

STIDHU

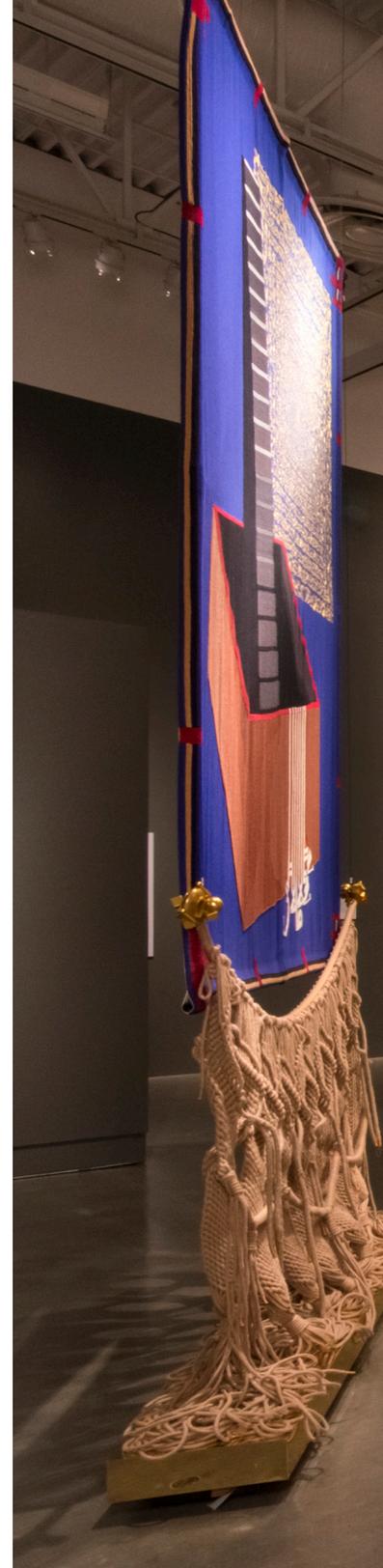
SHADOWS
IN THE MAJOR
SEVENTH

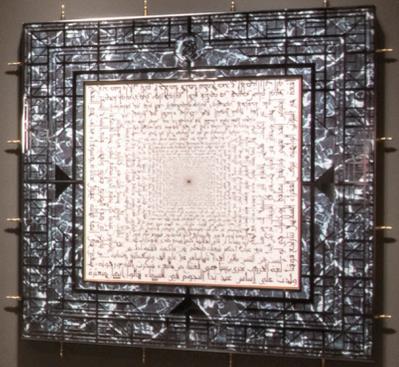
NEP



SURREY ART GALLERY

Nep Sidhu, *Malcolm's Smile*, 2015
Wool, cotton, aluminum. Commissioned by the Frye Art Museum, Seattle,
and funded by the Frye Foundation, Douglas Smith. Courtesy of the artist





NEP SIDHU

SHADOWS
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CONTENTS

OFF THE BIAS:

NEP SIDHU'S AUDIO TEXTILE ART

Jordan Strom ————— 11

NEP SIDHU'S ARTISTIC EQUILIBRIUM

Negarra A. Kudumu ————— 21

NOTES ON *PARADISE SPORTIF*:

A CONVERSATION WITH NEP SIDHU

Manjot Bains ————— 33

WRITERS ————— 70

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ————— 72

Nep Sidhu, *Collection of Paradise Sportif*, 2013 – 2016
Various materials. Courtesy of the artist







OFF THE BIAS:
NEP SIDHU'S
AUDIO TEXTILE ART

JORDAN STROM

Nep Sidhu with Nicholas Galanin, *SHE in Shadow Form & SHE in Light Form*,
from *No Pigs in Paradise*, 2015 - 2016. Raw silk, brass, gold zari stitch,
jute and cotton rope / melton wool, jute, silver zari, chenille, cotton
Courtesy of the artists

The major seventh is considered one of the most dissonant intervals in music. It was not commonly found in Western classical music prior to the 20th century. Yet the major seventh chord is very common to Jazz music, and thus, has been an important part of African American culture of the past century. Within an expansive matrix of other sources, it has been African-American music, particularly Jazz, along with R&B, Soul and Hip-hop, that has inspired the creative practice of the Toronto-based artist Nep Sidhu. The title of the exhibition is a nod to these towering traditions that the artist works within; particularly the avant-garde and experimental trajectories — the shadows — of these sonic forms.

In addition to these musical expressions, for Sidhu, it is clothing and the textiles of domestic environments, such as carpets and tapestries, that embody histories and values of connectedness, empowerment, and cultural exchange. The artist's formal language embraces forms of adornment beyond the fleeting cycles of fashion and the everyday functions of the modern uniform. For Sidhu, it is the role of contemporary art to attempt to mobilize instances of connection to ameliorate the damage caused by colonial histories and the general sense of loss and drift within contemporary consumer culture. His textile-rich practice appeals for the need to re-align with the restorative power of ritual and performance, and related material cultures of ornament and dress outside of Western traditions and forms. In the centrality given to fab-

ric and garment design, Sidhu's work recalls other artists such as Andrea Zittel, Kimsooja, Lucy Orta and Yinka Shonibare, who use garments as both sculptural form, in some cases as architectural form, and as utopian prototypes for a better world.¹

The exhibition *Shadows in the Major Seventh* brings together a selection of Sidhu's recent solo and collaborative works that bridge the fibre arts with painting, sculpture, music and film. As a member of the *arts* collective Black Constellation, with members based across North America, and a regular design contributor to the Seattle-based musical performance duo Shabazz Palaces, Sidhu's practice is both interdisciplinary and frequently collaborative. Works in this exhibition have been realized in close partnership with Nicholas Galanin, Ishmael Butler, and Maikooyo Alley-Barnes.

The salience of Sidhu's creative activities and collaborations are in their reworking of the boundaries between art and design, language and architecture, and the personal and the social. For Sidhu, art is ultimately about storytelling and investing in the people and histories that have previously formed and continue to surround us. Yet, these are also works that exceed narrative containment. They excite multi-sensory responses that challenge easy categories of cultural practice and aesthetic experience.

The earliest work in the exhibition, *Affirmation as it was told by she* (2014), is both portrait and landscape. Combining woven and embroidered textile and paint, the image represents, on the one hand, Sidhu's mother after her "passing from this world and in her next natural cycle" as he puts it. At the same time, the process of making the work was a "way to find where she had gone."

The dress form of this figure follows the geometry and structure of a traditional Mughal garden, functioning as an adornment that reflects the artist's mother's lifelong devotion to nature. The protection of this garden is given life by the Tuareg symbol of Bagzan, Burkina Faso, which represents the folklore of Tagurmat, a herbal medicine woman who channeled gifts of divination and healing.

Sidhu's composition, as is so frequently the case with his work, incorporates a multitude of divergent techniques and styles. Certain areas of the image are created using the French technique of colour blocking. In this case the artist uses velvet. The embroidered jute spiral shape at the bottom of the image is inspired by a West African Adinkra symbol that represents renewal and vitality.

Affirmation as it was told by she was the first in the artist's set of works that addressed the subjects of natural order, the protective qualities of adornment, the divine feminine, and the search for truth in geometry. This particular artwork is indica-

tive of Sidhu's process-based approach and deep engagement with his close relations — especially family — through his practice.

The ongoing series *Paradise Sportif* (2013 – present) function as both vestments and adornments, but they are simultaneously sculptural forms. The fine crafted garments include a wide variety of materials, techniques and clothing types. There are cotton and cured leatherette kurta pajamas with abstract shapes evocative of modernist painting, an emerald green satin jacket with vintage sari paneling, a basketball jersey with gold rope collaring and Ghanaian Kente cloth weaving, and a Rajasthani abhala bharat mirror-work embroidered motorcycle vest, among other designs. The combination of technical fabrics and organic materials, garment cuts and clothing types points towards the space that exists between ceremony and sport. For Sidhu, these pieces operate beyond mere fashion; they are intended for the "protection and enhancement of modern life."

