

## Harinder Judge's 'A Ghost Dance'

### *Monument & Void*

By Susanna Davies-Crook

### THE MOUTH (or Time)

“It was when I was at her bedside that I saw Death, the Death of the dance of death, with its bantering grin, the Death of fireside tales that knocks on the door, a scythe in its hand, the Death that comes from elsewhere, strange and inhuman: it had the very face of Maman when she showed her gums in a wide smile of unknowingness”

- Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*

We are time-bound. The body, in its wisdom, glides through the three knowable dimensions and the fourth, time. Bodies do not stray into the infinite: matter, thermodynamics and entropy hold them in place. But beyond the body, consciousness travels. Harinder Judge's work is engaged in this interplay between the material and the extra-material, matter held in space-time, the mind or even the soul's journey into the beyond. The language of art as the manifestation of human thought and inquiry plays a key role in this understanding. Judge creates a dialogue between the act of artistic creation, representation and form, connecting them to belief and meaning.

Judge's heritage as a Sikh British artist informs the work through the synthesis of his experience and the resonance of memory. Ritual and belief are embedded into the material process. Across the two rooms of his vast East London studio – serendipitously numbered 1:11 – daily engagement with his tools and chosen media are all part of his alchemical process, whether involving household materials such as plaster, scrim, pigment and ash, or more reified materials such as bronze powder. In this doubled space, Judge casts both plaster and spells. This magical formula has magical intent and may, in the way of all affective art, unleash the supernatural.

Judge pours layer upon layer of plaster into face-down, bespoke frames and then scatters in pigment, charcoal and ash. Heat is shared between artist and plaster in an exothermic reaction and is combined with the dust. All the world is here in this constellation of moments, trapped in the form of the work like insects in amber. His core interest is in the “transformation of the body into different states”, and as such, the transformation of material through different states. In turn, consciousness is changed through this encounter.

In this way, Judge's lived experience is channelled into the form and the material. Judge retells the story of his great-uncle's funeral in northern India. When Judge arrived by plane, he disembarked and entered almost immediately into the ritual, in which he had to carry his uncle to the pyre. He recollects the dead weight of the body and the heat of the fire, the way that all that remained was dust, which was then picked through to see what remained. As with all people touched by death, Judge's own consciousness shifted: he entered the altered state of grief and existential knowing, suspended in the time whilst he and his family tended the fire to ensure the body burned. This singular autobiographical act makes its way into the work as material, and also reaches outwards into memory, metaphor and history, like ink hitting water.

The title “A Ghost Dance” references the ceremonies employed to repel colonisers in late nineteenth-century North America, which are still active today. In certain Native American tribes, the Ghost Dance is a circle dance that induces trance and connects the living with the dead, often with the intention of calling spirits to fight on behalf of the Indigenous people and end Western colonial violence and occupation. As in many cultures, dance and chanting open the door to a wisdom imparted through the transcendence of body into spirit and the return into deeper embodied knowledge, often via clairaudience and visions. In some cases, the dance is tied to a prophecy: “The tribes of the northwestern plateau between the Rocky and Cascade ranges believed in the impending destruction and renewal of the world, when the dead were to return.”<sup>1</sup> During a period of Western expansion in the US and the genocide of Indigenous people, the Ghost Dance emerged as a protective belief system rooted in trance, movement and ritual. “Ghost shirts” – protective clothing believed to be impenetrable – were worn during the ritual to eventually shield the body in battle. In almost all belief systems talismans of found, man-made or hewed material enshrine these protective gestures into objecthood, and they are what is left after the invocation and after the conflict, glimmers of human hope and more-than-human belief.

In Judge's work, the objects are also traces. They are, somehow, of the earth: markings and translations by a body that keeps the score of colonial oppression by the British on this land on which we now tread.

In the opening to *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf links modernity, empire, decay and objecthood: "there could be no doubt that greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth."<sup>2</sup>

All empires fall. All that is solid melts into air.<sup>3</sup> Grass will grow over your cities.<sup>4</sup>

### **THE BELLY (or Cave)**

"In order to rise  
From its own ashes  
A phoenix  
First  
Must  
Burn."

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

A flare in the darkness: the experience of the cave is enshrined in story. The arc of time frames and holds the experience of the cave, in which there is a beginning, a middle, a denouement (which may be awakening or self-actualisation) and an end: to begin again. The cave holds the life, dream, and death cycle.

In the gallery, this cave is transposed and the journey is an echo of those that came before. Perhaps by reaching out a hand toward the darkness, we might connect with the ancestors. The air is sombre and heavy, as though after a storm or a passing.

