—and lived experience. It can come through conflict, through harm, as well as through beauty and care.

MW: When I first encountered *Sociomobile* in *Alter Altar* at Tate Britain in 2021—that striking red car adorned with a crocheted tablecloth—I was moved by how intimately

memory, especially cultural memory, pulses through your work. As someone living within the diaspora, how do you experience nostalgia? What role does it play in shaping the questions you return to in your practice?

JK: It comes back to that set of relationships I work with in my practice, which are both intimate and, at the same time, extend outward. There is something quite telescopic in the way the work moves, from a close, personal set of relations to wider, more structural forces.

I think that is what I am grappling with in the work: the way in which these things are related to one another. Even when I was pursuing a jewellery course, I was always drawn to that kind of cut-and-paste approach—bringing things together that we are often told have no relationship to one another. But, of course, they are connected.

I am not a historian, and neither am I a geographer, but there is something in me that is fascinated by the way narrative, storytelling, and history are managed. That management, and, I suppose, my own involvement in the manufacture of it, is something I am deeply interested in. Somewhere in the work, I think I am trying to create a sense of logic around things that might appear unrelated but are contingent on one another.

MW: How do you navigate the complexities of belonging, to a family tradition, a faith, a nation, and a diasporic identity, all at once? I'm thinking of your sculptural work, *Father's Shoes* (2009). There's a tenderness and quiet strength in how you hold memory through everyday objects. How do you approach this layering of personal history and cultural meaning in your practice?

JK: I think of myself as a mediator, which likely stems from family dynamics, learning to hold together seemingly opposing forces. I find myself doing that often, managing tensions that appear to be in conflict. I am also very conscious of the responsibility that comes with placing narratives back into the public realm—how these elements interact once they are shared. I sit on things for a long time before I commit to making them.

There is something within the work about holding contradiction. The narratives are personal, discreet, and often private, and I have been reflecting on the role of privacy within the act of making work public. That gentle holding may well be part of the process of deciding when something becomes a work, at what point it becomes a public offering.

There is something the Korean-Canadian visual artist Zadie Xa once said that has remained with me: How can you have a dialogue with your heritage without being an ambassador of it? I really relate to that. I am deliberate about the language I use when communicating my work, and about what I choose not to use. In some ways, that is also a means of retaining a sense of autonomy.

MW: Taking from your installation *Women Hold Up Half The Sky* (2019), where you draw on a doctored 1936 archival image of the 2nd Royal Battalion (Ludhiana Sikhs) in Waziristan to explore postcolonial gender roles, do you ever find yourself at odds with how Sikh or South Asian identities are represented or imagined, whether in the UK or back in South Asia?

JK: I do not really have a relationship with the concept of organised religion anymore, nor with ideas of God, though I am not an atheist.

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Not new, otherwise
Build Hollywood, Glasgow
2023
Photograph by Iain Mackay
Commissioned by Build Hollywood

[Above]
Reluctant Gravities
Installation view, Hollybush Gardens
2024
Image courtesy of Jasleen Kaur and Hollybush Gardens, London
Photograph by Eva Herzog
© Jasleen Kaur

[Previous page, following spread, page 97]
Alter Altar
Installation view, Tramway
2023
Image courtesy of Tramway, Glasgow
Photograph by Keith Hunter
© Jasleen Kaur

I think our relationships to these things are always shifting. Lately, I have felt a strong affinity with writers who grew up with parents who were preachers. There is something in those narratives that resonates, what one is exposed to when raised by, or within proximity to, people who follow devotional practices to tend to your spirit. It feels like a toolkit, and I am drawn to that.

I still maintain a close connection to certain practices from the Sikh lineage, but I find myself struggling with how these have been categorised within the framework of Western religious systems. As I get older, I find I cannot relate to that aspect at all. This is likely why I have always been drawn to parts of our histories that have been written out, which feel more plural, less defined, and less categorised. The photographer and writer Ariella Azoulay calls these "potential histories," glimmers of anti-colonial histories, which compounds why it is I am called to these overlooked or overwritten practices.

MW: *Alter Altar* feels deeply personal—visually layered and emotionally resonant. With the inclusion of video clips, family photographs, cassette tapes, plastic flower garlands, and textiles, the installation carries both the texture and memory of lived experience, almost like a semi-autobiographical combination of sound and sculpture. Could you walk us through the making of this piece, and how these fragments came together in both form and feeling?

JK: I think I am reflecting quite a lot on that work, because I am in the process of making new work and realising how much I am working with sensory aspects, or with a sensation in the work that I make, like texture, touch, sound. I was wanting to work in sound and thinking a lot about architecture, and the invitation to take up a space for this temporary time. And I was thinking a lot about the gurdwara next door, architectures of liberation and devotion.