Inspired by — and intended as — "ceremonial work wear" for Shabazz Palaces and the Black Constellation collective, these garments are less about costuming and more about the intrinsic and ceremonial aspects of incantation. Interpreting the form of the human body, Sidhu's designs encompass, what he describes as a "study of proportion within a wide range of textures — divining a juxtaposition of the coarse (natural) and the precise (engineered)."

Silhouettes are drawn from art and architecture, through a dialogue of embellishment and decoration toward purity of form. For Sidhu, purity of form is not measured by the reduction of embellishment, but through an accumulation of decorative elements that are also intrinsic to the form. References to Islam are evident in a number of these vestments. The Red basketball style jersey depicts the Arabic word for “free” on its front, a reference to Ishmael Butler’s song, “Free Press and Curl.”

Even within forms that are largely two-dimensional and wall-based, Sidhu’s work is frequently infused with sculptural qualities and strongly assertive of depth rather than flatness. In *Confirmation* (2013 – 2014), the artist has made a series of three images that while at first glance may be read as paintings, are in actuality examining the possibilities of what the artist refers to as a “third space” between the practice of writing and the practice of architecture. The cycle of paintings transitions from the linguistic (*Confirmation A*), to the architectural (*Confirmation B*), to the emotive (*Confirmation C*).

In the development of the script components of *Confirmation*, Sidhu spent many months learning how to write Arabic calligraphy (an early form known as kufic) from an imam that he had met in Toronto. By gradually diminishing the size of the script, and freeing it from a fixed horizontal axis into a square spiral, the artist creates a plunging

perspective that symbolizes transcendent (beyond the ordinary or common) experience. For the artist, the discipline and breathing control required while writing kufic is an important part of attaining self-knowledge. The script in each painting is framed by a flat die-cut chromed steel latticework surface that evokes an Islamic architectural screen. In each image/object the geometries of the text both compliment and contrast with the hard edge of the steel surface. The protective spirit of the text is echoed by the defensive rhythm of machine spikes that line each image’s perimeter.

In *Confirmation A*, the square calligraphic ink on paper composition translates a poem by Black Constellation member Ishmael Butler, describing his birth into this world with an understanding that was in place long before assuming physical form. Sidhu summarizes aspects of the letter: *During one’s time here on earth, the dance of ego, expectation and ethics continue to crash incandescent new black waves of purple and gold against a lone stone, creating a rhythm-like mantra that allows the listener to walk away with a new set of confirmed questions.* This text is based, in part, on the first time the artist met Butler and realized their “shared function” as creators and the beginning of their shared collaborative work.

The words written in the central panel of *Confirmation B* are based on a letter written by the artist to his mother after her passing a number of years

before. The letter expresses his hope in finding her in her next cycle, and to fulfill a promise made to her that the continuation of his art practice would allow her the possibility of an “eternal presence.” Words written in colours other than black are based on statements that were last spoken to the artist by his mother.

The text in *Confirmation C* (2013 – present) is based on an excerpt from Maikoiyo Alley-Barnes’ short story *Curse Words* (2007). This story tells a tale of a young man who finds himself in an apocalyptic present, in a place that has been cursed by a spell cast by the chief of the regions’ first peoples. The name Seattle was given to this place. The language and script that Sidhu uses becomes increasingly more abstract as the text diminishes in size and shape. The technique of the script is driven by the emotional response to the narrative of environmental decline and detachment from nature. For the artist, the “confirmation” of the title is an affirmation that this possibility of a third space does in fact exist, as the process of making the work had showed him.

As with the *Confirmation* series, Sidhu’s *Malcolm’s Smile* (2015) is intended to present a third space between architecture and the written word. In this case the three dominant suspended carpets and their pedestals form a triangular room-like space. Each prayer rug-like form is emblematic of the personal transformation embodied in the work and

person of Malcolm X. These hand-embroidered tapestries are imaginary monuments to what the American civil rights activist stood for — including solidarity between people of colour and social justice for indigenous peoples. Each carpet depicts architectonic forms that relate to this modern history, along with ancient forms. The quasi-figurative forms made of macramé *that cascade down to metal pedestals signify the feminine. They act, according to Sidhu, like guardian angels. Collectively these suspended forms create a protective space that celebrates the natural order.*

As had been the case with Sidhu’s earlier work (for example, *Bicentennial Blues*, 2014) the compositions in these carpets have some of the formal and retinal geometry and color patterns of the Nagaland textile traditions of Northeast India. *Malcolm’s Smile* is presented along with the 24 minute and 51 second audio loop *Ecdysis*, 2015, by Ishmael Butler. “With Malcolm X in mind,” Ishmael Butler states, “these Telepathic conversations usurp the prevalence of white noise. Landing on feelings and tones vestigial and advancing an artnernative to the hegemony of the individual and its device.”²

Sidhu’s calligraphy continues to take on new forms and space. His two latest works *Divine of Form (A Song for Rana) 7a* and *Divine of Form (A Song for Rana) 7b* reference the Gurdwara Sach-Khand (Realm of Truth), located in Hazur Sahib within the state of Maharashtra, India. Inside the temple lies

a room (Angitha Sahib) dedicated to Guru Gobind Singh's final resting place.³ Within this space, kirpans are laid down in protection and honor of the 10th Guru by visiting Sikhs. Sidhu's composition develops a similar visual rhythm of sword-like shapes in honor of Rana Sidhu, the artist's brother, who passed away in February of 2016. Each panel has a selected excerpt from the Guru Granth Sahib, written by Baba Farid. The shape of the script begins to take on sword-like qualities in Sidhu's handling of the embroidery. Farid's words capture Rana's surrounding and those around him, both in the past physical form along with the present spirit world. The centre monochromatic tan and black panels represent both a portal and meeting place between the physical and spirit world.

The installation *No Pigs in Paradise* (2015 – 2016) was the result of an intensive visual conversation between Sidhu and Tlingit Unanga'x artist Nicholas Galanin. The work was created as a response to missing and murdered women in Alaska, Canada and India. *No Pigs in Paradise*, as Negarra A. Kudumu has written, "speaks to an understanding of women as essential to the restoration of First Nations' and Sikh societies. The Divine Feminine is reaffirmed as the integral component to the re-establishment of balance and harmony. The path exists and the end goal is clear. The right path in this instance starts with protecting, leveraging ornament, textile, ceremony, incantation, so that they can be prepared to lead their families, com-

munities and societies to an exalted, harmonious and prosperous status quo."⁴ The "pigs" of the artwork's title refer to the individuals who exert violence against women. As Sidhu describes it, paradise is here and now, accessed through a deep connection with the past and a reformulation of modern ritual and protection.

Noting that most missing persons reports for First Nations women and girls usually include a description of a winter jacket that one could have been "last seen wearing," the lower portion of the gown *SHE in Mud Form* has been constructed out of puffer winter jackets. The upper portion of the torso is given shape by a Chilkat blanket-inspired form. Chilkat blankets could be more accurately described as robes, as they are frequently worn in ceremonies and dances by the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Within Tlingit tradition, scripture coming from the mouths of spirits is a representation of knowledge transfer. In this case, the opportunity for this transfer and balance is intended to be gifted to one who would wear such a garment. The mask reveals a similar temple tipi motif to the one located in *SHE in Light Form*.

SHE in Shadow Form combines raw silk, jute and cotton rope, and elaborate geometric shapes and text in gold zari stitchwork. Sidhu's family run the Sher-E-Punjab Boxing Academy in Chakar, Punjab, as a means of increasing the morale of women

dealing with socioeconomic challenges that has been ushered into Punjab by way of drug abuse, failing school systems, and corrupt policing, along with other issues. In the tradition of boxing, robbing plays a large part in the representation of pride, spirit and the psyche. For Sidhu, it was important to represent these codes by capturing the pride, power and history of the girls with this garment. The text panels reference the text of Sidhu's *Confirmation B* (2013 – 14), which discusses his mother and the divine feminine. The cuffs and mask are carved by Galanin. The former is based on a Tlingit warrior mask traditionally made of wood; Galanin describes its imagery as a "visual flow." The charms located on the head of the figure reference adornments worn on veils by women in North Africa.

