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Toronto-based artist explores women's sexuality

Mia Sandhu's paper cut outs depict her evolving ideas on women's sexuality

RYA BUCKLEY · FEB 14, 2019 · 0 COMMENTS · ARTS, FEATURES, LIFESTYLE, SEX AND THE STEEL CITY 2019



Photos C/O Mia Sandhu

By: Rya Buckley

Mia Sandhu's paper cut outs depict images of women partially or entirely nude, amidst backgrounds of leaves or behind curtains. She began working on these figures four years ago as a way of working through her own ideas about women's sexuality.

Sandhu is a multidisciplinary artist currently based in Toronto. Her work has been exhibited in Toronto, Kingston, Halifax and Hamilton. She is a member of The Assembly gallery here in Hamilton, has done an artist residency at the Cotton Factory and also exhibited her work at Hamilton Artists Inc.



Last November, Sandhu exhibited her collection *Soft Kaur* at The Assembly, which featured playful figures who are comfortable with their sexuality. The name of the exhibition, which alludes to both to the softness and fierceness of women, incorporates the half Punjabi artist's cultural background into her work.

"It's the idea [of] a female warrior spirit and the idea of equality that exists... Singh and Kaur are these given names and it was designed to eliminate status and... [create] men and women as equal. And I liked the play on this idea of soft female spirit slash warrior spirit [and] also the sexual undertone," Sandhu explained.

There are other motifs in Sandhu's work that suggest a dialogue between Sandhu's culture and her evolving ideas on sexuality. A lover of Indian fabrics, silks and tapestries, Sandhu includes these aesthetic features in her work through the exotic plants in the environment her figures reside in. With the evolution of her work, she now references more domesticated plants that humans have formed a relationship with.

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The silhouettes that are seen in *Soft Kaur* are also the result of Sandhu's art's progression. Her earlier work featured brown-bodied figures because Sandhu felt it more appropriate to use brown bodies in a work related to her upbringing and culture. Over time Sandhu employed more silhouettes in order to represent any woman, regardless of race.

The silhouettes do not broadcast as a uniform but as a canvas onto which women can project their own sexuality and ideas about sexuality. Sandhu is a believer in the fact that no one should decide for a woman how she should be represented sexually in society.

"I want women to be safe and I want them to feel safe and feel free and strong and empowered... [W]e're autonomous [and] each of us should choose for ourselves how we want to be represented sexually or in any other way because we're individuals. Hopefully we're not represented with any sort of attachment to shame. We should just be proud of who we are," Sandhu said.

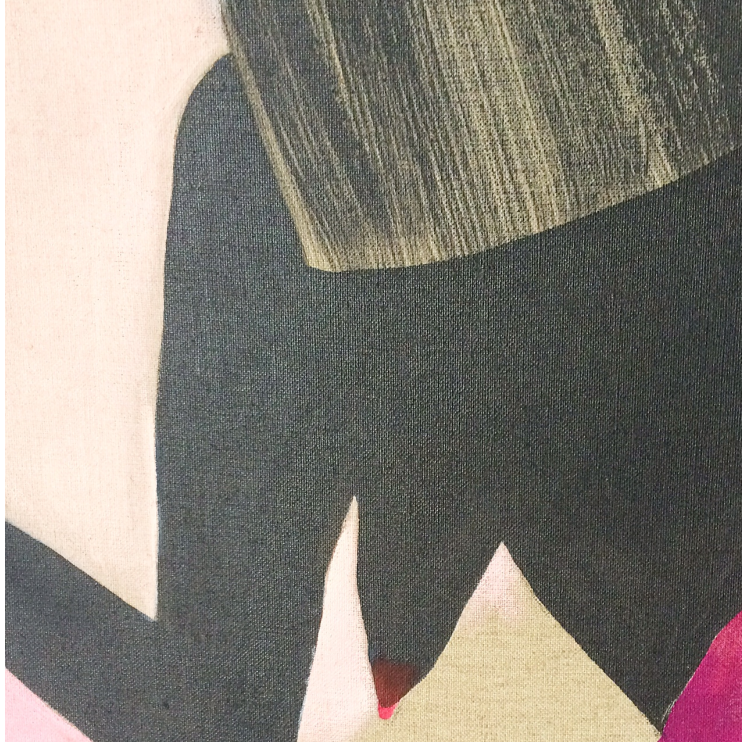


Facilitating space for women to speak about their ideas on sexuality was one of Sandhu's aims behind this body of work. She finds it interesting to observe how her audiences connect with and interpret her art. By enabling di-

alogue, she finds that women can begin to realize the experiences that they share.

Exhibiting at The Assembly also gave Sandhu a location to speak with others about her work and to receive feedback. One thing that she appreciates about the Hamilton art scene is the sincerity of the participants who she feels are open to talking about important issues and are creating art that is driven by content.

While there is no linear narrative to Sandhu's work, the content is obviously evolving as Sandhu's own views develop. One of the motifs whose symbolism has changed over the years is the cloak that Sandhu's figures have covering and revealing their bodies.



"[The cloak] represents shame, it represents personal space and it represents a number of other things as well... But it's like they're choosing how much of themselves that they're revealing and then as the work evolves, it's like the... cloak... stops being on them directly and starts being like in their space around them and they're allowing you in, or not letting you in," explained Sandhu.

Through her work, Sandhu is also choosing to what extent she decides to let her audiences in. She is working on a new set of drawings and will continue to explore women's sexuality and empowerment in the future. Her artwork is her diary, the paper cut outs and pencils replacing the thousands of elusive words that would be required to speak on the complicated ideas that she depicts.

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