

An Interview with the Singh Twins

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I WAS INITIALLY INTRODUCED AND drawn to the art of Rabindra and Amrit Kaur Singh (otherwise known as the "Singh Twins") when I saw their piece titled Nineteen Eighty-Four (after the fateful year for the Sikh community worldwide, not Orwell's famous and for Sikhs, hauntingly prophetic book). Since then, I've tended to follow any news I've heard of their artwork, and most certainly any news of them coming to Toronto.

In September I heard that the Twins would be in Toronto for the Spinning Wheel Film Festival (SWFF). SWFF is a celebration of films made for, by or about Sikhs. It's known for its support of art in its many forms in relation to Sikhism and has even held art competitions and exhibitions, as well as musical seminars. The Singh Twins had created an animation based on one of their paintings, *Liverpool 800: The Changing Face of Liverpool*. The painting was commissioned by Liverpool to celebrate its 800th anniversary. I thought it would be a great opportunity for me to get to know them a little better and learn about the inspirations behind their artwork.

The Singh Twins graciously agreed to meet with me after the screening of their film. It was a beautiful day, and unseasonably warm. While I was content in asking them questions at the theatre itself, they had other ideas. About fifteen minutes later, I found myself in the iconic Greg's Ice Cream, an institution that is well known and much loved by students who attend the University of Toronto, nearby. A whole group of friends and acquaintances made the trek from Bader Theatre to Greg's, and we all managed to beat a huge crowd that came only seconds later. As always Greg's flavours were the topic of much amusement (What to choose? Sweet Cream, Grape-Nut, Roasted Marshmallow?). Finally ice cream in hand, the conversation turned towards the Twins' artistic beginnings.

Interestingly enough, while always artistically inclined and sharing a love of painting and drawing while very young, The Singh Twins never had any intention of looking for degrees in Visual Arts in the university. Instead, they both attended Liverpool University to read for a Combined Studies Degree which required students to pick three subjects to study. They chose Comparative Religion, and Ecclesiastical History for the first two. Then, as luck would have it, 20th Century Art History became the third - simply because it happened to be the only other subject offered by the University's syllabus that didn't clash with the timetable for the other two. Resigned to this situation, the twins looked forward to the study of Art History with some excitement and much enthusiasm. But this course didn't bring the fairy tale experience that one might think. Quite the contrary. Despite learning much and expanding their artistic capabilities their experiences in the art course turned out to become the very reason why both artists have yet to receive their degrees!

While studying the contemporaries the The Singh Twins were drawn to the Indian Miniature Tradition of painting as a source of inspiration for developing their own style of work. But when they tried to express their interests they were essentially told by their tutors

that Indian art had been written off. It was apparently “outdated” and it seemed as if the tutors didn’t like the “Indian-ness” of the paintings. Consequently, the Twins were pressured to focus on particular role models and movements from western art that, although interesting enough, neither soon-to-be artist found particularly inspiring. To make matters worse, certain periods within Western Art History that the twins had always taken a great interest in since childhood - like, the medieval Renaissance and the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite and Art Nouveau movements - were not taken seriously, or, seen worthy of study by their tutors who told them that their chosen areas of interest “weren’t going anywhere.”

Finding blockades wherever they turned the Twins finally realized that something was inherently wrong with the way the course was being taught, and decided that they were not going to compromise their art especially since it seemed that the instructor couldn’t decide what to teach.

“They were telling us to express ourselves in one breath and then telling us not to [by criticizing our chosen style] in the next,” remarked Rabindra.

“It was clear they didn’t like Indian art, and they wanted to ignore the fact that so many people [famous Western artists] got their influence from other ethnic traditions,” added Amrit. “They just kept on trying to force the idea that European art was superior to non-European art.”

Criticized not only for their artistic expression the Twins were further told that it was wrong to both be interested in the same area art. First an attack on their culture and now on their similar interests – with such contradictions and outright discrimination, what choices were left? They could either compromise the integrity of their artwork, or they could challenge the notions of “correct art” that were being forced on them. They chose the latter.