Those who first set eyes on the mark-making of our human ancestors in caves across the world (most recognisably in Lascaux, southwestern France) will have done so with a torch, lighting up frame by frame the remnants of imagery left by unknown hands. To enter the cave we begin in the light, go in through the mouth, are entombed and incubated by darkness and receive divine knowledge, only to be reborn back into the light. This ritual has been the format of many cross-cultural spiritual experiences since time immemorial. One can visit the caves of Elephanta outside Mumbai, those in the foothills of the Himalayas near Judge's own ancestral village, the mounds of Silbury in the UK, or Wind Cave National Park, a "breathing cave" and sacred site of the Lakota people in South Dakota. The cave experience bonds us with our ancestors and with our origin story. In his book *The Mind in the Cave*, David Lewis Williams sets out cave consciousness through art and mark-making. He considers how we have consumed art created in caves such as those in Lascaux, which we receive as fully illuminated photos on a rectangular, flat surface. These photos, preserved in the pages of EH Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, give a false impression: we view these images as representations and therefore critique the rendering of the animals and the use of the tools. As Williams argues, this misses the point. These renderings are meant to be viewed live by torchlight. They point to the ritual, experience and awakening of the people who went into the cave and sought to know the universe and the origins of creation – perhaps to experience comfort and home in the oneness of all things. The markings are a trace of the act and a journey toward comprehension of that which we cannot know. The ineffable is made manifest.

In "A Ghost Dance", Judge offers an invitation to enter, to experience and to leave changed.

## THE DREAM (or Eye)

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.  
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.  
The grasses unload their griefs at my feet as if I were God,  
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.  
Fumy spiritous mists inhabit this place  
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.  
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.  
The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,  
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.  
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet  
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.  
Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky –  
Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection.  
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.

- Sylvia Plath, *The Moon and the Yew Tree* (excerpt)<sup>5</sup>

Judge draws us into this gallery-cave to ask us to be at our most open and receptive – to look within and without. The wall is an invitation and a liminal space, as though to touch it would be to transform. It moves inward like a fissure, a crack in time or in the wall itself. To stand in front of it is almost to be swallowed into the weight of it, whatever “it” is. Judge refers to it as “the void”, a kind of event horizon, perhaps. As he goes on to explain, “The only way you can get to know those things is by being in dialogue with them in some way, and mine is in a very material way where I’m forming things and making things, and I don’t know the work until it looks back at me”.

In some lights, or when rendered photographically, it looks like a waveform: perhaps that of a voice note, a dead person making contact in a movie, an earthquake registering on a seismograph, a sonic exploration of the Mariana trench, or a lie detected on a polygraph. It is almost script-like: a form of writing or recording... what? These everyday translations of unseen phenomena into graphic measurement are not dissimilar to Judge’s artistic process. They are an attempt to make visible the material of consciousness or of the knowledge of the hidden universe beyond our felt experience.

The light matter of the universe is always coupled with the dark matter of the unknown and unexplored. Matter and antimatter are always paired and “if they come into contact, annihilate each other, leaving behind pure energy”.<sup>6</sup> Antimatter has the same mass as matter but with the opposite electric charge. We as beings exist in a vice of polarity from the Magnetic North to the charge of our cells.

The dark shape Judge places in the space as if it has always been there speaks to what remains, the echoes of a civilisation. The object in relation – object: object – speaks in its own material language. As if growing, the earthly mound reaches for the above from the below. In monochrome it is both yin/yang and shiva/shakti, the necessity of dark and light in harmony.

If we consider the work an abstraction, the forms align with a kind of making that shares DNA with the practice of the Tantrikas and of the recuperated darlings of Western art, Hilma af Klint and Mondrian. The geometry of form and the mirroring itself speaks to hemispheres and mirrors.

Judge is not a direct medium or channel, but the ritual and repetition in the making of the work and of the relaxation of the artist’s mind as it treads these familiar paths has ancient roots in human meaning-making through visual representation.

The philosopher Abraham Maslow suggested that a self-actualising person has multiple “peak experiences”, high points in which they are at one with themselves and their surroundings, experiencing harmony and ease. Maslow suggested that those who seek to go into this expanded, networked consciousness with the aid of psychedelics can have these peak experiences, but caveated – as many great yogis and thinkers have since – that simply life itself is wonder and “to be looking elsewhere for miracles is a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous”<sup>7</sup>

The rise in psychedelics and plant medicine in the West and its co-option into the Western medical tradition and further into non-specific experimentation with substances and subjective experience, points toward this desire for connection. In many instances, these experiences hold a form of death, often called ego death, acknowledging that to truly see we must first go beyond the self.

### **THE LIGHT (or Rebirth)**

“The confrontation with death – and the reprieve from it – makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it... I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we’d never die.”

– Abraham H. Maslow

Pablo Picasso’s famed assertion that “every act of creation is first an act of destruction” is death and life again at the hand of the artist. To extinguish what we think we know and welcome what we do not know, yet. Harminder Judge’s work is engaged in these acts of creation and destruction. The rituals of his studio and the cycles of the materials in the work make visible the ineffable. Death becomes ash.

