

The UP Podcast: Episode 2 - Jasleen Kaur | Gut Feelings Meri Jaan Transcript

Hettie Judah 0:11

On the wall to my right, which is covered in paper that looks like an incredible blown-up photograph of the top of a pot of yoghurt. We've got three screens and the screens are showing acts of washings going on between the participants in various bits of the town. There's quite an interesting chair over there. Can we go and have a kind of do you mind if I have a sit down?

Lisa Allen 0:34

Yes, please do!

Hettie Judah 0:36

Okay, so it's a great bit of blush leatherette chair. I think it's a lazy boy.

Lisa Allen 0:42

So, it should start vibrating...

Hettie Judah 0:43

It is it is I'm getting I'm getting a massage. Oh. [Laughter]. I'm very comfortable. Now. I think I'm going to be here for the rest of the afternoon lovely...Hello, and welcome to *The UP Podcast* with me Hettie Judah. In this episode, we'll be travelling to Touchstones Museum and Art Gallery in Rochdale, Greater Manchester. To learn more about Jasleen Kaur's project *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*. Commissioned by UP projects in partnership with Touchstones, *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan* responds to the local archive, and the way that towns diaspora communities are represented within it. An artist who has previously explored hidden histories and cultural heritage through the objects we surround ourselves with, and the food we share with others. Jasleen was selected for this commission in 2017. UP Projects developed a partnership with Touchstones to commission an ambitious project that explored the social and cultural context of Rochdale as a site for artistic practice, placing emphasis on a community orientated approach responsive to local conditions, but would also resonate on a national and international scale. Over the last four years, Jasleen has collaborated with a group of women and gender nonconforming people from Rochdale's, Pakistani, Bengali, and Punjabi communities. Together they have explored how cultural memory is preserved, and ideas about inheritance belonging, land migration, ritual and healing. The result is a rich multifaceted work. The films document ritual, symbolic and highly charged actions, such as reading and consuming documents from the historic archive, which have been printed onto rice paper. The walls of the gallery have been

painted with earth, hung with printed curtains and papered with a print of fermenting yoghurt. Seating is provided in the gallery, in the form of chairs with thick plastic covers, the vibrating Lazy Boy recliner, and a fringed armchair upholstered in shiny grass printed fabric. The exhibition of films, objects and books made for the project are on show at Touchstones until the 13th February 2022. *The UP Podcast* is brought to you by UP Projects, a public art organisation, that commissions contemporary art for public places to engage people with some of the most pressing issues of our time. In this episode, I'll be talking with Jasleen about the ideas and process behind *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*, and we'll be hearing from cinematographer Alina Akbar, and Lisa Allen from Touchstones. Congratulations, Jasleen, it's an extraordinary body of work actually - it is a very complex body of work. I'd really like to start off by talking about the title because it feels like it's doing a lot of heavy lifting. There are a lot of things going on in that title. Can you kind of go through it and unpick some of those things for me?

Jasleen Kaur 3:36

Yeah, sure. And thank you, the title *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan* comes from a conversation with one of the people we were working with in this room. In an email exchange actually, I was checking in with her after one of the online workshops we've had. And we were talking about how the conversations we're having around belonging and identity and personal histories were like really unearthing for us individually, unearthing a lot. And then in an email exchange, she replied, saying: "Jasleen Meri Jaan", which means "my love" or "my dear", there's so much to uncover here. This kind of - there's endless things to uncover and I'm really surprised at how my body is reacting, which speaks to in language we talk about, you know, gut feelings, butterflies in your stomach, these idioms that are about how your body is reacting to something over your, you know, your cerebral brain. And yeah, that's how we were thinking about the archive, actually, and about these histories that there's an insufficiency when you're reading a printed document. There's something that it cannot get to. But the body remembers. Yeah, that's the title.

Hettie Judah 4:54

Because it seems to have had such an impact clearly on the people that you've worked with on this project, when you first started talking with Touchstones. What were the kind of what were the initial conversations, was there a brief for this project? What was the kind of objective?