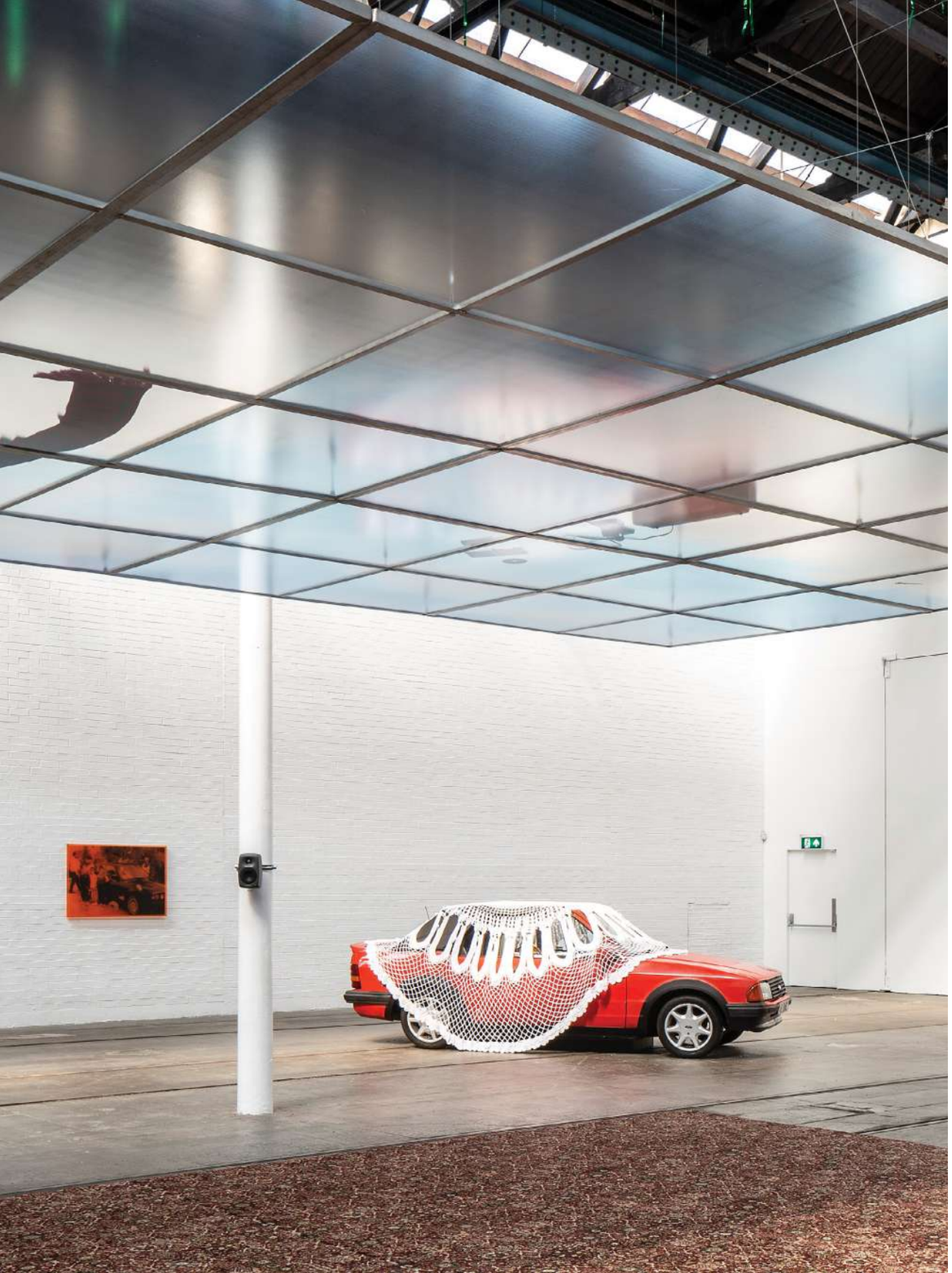
I worked with a voice practitioner named Marged Siôn, whose father was a pastor in a Welsh language chapel. We would meet every couple of weeks, and we'd do an embodied vocal practice, where through the movement of the body via guided exercises, I would produce sound.

All the vocals you hear coming from *Begampura* (2023), the sky, are produced through the movement of the body, and are set to raag scales that I was learning at the time through my Ustaad. I am still thinking about what my voice is for. And at the time there was something significant in mirroring in how sound is resourced from space and cavities in the body, and the space I was hoping to make in the gallery, and what it might resource.

MW: In your Turner Prize acceptance speech, you described your work as political, personal and spiritual. When sharing such intimate stories through your practice, do you find that the personal inevitably becomes political? How do you see those boundaries blurring—between private memory and public meaning, between inner life and collective struggle?

JK: I struggle to understand a separation between them. Lately, I have been thinking a great deal about justice and punishment, and the idea of retribution. I am interested in what it means to sit with complexity, something that resonates with the thinking of those engaged in abolitionist work, where there is no straightforward binary of good and bad, or justice and punishment. There is space to imagine other possibilities.