SHE in Sky Form rises phoenix-like from the gallery floor. The materiality of rope allows for both constraint and freedom to be physically shaped into a being that has become divine in form. A reference to the history of colonial violence, the hand-engraved bullet casings have been transformed into a veil or visor of protection and power. The flowing piles of jute rope are a reference to strong weaving traditions of the Pacific Northwest Coast. The figure rises in strength out of violence, symbolized by the dyed robe at the foot of the figure.

Sidhu speaks of *No Pigs in Paradise* as a "communion bridged" between First Nations and Sikhs. *SHE in Light Form* allows a "middle passage to take place between shamanistic protective symbols and veiling, to form a shared understanding and union between both communities." The totemic panel descending down the front of the figure combines abstracted images of a temple and a tipi (teepee) and references Tinaa to Chilkat weavers. At the top of the back of the gown is a motif combining a Northwest Coast copper crest, which symbolizes wealth through gifting, and a design based on a traditional Sikh Khanda. The burqa-like hood turns the colonial discourse of the veil (linked in the Western imagination to degradation and oppression of women) on its head, reclaiming the power of the face covering.⁵

Presented adjacent to *No Pigs in Paradise* is another work that bridges the worlds of contemporary Punjab with contemporary North America (Turtle Island). The two-channel video loop *Indian Land* (2016) is, as the artist has described it, "a love letter to a land that has given us our codes and understanding towards ourselves and the relationship to the supernatural." A slow moving panning shot of an agricultural landscape in the Punjab is presented on the top half of the screen, while on the screen's lower half a Sitka Alaska landscape slides past in the opposite direction. With time the two landscapes switch positions: Sitka vista rests aloft the North Indian fields. The quiet shimmering beauty of these merged landscapes, along with the surging

explosiveness of the *No Pigs in Paradise* forms, are summoned together with the raucous drum sounds and vexed chanting of Roberto De Simone's *Secondo Coro Delle Lavandaie* (originally 1976) remixed by Ishmael Butler for this particular installation.

As a collectivity, Nep Sidhu's wide-ranging art-works presents a powerful response to the ongoing injustices and biases at play in the world — with particular emphasis on discrimination and continued cultures of violence toward peoples of colour, indigenous cultures in North America, and women based in the Indian subcontinent. In order to remedy the ongoing cultures of racism, sexism and generalized disconnectedness, the artwork in this exhibition suggests that we need to invest in deeper, more meaningful relationships between peoples, and find new ways to respect and learn from global indigenous traditions. Sidhu's work asserts the power of nature, the body and ritual in providing protective and healing pathways forward. His is an art practice that cuts an oblique or diagonal line, and in doing so, sets a course for new relationships between the ancient and the here and now.

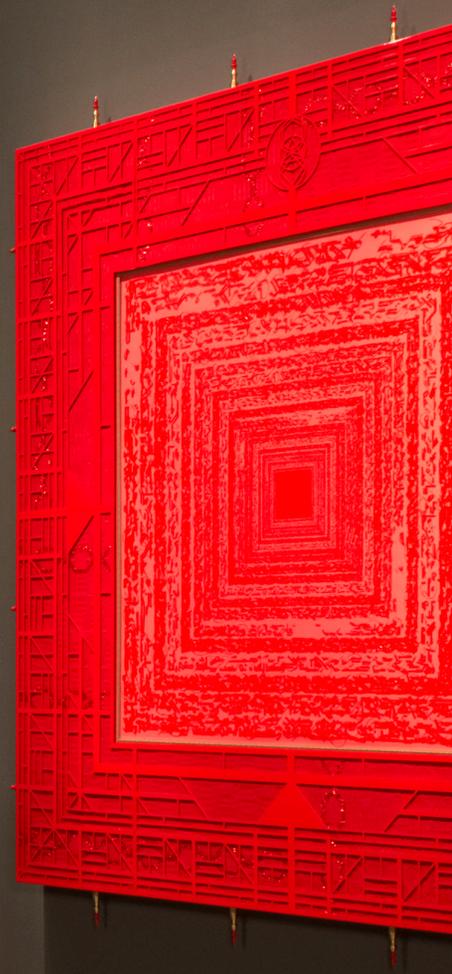
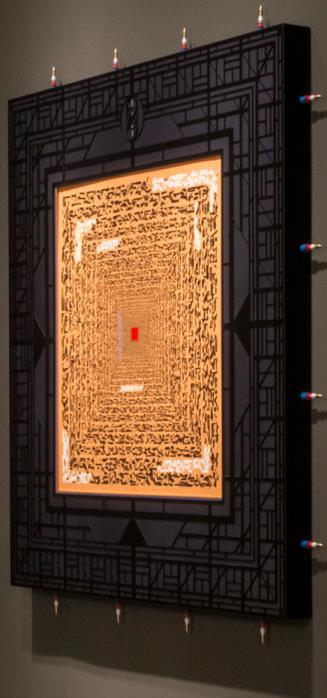
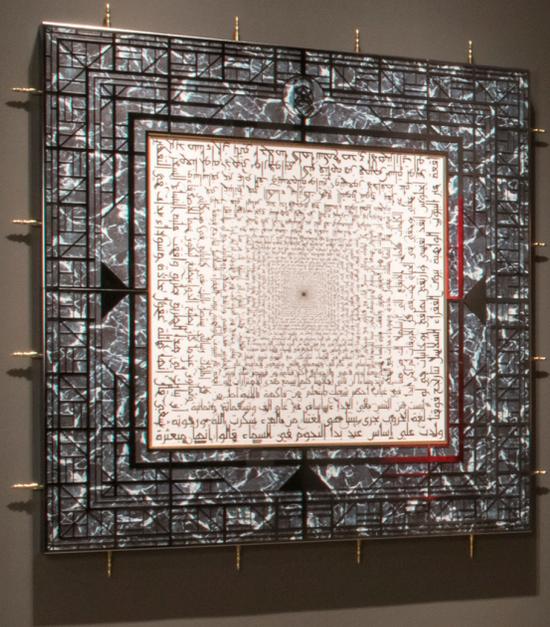
1. For more on the protective function of fashion and the links to contemporary art see *Aware: Art, Fashion, Identity*. Edited by Gabi Scardi and Lucy Orta (London: London College of Fashion and Damiani, 2010).

2. The performers of this composition were Ishmael Butler, Thione Diop (percussionist), Darius Willrich (keys), Morgan Henderson (bass, bass clarinet, flute) with mixing by Eric Blood.

3. Guru Gobind Singh (b.1666, d.1708) is the 10th Sikh Guru and the founder of the Sikh warrior community referred to as Khalsa. For more on the importance and specifics of sword and armament iconography to Sikh culture see Amandeep Singh Madra and Paramjit Singh's *Warrior Saints: Four Centuries of Sikh Military History Vol.1* (London: Kashi House, 2013).

4. Negarra A. Kudumu, "Nep Sidhu's *Pigs in Paradise*," (Anchorage: Anchorage Museum, Alaska, 2016).

5. See Leila Ahmed, "The Discourse on the Veil," in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. and INIVA, 2003) edited by David A. Bailey, Gilane Tawadros.





NEP SIDHU'S ARTISTIC EQUILIBRIUM

NEGARRA A. KUDUMU

Nep Sidhu, *Confirmation A, B & C*, 2013 - 2014
Various materials. Courtesy of the artist

“We as Sikhs believe that ritual should lead you to the truth, not get in the way of it.”¹

Introduction

In May 2015, I learned from Nep that my name — Negarra — holds much significance for Sikh people. Nagara, as it is spelled when translated from Punjabi, is the name of a drum that is sounded during war to announce the victory of the Sikh army. Maharajah Ranjit Singh, one of the most important Sikh leaders, built his reign on Sikh tenets, namely the Khalsa.² The Maharajah was known for his military prowess and for the establishment of a modern Sikh empire, which included a cultural and artistic renaissance, and triumphs against numerous invasions. The Maharajah, also known as Sher-i-Punjab attributed all of his success to the favor of God and, as H.R. Gupta describes in *Sikhism: Its Philosophy and History*, “He was often heard saying that he was nothing more than a mere *Nagara* (drum) of Guru Gobind Singh.”³

However serendipitous it may seem that a woman of African descent named Negarra is observing and engaging with the artistic oeuvre of a Sikh man of Punjabi descent named Nep Sidhu, I am resolute in my stance: Nep Sidhu’s work stands in equilibrium at the intersection of aesthetic quality and conceptual rigor. It is a victory I am very proud to proclaim.