Jasleen Kaur 5:06

It's been a long process. It's been four years of various iterations of work, and obviously we've had a pandemic and that I've had a child in that time, there's been threads that have been continuous through it, but actually the group, which are six of us, seven including myself, and we only came together in the last year. So, all of

this research and pre-work and funding. And I think that was the point where like, we need to get people together because there's I can't predict what this is going to become without having that dialogue. But Touchstones were fundamental in bringing the group together because Lisa, who works at Touchstones, who does a lot of work on the ground and with community was essential in bringing the majority - Lisa and Brian - bringing inviting people to this self-formed group, this invitation to engage in dialogue for six months - a year, with the outcome being well, I don't know what but there was, there was a lot of existing work at Touchstones and within Rochdale, that meant that this group could come together. It wasn't my doing necessarily as someone who's not from this field.

Hettie Judah 6:36

So, there's an enormous book that's resting on a plinth here and the pages in the book, they've got something embedded on them. I think it's seeds?

Lisa Allen 6:45

Yes.

Hettie Judah 6:45

It's embedded in the pages?

Lisa Allen 6:46

That's right.

Hettie Judah 6:48

I'm with Lisa Allen, Co-Head of culture at Touchstones. We're in the exhibition space just ahead of the public opening of *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*. I'd quite like to look through this book. Is that okay?

Lisa Allen 6:58

It is okay. But could you just pop some gloves on?

Hettie Judah 7:02

Okay, so we've got a rack of gloves here and they're made out of the special fabric that Jasleen's had printed. So, what are the texts that I'm looking at in this book? I've got one that's got Rahela, Bushra and Alina at the bottom of it.

Lisa Allen 7:15

Yeah. So, they are some of the participants that Jasleen has been working with from the group. And as part of the project, all the wider conversations that they had together as a group and their thoughts about the project, because, you know, I think the project for lots of the people involved brought up quite a lot of things that they had maybe buried themselves. And this book is made of seed paper, because

the pages of this book will go on and be buried in the ground in Deepish community, which is the community that most of the people from the project live in. And then hopefully, a lovely tree will grow and that will be a really beautiful legacy from the project, I think.

Hettie Judah 8:03

So, there's all kinds of different texts in here. Actually, it's not just people's testaments from the project. I've just found that a newspaper clipping that the headline is: "Wage slaves behind the neck curtains" and it's a clipping from the Rochdale observer in 1998. So, this, is this something that was from the archive in Touchstones?

Lisa Allen 8:20

Yeah. So, I guess the catalyst for the project was looking in the archives, we have a local studies department here, we have a huge collection. And one of the things that the group did together was to look for themselves in in the archive and think about how they were represented or not represented at all. And I think a lot of what they found was expected, but some of it, there was a pattern to the representation. And a lot of it was around particular funding that had come from the central government. So, all the SRB funding. So, whenever there's a bit of funding available to work with diverse communities, there seems to be, you know, a bit more information in the archive, but not a general representation, and certainly not a representation that the people in the group were happy with.

Hettie Judah 9:17

So having gone round the installation, there are obviously so many layers to this collaborative process that happened, because just looking at the objects that you've got in the room, so there's a book with seed paper that's got testaments and readings in it. There are films which have, which include members of this group reading out texts they've written. They're also people, you know, sitting in the archive, going through the archive, interacting in a very unusual way with the archive, which we'll talk about in a bit. How did this collaborative process work? There seems like there were quite a few different layers to what you were doing.