Maslow noted that a characteristic of self-actualising people was that death did not perturb them: they recognised everything must change. That death is life. Life is death.

To be alive, to die and to mark passing is a human performance. A procession takes place on the full moon<sup>8</sup> of May 23 2024 on the opening night of “A Ghost Dance”. It will link the dual locations of Matt’s Gallery and The Sunday Painter in South London and blood-beat feet will tread across time and space carrying dead weight. The six mirror-bodies mark the metronome of time step-by-step, themselves ash, clay, plaster – almost the same material as that which they carry on their lifting straps – object: a tree, a body, a ship, a stone, a cocoon, a house. Bells resonate and vibrate on unseen waves through unseen winds speaking the language of the spirits. As it reaches its destination it meets its mate. Another above, as below. A swollen, weighted reflection. Transformation is conjured this time in the element of flame, completing the cycle: earth as body, water as blood, air as breath, fire as spirit, perhaps, or any exchange of heat, words and thought therein.

In scientific circles, transformation is inscribed within the law of conversion. This law<sup>9</sup> states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, it can only move from one state to another. There is no true death, only a recalibration of energy.

Here, the bodies give themselves to gravity and time, allowing transformation of their energy, their time and their life source. They embody the elements as they walk the manmade pavements, passing through a tunnel from the now-gentrified Nine Elms, through the industrial old Wandsworth of wholesale markets and mechanics’ yards, into the less affluent neighbourhoods of Stockwell and Little Portugal.

It is acknowledged in many Indigenous cultures that the land will remember the theft, oppression and bloodshed of colonial violence, and it is the land that will seek reparations. The land will also remember those who were at one with it, interconnected and inter-reliant, who walked with it rather than on it.<sup>10</sup> The act of burying placenta in ancestral land, for example, binds the body of the infant to the body of Mother Earth and to the sacred homeland. Attunement with seasons, abundance, weather cycles and the circle of the four directions: North, East, South and West, sky and earth<sup>11</sup> are also the embodiment of the cave loop. The colonial and subsequent neoliberal project seeks to diminish complexity and exploit binary thinking, it peels the body from the land and the subject from its roots, and this act is embedded in time. Time is also a co-opted dimension. In post-Fordist late capitalism, linear time is perhaps a hindrance in the decolonial project. Via the knowing of more-than-human and more-than-body consciousness and invoking of Indigenous knowledge, Judge’s collapsing of time and influences then are an act of comprehension and resistance, they are more than one thing at once. The work is within and without, above and below: it acknowledges complicity and belonging to these streets, these walls and the need to exist beyond them, and thus transforms them, and us.

Harminder Judge (b.1982 Rotherham, UK) lives and works in London. He graduated from the Royal Academy Schools, London in 2021. Selected recent solo exhibitions include: *Sea and Stone and Rib and Bone*, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India, 2023; *Frieze London* with The Sunday Painter, London, UK 2022; *Rising Skin from Rock and Chin*, The Sunday Painter, London, UK 2022; *Ankles Absorbing Ash*, Humber Street Gallery, Hull, UK 2022; *Mountains and Mercies*, galeriepcp, Paris, France 2021. Selected recent group exhibitions include: *Curated By: Glossary*, Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria 2023; *The Reason for Painting*, Mead Gallery, Warwick, UK 2023; *Love Letter*, Pace Gallery, New York City, USA 2023; *And this skin of mine*, Guts Gallery, London, UK 2022; *New Beginnings*, Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2022; *A Grain of Sand*, The Sunday Painter, London, UK 2021; *Am I Human To You?*, Jugendstilsenteret & Kube Museum, Ålesund, Norway 2021; *Tomorrow: London*, White Cube, London, UK 2020; *Our Ashes Make Great Fertilizer*, Public Gallery, London, UK 2020; *At Home In The Universe*, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India 2019 and *A Plot For The Multiverse*, Indigo + Madder, London, UK 2019.

1 <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195173697.001.0001/acref-9780195173697-e-0690>  
2 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press (1925).  
3 @Karl Marx  
4 @Anselm Kiefer  
5 Ariel, Sylvia Plath, Faber & Faber (1965)  
6 <https://home.cern/science/physics/matter-antimatter-asymmetry-problem>  
7 Maslow, A.H. *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences*, 2nd edition. Viking (1970)  
8 White as a knuckle and terribly upset”, (Plath)  
9 It feels odd to speak of laws of the elements, when they should be free  
10 Further elaboration on “walking with” can be found in *Walking*, ed. Tom Jeffreys, Whitechapel (2024)  
11 I initially wrote compass, but compass does not acknowledge above and below, and feels linear and instrumentalised, rather than four winds.