CAN'T DO IT.



I think that holding complexity feels aligned with people who write, speak, or practise within abolitionist frameworks, where the refusal of binaries opens up other ways of understanding. But it is also an extremely complex and difficult conversation to have.

MW: The Turner Prize is significant not only for your practice, but for the broader representation of the South Asian diaspora artist. How has this recognition shifted things for you?

JK: I did not expect to be nominated. I did not know any of the judges, and I am still not entirely sure how that process works. I didn't think it was my time. But it is, of course, nice to be validated.

I am using that feeling to focus. When *Alter Altar* was still on display at Tate Britain, I went back one morning when the gallery was empty and made some notes for myself. My favourite artists feel like conjurers, and I wanted to understand the way in which a work goes beyond the material, beyond the physical object. There is something intangible. It is almost like magic. I felt emotional in that space, I've cried several times there. My head is down at the moment. I am working hard at staying close to whatever that process is, the one that allows you to make work again. Because, honestly, it is quite an intimidating thing. I am not sure I know how to make work like that again.

MW: How has this moment landed with you—both personally and politically?

JK: I do not take that for granted. Even with my students at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London—many of whom are negotiating the university space and finding it a struggle—I see within that difficulty a real desire to honour what it means to be an artist. There is also a need to defend the thinking and moving like an artist, which does not necessarily involve having a studio or producing large sculptures. It is about moving through the world with a particular set of intentions, of holding on to imagination.

MW: Your work weaves together the domestic and the sacred, the ordinary and the political. In many ways, it feels like a quiet form of resistance, particularly resonant when considered within the layered histories and lived realities of diasporic communities. What is it that draws you to these tensions, and how do they continue to shape your visual language?

JK: The way I feel about those kinds of intimacies being interwoven with wider thought experiments is about setting them in relation to broader histories or forces. They are contingent on one another, they have shaped one another. The intimate is always marred by larger forces.

Questions of justice are always surfacing in the things I address. I was reading this book, *The Parameters of Our Cage* (2020), a series of letters between two artists, C. Fausto Cabrera and Alec Soth. One is incarcerated, and one is not. During the pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, there is a moment where they are calling out for justice. Fausto, who is incarcerated, says something like: People cry out for justice as though we even have a grasp on what that means. What they mean is prison, because that is what we have been trained to believe accountability looks like.

UNSTICK

YOURSELF

When I speak about the work in *Alter Altar*, there have been questions around autobiography, or nostalgia. But I do not really have a relationship with nostalgia, nor a desire to even lean into autobiography. It is more about how I understand those intimacies being interwoven in these wider thought experiments, in a way of setting them in relation to these wider histories or forces, often about harm and justice.

MW: There is a growing presence of second- and third-generation South Asian diaspora in the UK, and many are calling this a moment for South Asia in the arts. You've become a vital voice for many young South Asian women navigating this landscape.

JK: I would say, keep being mischievous. Keep pulling out things that are weren't expected of you, and at times, forget the canon. I would honestly find it quite disheartening if young people were looking to me as a fixed model.

There is something important in not becoming stuck, particularly around the way people are boxed in. Identity can be sticky, and showing up in the world as someone who is quickly labelled carries its own weight. So, I would say: unstick yourself. Be in community—find or build a support network, even if it is only three friends. That sense of solidarity can make all the difference.

MW: At a time when much of the world seems to be turning away from unfolding global crises, and where silence, both imposed and self-censored, has become a form of complicity—your words [*I want to echo the calls of the protesters outside. A protest made up of artists, culture workers, Tate staff, students who I stand firmly with. They've gathered to make visible the demands of the open letter signed by, when I last checked, 1,310 signatories in just a week, calling for you, Tate, to sever ties with organisations complicit in what the UN and ICJ are finally getting closer to saying is a genocide of the Palestinian people...*] at the Turner Prize ceremony stood out as a clear and deliberate political act. In moments like these, what sense of responsibility, if any, do you feel as an artist working today?

JK: That entire Turner Prize moment became, for me, a moment to mobilise. I don't think it is brave or that words are enough.

I often think about what it means to theorise within a gallery space, which is delegitimised the moment it exists outside that context, in real time, in the world. So, yes, I suppose what I am really thinking about is the need for more practice, more action. Less theory, less allegory. We are living through a time that demands tangible doing, not simply more talking. [•]

[Right, above]
JASLEEN KAUR
Untitled
Resin, roti, photo on archive paper
42 cms × 59.4 cms × 5 cms
2023
Image courtesy of Jasleen Kaur and Hollybush Gardens, London
Photograph by Eva Herzog
© Jasleen Kaur

[Right, below]
JASLEEN KAUR
Untitled
Resin, roti, photo on archive paper
80 cms × 120 cms × 5 cms
2023
Image courtesy of Jasleen Kaur and Hollybush Gardens, London
Photograph by Eva Herzog
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