Jasleen Kaur 9:55

I'm really interested in conversation and dialogue and listening as the key kind of methodologies or things that exist when working with anybody, whoever that group or those people may be. So, because we were in a lockdown, the dream was to, you know, come up and be in Rochdale. And obviously that wasn't possible. It's something was enabled through that. as well, I had a young child, members of the group have clear commitments at that time. In that first lockdown, these reading groups popped up peers and friends, and I was joining teachings and study groups that people admire, and friends were running. And I think, well, I know that

participating in those other online things really influenced how I want you to hold the group, you know, just practical stuff around: how do you allow somebody to speak? How do you listen? How do you collaborate? How do you just looking at these boxes and screen? Things we were talking about were around inheritance, or migration stories, belonging, land, being in diaspora or children, all of those meetings were recorded and transcribed, not to become work, but so that we could see where that material might live in an exhibition. And as you mentioned, it's become edited bits of reading or text that sits within the show, for a moment of time.

Hettie Judah 11:21

That's really interesting. So, the texts weren't written as texts, they were spoken word that came up as part of these conversations, part of the workshops. I'm really interested by what I see as a kind of, like an interesting tension in your work between your training and your kind of material aspect of your practice. And the fact that you're very comfortable with collaboration, because you're, when I see objects that you've made, you're clearly incredibly perfectionist, you're very detail oriented. You trained as a jeweller and you have a kind of, I guess, one foot somewhat in a product design camp, but then to open yourself up to work collaboratively with the community, you have to be just open and available to what's coming up. How do you negotiate that kind of tension?

Jasleen Kaur 12:06

There's a whole conversation to have around how artists engage in community or in, quote, unquote, socially engaged practice. So I, whatever we want to call it, working with collaborators, working with individuals, I am quite strict with how many of those types of commission's I take on. I have a responsibility to these individuals that if they're unhappy with anything, we pull that, right? And there's something then that makes me accountable in my working process, when you're working with people, your stories and your testimonies and what you're sharing with you, and how do you then make something public that is deeply private? That speaks back to the archive again? How do you make something with a group of people that sits in an art world as well, that kind of, you know, it has currency, it's going to exchange it's going to move beyond you in the group and the control that you have? So, I'm really, I don't have hard and fast rules, but like, I'm really interested in just being open about that process and asking institution and organisations that commissioned me to also be accountable for that, that that kind of level of care.

Hettie Judah 13:20

So, you're working here with a group of women and gender nonconforming people, I'm really interested in their particular relationship with the archive, and this question of whose stories are told and whose voices are heard?

Jasleen Kaur 13:32

I'm really glad you asked that question, actually, because we were - we talked about a lot about what it meant for us to be brought together and even before reaching out to the group making the decision to say we're inviting South Asian women and non-binary women to join the space, you know, what it meant to say South Asian as a label and where that may be an issue or be restrictive, and in the end I decided to go with that, but what we acknowledged in that space, and the way the text is written as well is that I don't actually use the word South Asian and we started to say specifically that, you know, Punjabi, Bangladeshi members of diaspora in this group, and there are seven veering possessions in that small group of various ages. Sure, there's moments where we can share, but there's deafening opinions in the group. And that was held by me in the space as well by everybody that there was moments of we didn't agree, we've had differing experiences whatever that diasporic identity is, none of them are the same. None of them are the same. And that you asked about the archives, so Shakra, one of the group members, as she works in the local studies library at Touchstones, which was really special to have her presence and her voice and she is part of the scene where we eat the archive, we read and eat parts of the archive. And so for her, she has this other relationship to it because she knows it intimately and she was quite passionate about how it has to change, like something has to change there. I was inviting them to have a kind of critical discussion about the archives, the institution in which it's held, its deficiencies. And I don't know something around like resisting archival life in the form that we know it. Or the form that it exists here in this building.

Hettie Judah 15:28

So, there are three scenes, although three kinds of individual films in the installation of different acts of washing; one scene in which Alina's hair is washed with yoghurt, and then there are two scenes of washing of parts of the kind of Rochdale infrastructure. So, there are the steps outside Touchstones and there's also a statue of a man called John Bright. I don't know anything about John Bright, who is he and why is it significant to be addressing the statue in this way?