Context

I first met Nep in May 2014 through our mutual friend, also an artist, Maikoiyo Alley-Barnes in preparation for their joint exhibition at the Frye Art Museum titled “Your Feast Has Ended”, which also included artist Nicholas Galanin. Through this exhibition, and specifically through Nep’s work, I felt as if a space had opened for me — a glimpse into a universe that had hitherto been a private domain reserved for independent creation. As I would later share with Nep, this opening mimicked and made visual a ceremonial space and accompanying set of processes, which previously only I knew. Drawing those parallels, and experiencing feelings I had only ever known in the midst of a major spiritual transformation, made clear to me that Nep’s ongoing visual explorations, like my spiritual ones, were truth seeking.

Nep’s ethnic and cultural heritage, as a Sikh man of Punjabi origin may seem like mere categorization. In actuality, this fact is key given the implications these identities continue to have for Nep personally and artistically. That said, a brief summary of Sikhism is warranted.

Sikhism originated in the Punjab region of present-day India and Pakistan founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 1499. It is a monotheistic tradition whose fundamental tenets include faith, meditation, the equality of all humankind, and leading a life of unselfish service for everyone’s benefit and

wellbeing. Sikhism insists on the equity of all humankind such that upon it's founding, Guru Nanak Dev Ji did away with the caste system. When asked about the status of women the Guru responded, "How can she be considered inferior when she gives birth to kings?"⁴

Another aspect of Sikhism that is most salient when contextualizing Nep's artistic point of departure is the Khalsa. From its inception in 1699 by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, the Khalsa became the responsible civil, spiritual, executive and military authority of Sikh people. One key mandate of Guru Gobind Singh "ordained that they should uphold righteousness in every place and destroy evil in every form by all means available and should not submit to *zulum* (oppression and tyranny) but resist it, if necessary, by force."⁵

Fast-forward to the sixteenth year of the 21st century, to *Shadows in the Major Seventh*, and here is an exhibition, Nep's first solo show, that advances his truth-seeking explorations and poses very pointed questions about what humankind is willing to do to achieve truth. Will we fulfill our spiritual callings? Are we willing to sit in communion with our elders and ancestors, hear their stories, and learn their teachings? Will we acknowledge past transgressions and our role in maintaining or upstaging the status quo? Are we courageous enough to defend against injustice no matter what form it takes? Can we make reparations for what has happened to our women?

Nep does not ask these questions in vain. He is bound up in these realities in part due to heritage, but also because he lives them. As arduous as certain of these truths are, Nep is neither cynical nor fantastical. He advances, knowing that one must continually work for what one desires. These values inform Nep's life and his practice, and the best of his oeuvre to-date, is presented in *Shadows in the Major Seventh*.

Warrior Saint and Prophet

Present throughout Nep's body of work, is his veneration of the divine feminine. It was initially around this principle that his artistic collaboration and parallel brotherhood with musician Ishmael Butler developed. After irregular email correspondence, the two met during Ishmael's brief stopover in Toronto while on tour with Shabazz Palaces.⁶ Nep shared with Ishmael his textile work titled *Found Paradise* and in return, Ishmael shared with Nep a song of Ethiopian origin by which he had become transfixed. While listening to the song, the two were interrupted by a knock on the door of Ishmael's hotel room. Ishmael opened the door and an Ethiopian woman asked, "How do you know this song? Who sent you?" Ishmael explained that he loved the song, and played it for the sentiments it evoked because it set space and feeling. He asked the woman about the lyrics to which she responded, "You two will find this meaning out together. That's why we are here today," and she left, leaving

Ishmael and Nep speechless — speechless in the way that would carry forward into their creative process.⁷ This pattern of minimal verbal exchange became the natural way of the collaborations that would follow.

Having both lost their mothers, these two men came together around music — Ishmael’s expertise — and art — Nep’s expertise — confirmed by a woman unknown to both of them, that their meeting was predestined. Happenstance? Doubtful. When one walks fearlessly in the world, he will bear witness to the fulfillment of a divine promise because prayer has been received.

One body of work resultant from Nep and Ishmael’s initial collaborations is the *Confirmation* series. Combining language and architecture, the resultant third space provides alternate ways of negotiating and acting to reconfigure human life. The scholar Homi K. Bhabha understands third space as an ambiguous space that emerges when two or more individuals/cultures unite. The resultant space challenges hierarchical claims around originality or cultural purity. Bhabha states,

“It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew.”⁸

The third space, visualized through *Confirmation A*, originates from Ishmael’s lyrics about parallel arrival and awareness in this present world written in Nep’s kufic script.⁹ *Confirmation B* is the completion of a promise Nep made to his mother after her passing to sustain connection. Through memorializing his mother’s last words in a letter contained within the work, *Confirmation B* serves both as an act of familiarity and remembrance, which allows his mother to recognize the letter by its signals. *Confirmation B*, “takes it a step further: the combination of language and architecture is not solely a portal, but a vehicle for the necessary incantation that is the precursor to ancestor veneration.”¹⁰ That these spaces are tied to the collective of ancestral mothers, specifically Nep’s and Ishmael’s mothers, remains relevant as it is a primary point of connection, which upon their first meeting was confirmed by a mother figure.

Completed in 2015, *SonicArchiTextile* is an aural-visual installation inspired by and constructed for Malcolm X on the 50th anniversary of his assassination. It is comprised of two components: *Malcolm’s Smile*, Nep’s three, twelve-foot tall, hand woven tapestries, with macramé forms cascading atop golden platforms; and *Ecdysis*, an ecstatic and meditative musical work, composed and arranged by Ishmael.

Ecdysis is a call to contemplation. It completely dissipates all angst and prepares your mind to receive the spirit of the song. *Ecdysis* is as reminiscent of Oum Kalthoum carrying our hearts to exaltation with every turn of a verse, as it is of Thelonius Monk's manner of reaching inside the diatonic scale to find amalgams of notes previously unknown.

Malcolm's Smile interprets for us the various phases of Malcolm X's life. The tapestries are replete with iconography pertinent to Islam and numerous references to the African continent, a place that became very important to Malcolm X subsequent to his completion of the Hajj. Less obvious, but overtly felt, is the third space *Malcolm's Smile* offers for what the scholar Christina Sharpe calls wake work.

“Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances; a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also ‘the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)’; finally, wake also means being awake and, most importantly, consciousness.”¹¹

When we can properly mourn our ancestors, we are more emotionally fit but we are also, as Sharpe states, awakened, in a conscious state. This state of awakened consciousness is the fulcrum of Malcolm X's life's work. That Nep and Ishmael have captured this so exquisitely is, I believe, the greatest gift of *SonicArchiTextile*.

The Griot Guild

The oral tradition runs deep within Sikh and Punjabi culture. The tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh was a renowned poet in his day. If you listen carefully, there is a lyricism in the way Nep speaks that is too, a form of poetry. Within the numerous and diverse cultures of peoples of African descent, griots existed not only for entertainment but also as keepers of the historical record. In Maikooyo Alley-Barnes, Nep has a kinship based on, amongst other things, a mutual love for the word and the various ways in which it iterates and manifests.

Maikooyo, like Nep, is a multimedia artist. His sculptural, film and textile works, tell ancient and contemporary stories with a finesse and otherworldly force that is — amongst other things — ancestral. Calling on the original ancestors of his hometown, Seattle, Maikooyo's narrative *Curse Words* tells the story of the seventh son of Chief Si'ahl¹² (Chief Seattle) who hated, and rejected, his Duwamish heritage. The son subsequently entered into a pact with the newly arrived white settler colonialists.