“...we really started to challenge them, and started to emphasize [in our own work] the Indian-ness of the miniature paintings, like contrasting colours and flattened perspective, etc. But we depicted western scenes to show that although we have eastern influences, we live in the west.”

In keeping with their challenge to the tutors, for the final dissertation of the art course the sisters focused on how European art has non-European influences. Amrit focused her paper on the teacher and student – Gustav Moreau and Henri Matisse, while Rabindra picked out and focused on ten different western Masters. While Amrit highlighted the non-European influences displayed by the work of Moreau and Matisse, Rabindra did the same with her broader selection of artists.

When the papers were submitted to the university for grading both Rabindra and Amrit were told that they were “super human” and “PhD standard” - displaying “a level of scholarship far beyond what was expected at BA (Hons) level”. In short, the examiner refused to accept that the Twins had written their respective dissertations themselves. He accused them of plagiarism and collusion and refused to award a mark to their work! Consequently, the Twins’ overall degree awards were severely downgraded from a ‘1st Class’ (highest possible grade) to a ‘3rd Class’ (just scraping a ‘Pass’). But, far from being discouraged, the Twins took up the issue with the university with the support of their family. While they battled for their appropriate marks, they registered for their respective PhDs at Manchester University. Having not received their official undergraduate degrees, they were only able to do this because their supervising Professor personally vouched for them both. During their time at Manchester they received a scholarship to study Sikh Art and soon

found themselves in India where Rabindra took to focusing on miniature paintings within early 'Janam Sakhi' manuscripts, while Amrit focused closely on the more mass produced, printed imagery from the later period. Researching Sikh artistic culture wasn't easy as Rabindra noted that they often had to face the mentality captured in the old joke "What is Sikh culture? Agriculture!"

Upon returning to the UK, the Twins were informed that their supervisor had left Manchester for a position at another university. Whilst waiting for the university to find them another supervisor the Twins decided that they might as well use the time to start trying to promote their artwork. They produced post cards of their paintings and used them to canvas museums and galleries. Although, some of the most established London galleries rejected their work, considering it "not mainstream enough" to fit in with their definition of Contemporary British art - (one gallery advised the Twins to "try the ethnic gallery down the road!") - others did come back with offers for exhibitions and thus began their career as artists. One year later, as things on the art front were really starting to snowball for The Singh Twins, Manchester University informed them that a new supervisor had finally been found. However, it also informed them that, since this supervisor did not have a PhD qualification, they would have to downgrade to an M.Phil, rather than complete the PhD, they had registered for. Having spent three years gathering so much research, The Singh Twins found it impossible to relegate it all to just an M.Phil but when they tried to argue their case with the University, the latter suggested "if you want to do a PhD you can always go and do it at Liverpool University!" - knowing full well the Twins' past history with them. As matter of principle, the Twins decided that they would rather not have a degree at all than be forced to pursue an MPhil.

It was a little after this time that they met an eminent scholar in Sikh Studies - a Professor and author of many books in the field, who mentioned to them that he wasn't surprised by the constant barriers that the academic community was erecting in front of the Twins. According to him, the Government of India had sent a directive (after attacking the Golden Temple in 1984 as a part of Operation Bluestar) to the British government telling them to put a clamp down on Sikh studies throughout the U.K.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

Nineteen Eighty-Four

Having learned of their remarkable journey into the world of art, I turned the conversation to their painting titled "Nineteen Eighty-Four." 1984 was a year that Sikhs will not likely ever forget. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India had the Indian army storm the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs called the Harimandir Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple. While using the excuse of eradicating terrorists, she openly said that she would punish the Sikhs for opposing her declaration of "State of Emergency." The storming of the Gurdwara even took place on a day well known to have an extremely high number of innocent civilian worshippers visiting the Temple. There was also a media blackout, after which only such information was given to the media as the Indian army deemed fit. The resulting massacre and destruction has been burned in to the Sikh psyche – likely Ms. Gandhi's goal. But while Sikhs everywhere were feeling victimized, they were being painted by the media and Indian government as terrorists.