Jasleen Kaur 15:56

So, he's an industrialist during the time of the Industrial Revolution, owned mills. And I think something that I do in my practice is that I make these visual collisions. So it is in this work, but also in my, in my head, and other projects, or the way that I'm thinking about things. It's like, what is latent or what is residual and both physical bodies, but also like, you say these buildings that are like, built off the back of empire and wealth, which is, which is why there is a Pakistani diaspora and Rochdale, right? It's why people began moving. So, I want you to kind of collide these monuments, these buildings, these things that are kind of residue in the town with the very people who are they are related to, I guess. And with the yoghurt

there is such a long kind of unwieldy thought process with the yoghurt. I'm Sikh, and so there's this moment in the yearly calendar where we wash the Nishan Sahib, which is a flag that stands outside every Sikh Gurdwara, we wash it with yogurt - with milk, I guess we were re-mixing rituals that were reading this article about the gut brain and how intergenerational trauma sits in the gut, and how it affects the microbiome of your gut, you know, as well as talking about like turmeric milk, and, you know, things that we ingest to heal. We we're talking about yogurt, and the fact that the Pakeeza factory is in Rochdale and I really wanted to work with him, and it didn't end up working out in the end. But I think I was thinking long before meeting the group about this notion of culture, how the archive kind of preserves and consolidates that and this notion of like a cultural identity. There's this brilliant book by Raymond Williams called *Keywords* and he breaks down like the etymology of words. And he breaks down the word culture and how it enters English language. And like the 14th century, he says, it's the tending of something. So like culture, entered English language, when they talked about tending to your animals in the morning, tending to your crops I'm really interested in enactment or action or practice. And so as I was researching and looking in the archives, and being in the stores, and these temperature control stores of things that are preserved, and then visiting the Pakeeza factory and seeing how this yoghurt, this this kind of edible cultures, literally made for South Asian tongues, this particular brand called Pakeeza that I grew up eating, that everybody in any South Asian will know a little bit about Pakeeza yoghurt, yeah, but coming back to the body and thinking about bodily archives, and there's this beautiful book that's on my lap right now called *No Archive Will Restore You* by Julietta Singh. And she talks about these like illegitimate messy body archives, you know, it comes back to the Nishreen and saying, "I'm surprised, but I thought I dealt with this, I thought I was, I could have these conversations about our beginnings". But she was surprised about the way her body was reacting, which when we were looking at the archive, it's just such a disembodied process, you know, you're reading oral histories that are written by not the person that is speaking. So, who's speaking for whom?

Hettie Judah 19:17

So, this act of washing in a way is quite a kind of, it's on one level, an act of purification, which is also a kind of an act of because it's with yoghurt, it's an act of metabolic purification as well, then it's also quite subversive, because you're seeding bacteria, South Asian bacteria, into the stone of Rochdale and into the stone that's supporting this industrialist as well. So it's got so many different layers going through it.

Jasleen Kaur 19:46

Yeah, I'm so glad you say that.

Hettie Judah 19:52

I'm in the basement of Touchstones Rochdale with Alina Akbar, who's a cinematographer and she was also one of the participants in *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*. So as a participant, what were the processes that you went through to develop the kind of texts and actions that we see in the work?

Alina Akbar 20:08

So as a participant, we we're involved in fortnightly workshops over zoom. And in these workshops, we kind of had important conversations. We looked over texts relating to cultural healing, generational trauma, inherited trauma, and just introducing us to write things that we probably wouldn't read about or acknowledge within ourselves. And then three days, we kind of did free writing tasks within the workshops and that's where the texts kind of developed, the scripts that you see within our films, a lot of it was just through conversation and us getting on with each other and kind of discovering each other's personal journeys to this town, and how our parents, great grandparents ended up here.

Hettie Judah 21:01

I mean, the involvements were quite intense, as well there was a scene that we see in this work where you're having your hair washed with yoghurt. And it seems like it's a really kind of ritual act, there's something really symbolic going on, what are the kind of references that have been brought into this scene?