This and other nefarious deeds eventually resulted in the son being cursed with immortality.

In *Confirmation C*, Nep retells Maikoiyo's story of Chief Si'ahl's seventh son using his Kufic script reddened, against a background of the same color. That one is reminded of blood is intentional, but the optical illusion is so jarring that one literally sees red everywhere. The metaphors are endless and the analogy to blood unavoidable. *Confirmation C* speaks of the tens of thousands of Duwamish and Suquamish people who were murdered and removed from their ancestral homelands by white settler colonialists. Considering equivalent events occurred throughout the Americas, those tens of thousands become millions. This blood has literally trod the earth of an entire continent.

"Curse Words" asks us, if the price of the ticket is blood, is this trip one we even want to take? The cost of self-loathing for the appeal of the new, claiming growth and riches, is a blunt metaphor for the history of Seattle and the entire American continent. When re-told via *Confirmation C*, there is no avoiding the cost. Red bleeds from everywhere and even once you walk away the red does not immediately dissipate. Nep has captured "Curse Words" essential lesson: the futility of and the penalty for running from truth.

Protect and Exalt

No Pigs in Paradise, created with Nicholas Galanin, unifies the artists' talents in homage to First Nations women who, in the second decade of the 21st century, continue to be victims of rape and homicide. These horrific acts constitute the legacies of settler colonialism in North America and beyond. What makes this endeavor notable is that in a time where the majority of the perpetrators of these violations are men, two men, Nep and Nicholas, are leveraging their talent and prowess to raise awareness about these issues and inspire a culture of healing and justice for these women.

No Pigs in Paradise includes four female forms draped in Nep's textiles and Nicholas' hand-engraved metal adornment. If ever there was the manifestation of Nep's mantra, protect and exalt, its grandest iteration is found in *No Pigs In Paradise*. This series unites Nep's kufic script, his selection of the richest fabrics and most intense colors, Tlingit iconography hand sewn onto the textile, and Nicholas' hand engraved golden panels and bullet casings serving as facial protections. This hand-work has significance too as it recalls ancient traditions across various cultures of laying on hands for the purpose of healing, the precise intent of the gowns in this series. The female forms emerge as the Mothers¹³ who have arrived to restore healing and harmony to their communities, and justice for the transgressions visited upon their daughters. They are also exemplary of the principle of the

divine feminine, which understands the innate female power of creation, second only to Mother Earth.

Another aspect of Nep's life work that runs parallel to, and is a fount of inspiration for his creative practice, is the Sher E Punjab Sports Academy founded in 2005 by his father and other members of the Chakhar community in Punjab. The school initially focused on young girls in an effort to combat the challenges unique to young women growing up in Punjab state. The school, which now also serves young boys, is centered on sport and promotes the concept that a fit and healthy mind and body is key to academic success. The name of the school translates into the Lion of the Punjab, a name given to the Maharajah Ranjit Singh and also to his army. The linguistic choices here are important and form the basis of a deeply integrated foundation, which departs from Sikhism's core values, most notably a commitment to the ongoing development and support of community.

When thinking about Sher E Punjab, I must also consider Nep's clothing line *Paradise Sportif* and the restorative intent, similar to the mission of the school that he infuses into each creation. In Nep's own words,

“When understanding the power of our past messengers and healers, the garments that they wore played significance in their function as much as their understanding of nature, rhythm, dance and medicine. When dealing with negative or destructive spirits during a ceremony, the healing of an illness could inspire revenge in the spirit that caused it. The spirit could not effectively attack a shaman wearing a powerful costume, nor could it recognize the shaman when he or she was out of costume.”¹⁴

Whereas the school exists as a starkly positive alternative to the burdensome realities of young children in the Punjab, *Paradise Sportif* is an aesthetic study of the possibilities for living in a harmonious and restorative manner.

Cycles

I have had the privilege of observing Nep engage in brotherhood with Ishmael, Maikoio, and Nicholas in a way that indicates kinship formed in lives past. How and why these kinds of relationships are formed only during adulthood escapes me; however, it is in our moments of greatest need when we realize these relationships matter most. Several months ago that moment transpired for Nep with the sudden death of his blood brother Rana. The ways Ishmael, Maikoio, and Nicholas, rallied around — and *for* — Nep demonstrated the highest expression of audible and visible love and care.

In the midst of this hardship, swathed in the love of his brothers, Nep pressed forward and answered his internal call to create works centered on his love for and devotion to Rana. *Divine of Form A and B (Song for Rana)* leverages Sikh imagery and traditional colors along with repetitive images of the *kirpan*¹⁵ in homage to Nep's brother. It is an overwhelming outpouring of love. Far be it from me to presume understandings between brothers, but I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the power and courage that flows fluidly from these works, as it flowed between Nep and Rana.

Nep's process is at times reminiscent of an architect planning a massive monument, and at others he is a steadfast chemist repeatedly testing formulas until they match his quality control standards. The resultant works reveal a self-taught practitioner with a disciplined mind that in the midst of life's many upsets and restarts, holds fast to the destiny for which he was chosen. There is an internal drumbeat that Nep answers with his ever-growing body of work. On the occasions when we too are privileged to hear it, we shall observe how much Nep has urged us closer to victory and truth.

1. Nep Sidhu, quoted at the event "Artists in Conversation Part II: The Resurgence of shaMEN. Lecture with Maikoioy Alley-Barnes, Nicholas Galanin, Negarra A. Kudumu, and Nep Sidhu." Frye Art Museum, Seattle, August 2, 2014.
2. Collective body of all initiated Sikhs.
3. Gupta, H.R. (1997). Chapter 23. In D. Singh, K. Singh & C. Singh (Eds), *Sikhism: Its Philosophy and History* (Chandigarh: Institute for Sikh Studies, 1997), p. 392.
4. Singh, Choor (1997). Introduction. In D. Singh, K. Singh & C. Singh (Eds), *Sikhism: Its Philosophy and History* (Chandigarh: Institute for Sikh Studies, 1997), p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p.10.
6. Ishmael Butler is one half of the duo, Shabazz Palaces, which also includes rapper and percussionist Tendai Maraire.
7. Story told by Nep about his first meeting with Ishmael. Frye Art Museum, Seattle, January 7, 2016.
8. Bhabha, Homi K. Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences. <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html> accessed May 13, 2016.
9. Sidhu studied for 9 months with an Imam to learn Kufic script.
10. Transcendence, Transformation and Continuum: Summer 2014 at Seattle's Frye Art Museum. <http://postcolonialist.com/arts/transcendence-transformation-continuum-summer-2014-seattles-frye-art-museum/> Accessed May 16, 2016.
11. Sharpe, Christina. "Black Studies: In the Wake." *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2014. p. 60.
12. 19th century Duwamish leader during the 19th century for whom the city of Seattle is named.
13. Various African traditions have an understanding of a united female spiritual force referred to as the Mothers who mete out justice and restore harmony when it has been destroyed.
14. <http://www.nepsidhu.com/portfolio/paradise-sportif/>
15. Ceremonial sword worn by Sikhs





NOTES ON
PARADISE SPORTIF:
A CONVERSATION
WITH NEP SIDHU

MANJOT BAINS

Nep Sidhu, *Collection of Paradise Sportif*, 2013 – present. Various materials
Courtesy of the artist and the Black Constellation collective

Founded eons ago, The Black Constellation consists of a unified cross disciplinary guild of Soothsayers, Makers, Empaths, and Channels. Their terrestrial offerings have been a myriad of elements including: sentient offspring production, the facilitation of cultural phenomenon, the perpetuation of ancient ritual, and the undertaking of the new and remarkable. In all things, The Black Constellation combines the astral and the earthly; the gorgeous with the abjectly honest; the ancient with the as of yet unimagined. This cosmic body of work exists while remaining in constant communion with the Sacred.