I came to learn that it was for this very reason that Amrit had originally painted a small painting in which she presented a birds eye's view of the fateful storming, and ensuing death and destruction. She wanted to show friends that what was happening to the Sikh

community was so much more than what the media would have one believe. While the Twins were initially proud of Indira Gandhi as a strong female role model, after the 1984 storming they found themselves severely disappointed. "She had become just like every other politician in our eyes," said Rabindra. While clearly an emotional event, it did not affect the Twins' view of India as a beautiful and amazing country. It was clearly necessary to separate the country itself from its politicians and politics.

In 1999 for the 300th anniversary of the establishment of the Khalsa, an essential part of the Sikh faith, the Twins created a larger more detailed version of the original "Nineteen Eighty-Four" painting. In it they added historical references and linked the sacrifices that the Sikhs made in history for human rights and India itself, putting it all into a context aimed at explaining why Sikhs felt so aggrieved with what happened.

Click on <http://singhtwins.co.uk/1984.html> to read more about 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'

Liverpool

Fast forwarding a few years and we come to 'The Making of Liverpool' animation, the reason why the Twins are in Toronto. In 2005 the Twins were commissioned to do two paintings by their home city of Liverpool - one (titled 'Liverpool 800: The Changing Face of Liverpool') to celebrate the City's 800th birthday and the other (titled 'Arts Matters: The Pool of Life') to celebrate its status as 'European Capital of Culture' in 2008. 'Liverpool 800', which depicts Liverpool's 800 year history and achievements, was officially unveiled by Prince Charles in April 2007 and is now permanently installed on public display in one of the City's most famous buildings, St George's Hall. Responding to public requests to know more about this work and the story it told the Twins decided to use the medium of animation film to bring the painting to life. They applied for funding from the Arts Council England. Upon receiving the funding they worked closely with a Liverpool-based company called Sparkle Media (who had already animated small parts of the painting for use in the official 'Capital of Culture' opening ceremony) to make their vision into an animated reality. I can personally say the end result, 'The Making of Liverpool' was extremely entertaining, informative and artistically inspiring.

Click on http://singhtwins.co.uk/liverpool_800.html to read more about 'Liverpool 800: The Changing Face of Liverpool' and 'Arts Matters: The Pool of Life' paintings

Click on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7570540.stm> to see a BBC news broadcast about 'The Making of Liverpool' animation.

Advice?

It's clear that Rabindra and Amrit faced many obstacles which they clearly worked hard to overcome. Their adversity, determination, and unwillingness to yield to pressure that would have them corrupt their artistic expression is nothing if not admirable. What advice then could they offer young Sikhs or anyone else aspiring to become artists? A career path that is often considered unprofitable or unrespectable, especially in the Indian community, art is not an easy profession to pursue.

Luckily for the Singh Twins their family was very supportive throughout their many ordeals, and especially in terms of their career choices. They also received much support from their community because of the content of their art. If anything the hardships they faced were in terms of having galleries show their art, especially since its unique style didn't allow it to fit the mould. In this light both artists say that in order to succeed, it is important for one to think of art as a business, to be focused, disciplined and proactive in constantly

looking for ways of diversifying and promoting ones work without being too bothered by the rejections. At the same time it's important to honour the integrity of ones own artistic expression and not change just to fit in.

“Just be true to yourself and if you really believe in what you're doing you have to disregard the criticism and rejection,” advised Amrit. “At the end of the day, that's what produces art which lasts, which speaks to people and has meaning. And that kind of art comes from the artist's soul, rather than being driven purely by commercial reward or bending to the dictates of others.”

“Don't worry too much about the “no's,” added Rabindra, “because in the end its going to be that one “yes” that'll get your foot in the door.”

Authors Note: The only way to understand the determination and tenacity that The Singh Twins employed throughout their lives is by putting it all into perspective. These two individuals were presented with numerous barriers set up, first, by the ingrained prejudice of the institutions they studied at and, later, by none other than the formidable machinery of the Indian government – and they overcame every single one.

When you can take the government of India, you know you're good.

Click on <http://singhtwins.co.uk/GALLERY.html> to see more of the Singh Twins' work on their website Gallery

General link to The Singh Twins website = <http://singhtwins.co.uk/WELCOME.html>