Alina Akbar 21:17

So, a lot of the work has yoghurt in it, and that kind of links to yoghurt as culture. I think Jasleen was thinking about her visit to the Pakeeza factory and how that has a connection to Rochdale itself, and the landscape around and how dairy farms are local to Rochdale. So, within our culture from when we were young, we always remember our grandmas and moms telling us to boil our hair and put products in our hair, that keep it healthy. And, from when I was younger, I remember like just sitting between my mom's lap, getting my hair rubbed with oil or whatever she wanted to put in it, and I think that's a ritual in itself. And it's just about looking after ourselves. And that kind of translated into this work. And it was really nice during that scene with Bushra, she has like a much more personal bond to me.

Hettie Judah 22:15

So you've really quite recently graduated from film studies in Manchester art school, is this the kind of first like in quotes "professional film project" that you've worked on, because you were working as a cinematographer on this.

Alina Akbar 22:30

I was always freelancing throughout my degree. But this is, I'd say, is the main big project for me. So, the main thing that I've worked on, I think this project felt like a

really personal one and an important one that I've worked on, especially since graduating, it's kind of allowed me to see more into the art world itself. And it's kind of set the bar for collaborations for me, because of the way me and Jasleen collaborated for this work. It's really interesting, because at the time, Jasleen approached me, I was writing my dissertation, which was about kind of working-class representation within filmmaking, and artworks and gallery spaces. So, I was kind of looking at and already thinking about ethics and authorship to do with socially engaged art. And I think it was kind of full circle then working on this project and seeing how well Jasleen kind of navigated this space.

Hettie Judah 23:21

I think it's so interesting that she wasn't aware of this connection that you had to Rochdale when you started work on this project. Has kind of working with Jasleen changed the way that you see your relationship with Rochdale, has it had a transformative effect on you at all?

Alina Akbar 23:47

So, I guess first big thing is I didn't really have a relationship to Touchstones, nobody here knew that I existed, I was always much more involved in Manchester, in the city. So, I think coming back here and working with local women, because a lot of my work is usually to do with men and young boys. So, I think it was really nice to come and connect with women and then I found myself like mixing English and Punjabi as I was speaking and it's something that I've never had the opportunity to do before where I felt like completely comfortable in the space to mix my language and then speak about specific things.

Hettie Judah 24:43

We've talked quite a lot about the kind of films and the workshops that have gone into this installation, there's also this quite material aspects of the work and there are these particular textiles that you produced for it, and they've gone into costumes, they've covered piece of furniture, plastic chair covers, there are particular bowls that people use. Can you talk me through that kind of material vocabulary that comes into the work as well?

Jasleen Kaur 25:06

So, we were making Kameez's, kind of traditional South Asian dress to wear in the, in the filming and they're printed, the fabric tape was called techno shine. And then they're printed in an image of Pakistani soil which was an image that Alina kindly let me use. She asked her mom to bring back some Pakistan soil from Pakistan. So, there's Pakistani soil, there's Lancashire grass and there is yoghurt. And yeah, as you say, these become like, they're the garment but there's also a upholstered chair, which is exactly the chair that we grew up with, I think, for a long time pulled from my aesthetic sensibilities, or like, what it is that I grew up around, like, quite

simply, it's like, I've called them in the past like "aspirational materials", because for me, they speak to like, a point where they're off South Asian diasporic homes, the plastic that covers sofas, the trim it is kind of like, there's something luxury up about it, but it's not quite there yet. I'm also into like, the social life of materials. So how things enter our homes, which is like imported from China, through Cash and Carry's, my dad and uncles all run hardware shops. So, there's this kind of business aesthetic like follows, that follows our two childhoods and homes. And actually, whenever, when we've been filming in members' homes, that aesthetic is just it's very pleasant and it's like, it's my first language. I think, growing up between Gurdwara hardware shop and home, that was my first schooling in like, upholstering, you're in what kind of fabric you choose to upholster tears in, or how to cut a key. So, there's, I think I'm interested in how they tell a kind of social history. But I also just love those materials.