– *Maikooyo Alley-Barnes*

A deep spirituality flows throughout Nep Sidhu's first Canadian solo exhibition, *Shadows in the Major Seventh*. Each piece tells a story of a person or peoples whose lives or histories have resonated with the artist, from his family and collaborator Ishmael Butler, to Malcolm X and missing First Nations' women. A common theme of protection links each work together through adornment, spiritual iconography, scripture, and imagery woven into tapestries.

Included in the exhibition Sidhu's clothing line, *Paradise Sportif*, which he describes as, "a contemporary understanding towards adornment and garments for the protection and enhancement of modern day ceremony through ancient channels with a feeling for the now." The pieces are intricately embroidered, layered with histories, and beautiful aesthetically. Through their construction and aesthetic, the clothing offer a kind of resistance. These pieces are stylish; they draw attention to themselves as if to counteract dispossession from land by claiming instead a visibility that possesses and claims space. The clothing is an intrinsic part of performance and storytelling, making a statement and playing a role.

In my conversation with the artist, Sidhu discusses the inspirations and production processes behind the *Paradise Sportif* clothing. We also delve deeper into his thoughts about the use of adornment and iconography as protection seen throughout his works.

As a visual artist working with a variety of media including textile, where do you fit with the practices of The Black Constellation members who are writers, thinkers and musicians?

In having started to make the collection around the conversations and actions with Ishmael Butler (of Shabazz Palaces) I came into knowing of other makers and shakers around him, which ended up forming Black Constellation. From there we had an instant trust amongst one another to begin collaborating openly and freely. In terms of there being a natural convergence of music, clothing and sculpture, there existed an authentic stream of performance and ceremony that became the vessel to explore new spaces and opportunities within those constructs. In being interested in an original experience in that sense, clothing became a natural glue to bind multiple practises within some of the artists and ideas in Black Constellation, regardless of whether it was executed inside institutions, concert halls or everyday living.

Paradise Sportif is a non-commercial clothing line that is part political statement, part style statement, and both protective and ceremonial. I was immediately drawn to the striking jackets in the installation, but you produce this line exclusively for members of Black Constellation and music group Shabazz Palaces. Do you create personalized clothing for each artist and personality?

There has been a response on instinct from what Ish [Ishmael Butler] makes in terms of the attitude of the music, but beyond that I don't look to personalize anything in that way.

Each jacket, robe, vest tells a story. How do you engage in conversation/co-creation with the person each piece is made for? Do certain colours used evoke personalities or stories?

Creation wins over conversation every time.

There's no one formula I have to choose colors. It's what feels appropriate at the time. That can mean any number of things. At times the answers on texture, form and color can come to me within seconds as other times I can spend hammering out hundreds of combinations before feeling right about the result, or needing to throw the entire kitchen sink out and start again.

I want to talk about how the pieces are constructed. You make use of beautiful hand embroidery techniques from India and beyond, as well as embossed leather, mesh jersey, silk and wool chenille. Do you work with a team of embroiderers and seamstresses or do you create each piece by hand or in collaboration?

There's no one way. It comes down to varying elements, fabrics and technical ambitions. I work with various tailors, pattern makers, dyers and embroiders depending on the task at hand. These relationships are often built over time with an understanding of craft and the potential of technique being at the centre.

You make interesting use of sports jersey design, language and embroidery techniques. How do you select the materials you use — is there meaning ascribed to the type of fabric, adornments, and embroidery you use?

A decision on the material depends on the quality and direction of the shapes, textures and folds. Even with those considerations, there is still all of the unknown in which mistakes, various forms of stumbling and tripping present themselves as new considerations. There is at times a delicate balance of rigidity and softness one should employ to be open enough to react to new ideas along the way while also being disciplined in a plan enough to see new possibilities happen because of the focus to an original narrative or intention. I think this kind of attitude also allows less plateaus to form in one's art practice, as "styles" and "expectations" aren't allowed to live for too long and get in the way of a creative environment that is based on constant movement and discovery.

We see Islamic, Sikh, African and North American indigenous iconography weaved throughout the exhibition. Does the clothing and the iconography connect or relate to sacred ritual and performance?

What connects these mentioned places and people is a history of practices based on protection and exalting. Textile is merely an opportunity to further this experience, as it always has been.

The weaving of charms, adornment, and Sikh and First Nations iconography stood out for me in Collection of Paradise Sportif, Divine of Form 7a and Divine of Form 7b, and No Pigs in Paradise. Why is protection a critical theme in many of your pieces?

Protection naturally comes up because I'm rooted to a people who had to stand up to various forms of tyranny in order to protect the beliefs of living inside a system that was universal. Protecting oneself against the forces of corrupt religious leaders, greedy government officials, etc can itself become an attack. Perhaps it's my life long acknowledgement and appreciation in being able to be cut from such a swath of people. The work ends up naturally addressing and adorning itself to perhaps reflect the codes of those ideas without much injection of concept or planning in that way.

In addition to the cultural, historic and religious iconography, we see sportswear, logos and crests in your textiles. How do you subvert design and iconography to create new works?

Whether its creating simultaneous textile based sculpture or creating a parallel of vestment and fashion that reflects the music of Ishmael Butler, these seemingly different creative realms are not separate—it is intrinsic that they blend together, resulting in an all-inclusive experience.

At the root, I guess I'll always be interested in forms of communicating that can be pushed into new areas of function and feeling along with new silhouettes. This way my interests aren't isolated and regulated to being defined by any single medium. Ornette Coleman had a concept called harmolodics that referred to "the use of the physical and the mental of one's own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group." There can be a constant interplay of harmolodics in being multi-disciplinary. In that harmony has always been the centre of ancient technologists. An open union of expression, without constraint of tonal limitations, rhythmic predetermination or codified results. Free by design... naturally.







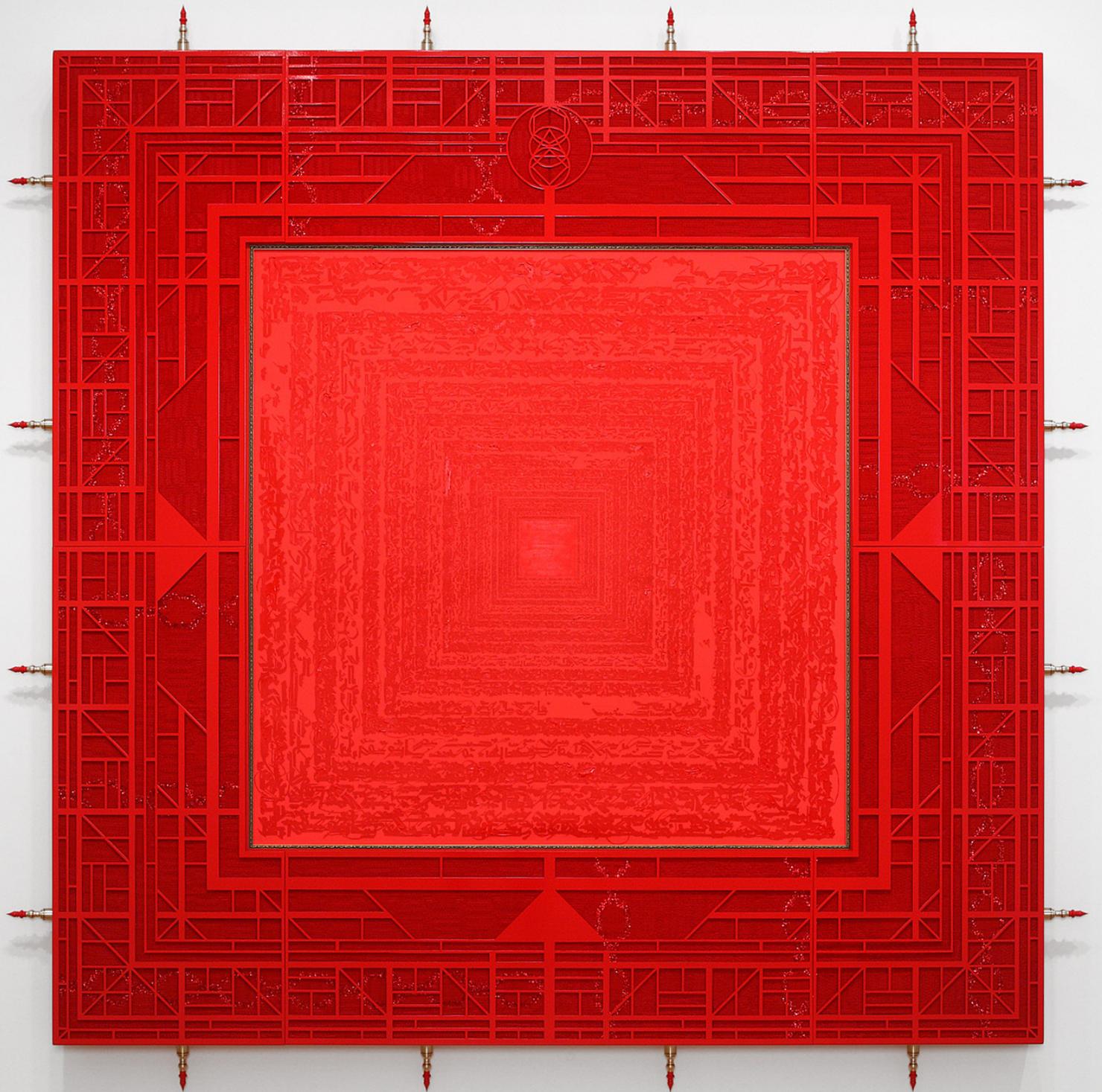
Nep Sidhu, *Affirmation as it was told by she* (detail), 2014
Mixed textile, paint. Courtesy of the artist

