

WINTER 2024

Surrey Art Gallery



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ENGAGING
CONTEMPORARY
ART



Baljit Singh, *Coming Home*, 2022, digital photograph. In collaboration with NorBlack NorWhite.

From the moment of birth, hair takes on multi-faceted meanings. Rooted within storytelling by families and communities, the politics of hair have been both intimately personal and profoundly social. Hair carries diverse cultural narratives that are usually shared through identity and gender. For example, the beauty one sees in loosely coiled curls or a tight braid are both evocative and subjective, not only in the presentation but how hair is communicated to the world.

un/tangling, un/covering, un/doing shares stories embedded in the rituals attached to hair, such as acts of resistance and sacred reverence. Artists from across Canada—including Audie Murray, Becky Bair, Wally Dion, Clare Yow, Sharon Norwood, Sarindar Dhaliwal, Karin Jones, Baljit Singh, Kiranjot Kaur, and Natasha Kianipour—offer reflections on how hair embodies the importance of culture. They celebrate and reveal their responses to an individual's association with hair and its many manifestations.

Deeply meaningful relationships with hair involve intergenerational acts of oiling, braiding, covering/uncovering, and grooming that assist with giving meaning to traditions. Just as much as there are underlying tensions within the cultural histories inherent to these practices, so too do they influence ongoing



Rebecca Bair, *Untitled (Shadows)*, 2022, face mounted digital print.

forms of struggle. For instance, cutting a strand of hair became an act of resistance, igniting an international women's movement in Iran to confront histories of oppression. The accoutrements of hair such as hijabs and turbans have been politically charged with public bans in some countries. This has forced people to confront a loss of deeply held beliefs, requiring them to assimilate to that society. In this exhibition, artists employ compelling storytelling that express connections intertwined with familial teachings and their own informed experiences.

In **un/tangling, un/covering, un/doing**, artists share their perspectives on hair and its relationship to identity and society. Re-defining beauty standards allows a navigation of the past and present to cultivate reimagined relationships to hair.

Black Arts Centre is the community partner for this exhibition and will feature a reading nook for all ages titled **New Growths**.

This winter, exhibiting artist Clare Yow is presenting a new work from a series titled *The sun will always set* that will be presented in the group exhibition *un/tangling, un/covering, un/doing*. Assistant Curator Suvi Bains chats with Yow about this series and the deep history it carries.

Saffron coloured sons is a new artwork, can you share the significance of the title?

The title comes from an 1886 issue of **Vancouver News** where the Chinese population was referred to as “saffron coloured sons of the East.” White pioneers claiming to be the “native sons of BC” fought against the inclusion of “Asiatic races,” including Chinese, Japanese, and Indian peoples, into economic and social life. There was such fear of the “yellow peril,” the racist and colonial ideology that these races threaten Western civilization. I was struck by this phrase—the colour of saffron paralleling the perceived peril. Referencing it is my way of reclaiming what was used against the Chinese community nearly 140 years ago.

What inspired you to create this project and why is it important to you?

The Chinese Immigration Act went into effect on July 1, 1923, and it pretty much put an end to the settlement of any new Chinese immigrants in Canada, until its repeal in 1947. With the observance of the 100th anniversary of the Act in 2023, I needed to create new artworks in response, especially as a first-generation Chinese-Canadian immigrant and settler. My project is directly about the Chinese community’s experiences during this era of legislated exclusion and hostility, but it also connects the dots with today’s rising tides of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and lateral violence within our families and communities. I feel strongly against those in historically oppressed communities who now wield power in oppressing others.



Clare Yow, *Twinned*, 2023, LightJet print.



Clare Yow, *Saffron coloured sons* (detail), 2023, LightJet print.

Queue is a type of traditional hairstyle in China. Can you expand on the history of this particular braiding practice?

Historically, the queue is a contentious symbol for Chinese men. The queue hairstyle is where the front portion of one’s head was shaved while hair on top of the scalp was grown long and braided. From the 17th century onwards, Han Chinese and other men under the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty had to give up their traditional hairstyles and wear the queue. There was great resistance to the queue, seen as an imperial symbol.

For Chinese labourers who came to the West from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the queue ostracized them. Along with cultural dress and customs, these traits upheld the stereotype of Chinese migrants as mysterious and undesirable in a colonial nation-state determined to remain British and Anglo-Saxon. Until the Qing Dynasty’s fall in 1911–1912, labourers wore the queue out of loyalty to their homeland; retaining it also ensured they would be allowed to return to China. The queue was phased out after Manchu rule.