Hettie Judah 26:56

And then you've also brought earth into the installation, because there's this kind of mark that's rubbed along the wall, which is also quite subversive, because you're literally dirtying the white cube space of the exhibition. Is that, is that some of the soil from Pakistan?

Jasleen Kaur 27:12

It's Lancashire, it's Lancashire turf that I asked the group members doing the install to come and mark the space, there was something subversive about making a mark. Similar with like the entrance and the exit, there's some films that are kind of really discreetly placed out in the archway that are their rituals, not the right word, there are practices that I'd like to ward off the evil eye or, you know, cleanse a space, there's seeds and chillies that are used, and I wanted to kind of treat the space in a particular way that isn't necessarily written about in the work or isn't necessarily noticeable.

Hettie Judah 27:52

There's also this kind of really interesting emphasis on this idea of belonging and heritage and where certain objects fit and where people fit in, where they feel that they have an attachment. So, in one of the films, you have a group of the participants standing out in a field surrounded by cows, and they're walking, but they're not walking on the ground, they're walking on these little kind of treadmills that are kind of quite associated with, like old people doing exercises in the park. So, there's this kind of artifice, nylon-like kind of textiles that which have got this kind of techno dazzle to them. Did the work that you did with this group - did you end up coming to any kind of conclusions about the idea of belonging or hybridity or attachment to land? Or is it all sort of very kind of open discussion? Do you think that people kind of shifted the way they saw themselves in their relationships?

Jasleen Kaur 28:46

I think there's varying perspectives held amongst the individuals; we're living through time. And I see this in the archive as well. When it's cyclic, we're in a moment of resurgent nationalism. Again, I don't think there's a consensus in the group at all, but I can speak personally that, you know, for the past 10, 12 years, there's a questioning around belonging, there is an unbelonging, that is very present, and I think it is shared amongst the majority of the group members. And we were really thinking and talking about that too, about when you look at the archive, and you see arts funded projects, immediately or a couple of years after ruptures socially, whether that's race riots or a 9/11. These projects seem - this funding seems to be available to be a band-aid or a sticking plaster or desperation almost to try and have some kind of dialogue. And I don't know if I'm answering your question, but something that feels really... that has stuck with me through this project is there's so much and that is not in the exhibition. I think you've got to be aware of it as well about where this sits in the legacy of the archive and the legacy of the work at Touchstone, within the arts and in general and so, there was a lot of there is a lot of resisting actually that is you know, the seed book is not going to go into the archive is going to be planted at the Deerpark Community Centre in January. So that the project kind of evolves and there's a resistance to things being given formal archival life because I think there's something about you know, when you remember something when something is remembered when something is documented, something is undocumented, something is missed remembered, I was interested in complicating each of our narratives. I was interested in complicating this process of remembrance and making something unintelligible or difficult to process or difficult to fully understand these six seven individuals in this work and what yeah, what belonging or what inheritance might mean or what our identities might be.

Hettie Judah 30:57

Thank you so much. That was so interesting. Thank you for listening to the second episode of *The UP Podcast* with me Hettie Judah. And thank you to Jasleen Kaur, Alina Akbar and Lisa Allen for all of your insights. If you have the chance to visit Rochdale and want to experience *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*. It's open and free to visit until the 13th February 2022. *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan* was generously supported by Heritage Lottery Fund, Foyle Foundation, Garfield Weston, Rochdale Council and Arts Council England. Go to www.upprojects.com for more information on how to visit. You can also find UP Projects on Instagram at @up_projects and on Twitter at @upprojects. If you haven't already, please do listen to episode one of *The UP Podcast* in which I speak with Shezad Dawood about his work *The Terrarium*. The UP podcast was presented by Hettie Judah and generously supported by the Arts Council England. Audio production editing is by Arsalan Mohammad, graphics by Studio Workshop. Thank you for listening, and goodbye for now.