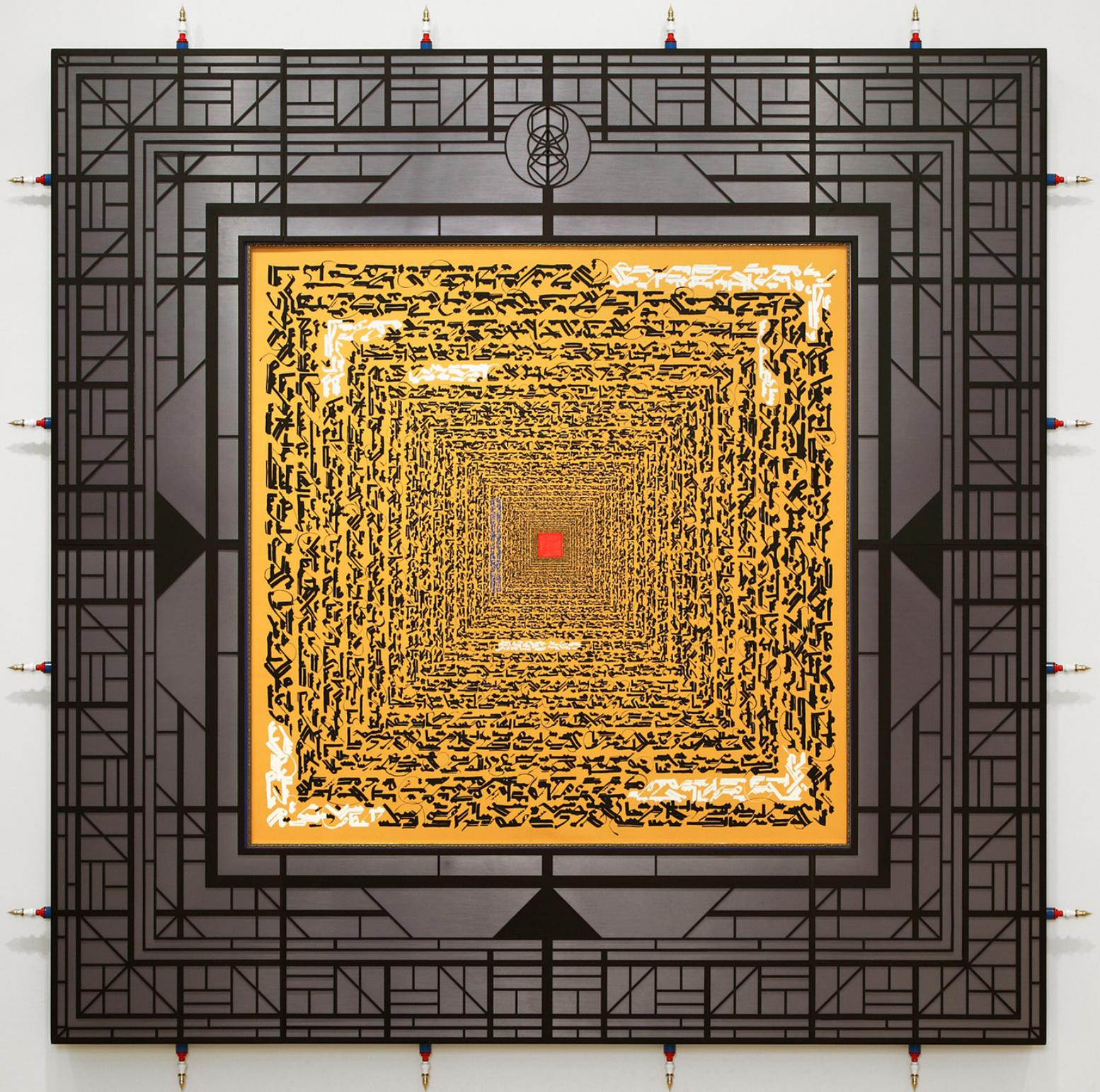
Nep Sidhu, *Confirmation C*, 2013 - 2016
Ink on paper, aluminum, textile, brass
Courtesy of the artist

(Next Spread)

L: Nep Sidhu, *Confirmation B*, 2013 - 2016
Ink on paper, paint, anodized aluminum, brass
Courtesy of the artist

R: Nep Sidhu, *Confirmation A*, 2013 - 2016
Ink on paper, sheet veneer marble, chromed steel, brass
Courtesy of the artist









Nep Sidhu, *Collection of Paradise Sportif*, 2013 – present
Various materials. Courtesy of the artist

(Left)

Nep Sidhu, *Collection of Paradise Sportif (detail)*, 2013 - present
Various materials. Courtesy of the artist and the Black Constellation collective

(Centre)

Nep Sidhu, *Malcolm's Smile*, 2015. Wool, cotton, aluminum
Commissioned by the Frye Museum and Funded by the Frye Foundation, Douglas Smith

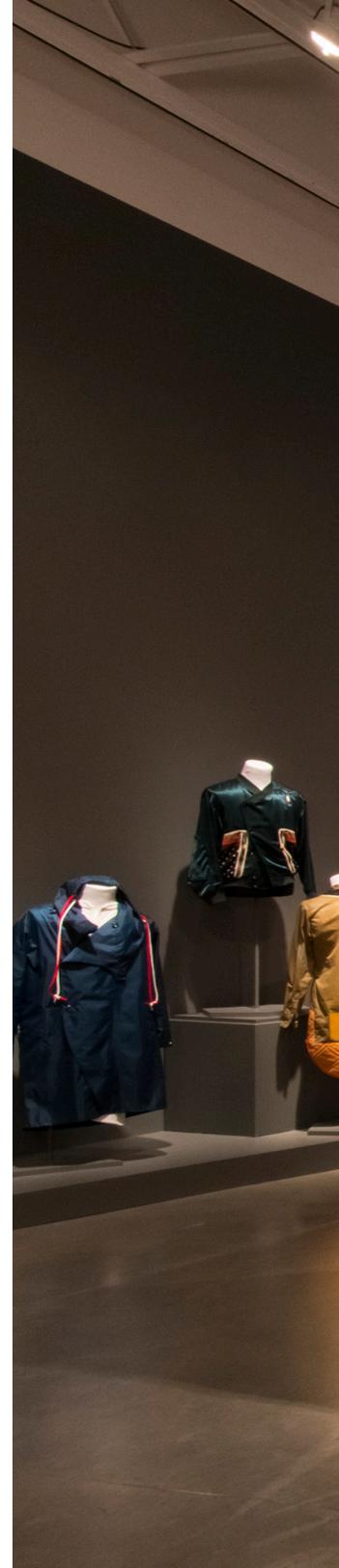
Ishmael Butler, *Ecdysis*, 2015. Audio recording (24 mins 51 seconds)
Performers: Ishmael Butler, Thione Diop (percussionist), Darrius Willrich (keys),
Morgan Henderson (bass, bass clarinet, flute). Mixing Eric Blood
Courtesy of the Frye Museum, Douglas Smith and Stephanie-Ellis Smith

(Background)

Nep Sidhu, *Confirmation B*, 2016. Ink on paper, paint, anodized aluminum, brass
Courtesy of the artist

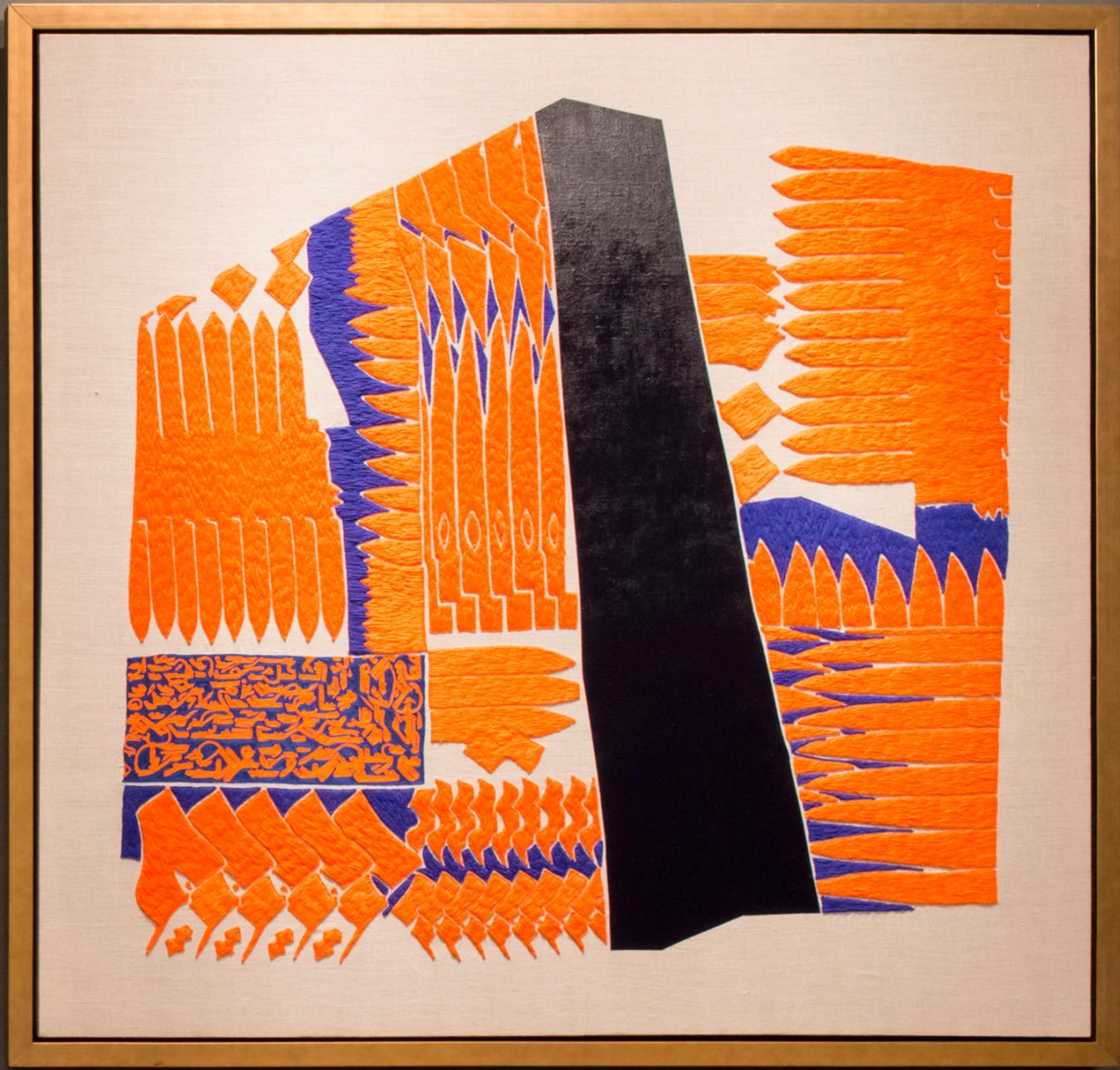
(Next Spread)

Nep Sidhu, *Divine of Form (A Song for Rana) 7A & 7B*, 2016
Wool, cotton, paint on linen. Courtesy of the artist









Nep Sidhu with Nicholas Galanin, *SHE in Mud Form*, *SHE in Sky Form*,
SHE in Light Form, *SHE in Shadow Form*, from *No Pigs in Paradise*,
2015 - 2016. Courtesy of the artists

Nep Sidhu & Nicholas Galanin, *Indian Land*, 2016
Two channel video loop (edited and filmed by Stephan Gray and Ram Singh Chakar)
Courtesy of the artists

The Revenge of De Simone's Secondo Coro Delle Lavandaie repurposed by Ishmael Butler, 2016
Audio recording. 19 min. 26 sec. Courtesy of the artists







Nep Sidhu with Nicholas Galanin
SHE in Mud Form & SHE in Light Form,
from *No Pigs in Paradise*, 2015 - 2016
Wool, cotton, silk, leather, gold
zari stitch, poly-cotton / melton wool,
jute, silver zari, chenille, cotton
Courtesy of the artists







Nep Sidhu & Nicholas Galanin, *Indian Land* (cropped), 2016
Two channel video loop (edited and filmed by Stephan Gray and Ram Singh Chakar)
Courtesy of the artists



Nep Sidhu with Nicholas Galanin
SHE in Shadow Form & SHE in Sky Form,
from *No Pigs in Paradise*, 2015 - 2016
Raw silk, brass, gold zari stitch, jute,
cotton rope / Mongolian lamb, cocoa fibre,
brass bullet casings, cotton
Courtesy of the artists









WRITERS

Manjot Bains is a Vancouver-based writer and communications consultant. She is the Editorial Director and co-founder of Jugni Style.com, an online arts, culture and style magazine. Her creative non-fiction and other commentary have been published in Geist Magazine and Huffington Post, and she currently produces the Jugni Style podcast, which comments on pop culture, race, politics and fashion with a South Asian focus. Her graduate research explored identity, public performance of culture and gender, and South Asian diasporas.

Negarra A. Kudumu is a Seattle-based independent scholar and intellectual provocateur, whose practice is situated squarely within the domain of cultural production and consumption, investigating the ways in which these processes are expressed through language. Her intellectual interests reside at the intersections of contemporary art, curation and critical theory with a specific interest in the contemporary visual culture of the African continent, Iran, South Asia, and their respective diasporas.

Since 2009, **Jordan Strom** has worked as Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at the Surrey Art Gallery. Recent exhibitions include *Mimetic Workshop: Kelly Lycan and Fiona Ackerman* (2016), *Ground Signals* (2017) co-curated by Roxanne Charles and the sound art group exhibitions *Sonorous Kingdom* (2014) and *Sound/Tract* (2013). From 2004 to 2008, Jordan was editor of *Fillip* magazine. He holds an M.A. in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia's Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory.

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(Front Cover Image)
Nep Sidhu, *Divine of Form (A Song for Rana) 7B*, 2016
Wool, cotton, paint on linen. Courtesy of the artist

(Back Cover Image)
Nep Sidhu, *Divine of Form (A Song for Rana) 7A*, 2016
Wool, cotton, paint on linen. Courtesy of the artist

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