

Welcome to the sixth episode of OUTPUT Gallery's podcast. If you've missed any previous shows, which began with an origin story about how OUTPUT came to be, plus interviews with exhibitors including Joseph Cotgrave, Lo Tierney, Chila Kumari Singh Burman and Gold Maria Akanbi, all you need to know is that OUTPUT Gallery is a small space in Liverpool City Centre that opened back in April 2018. OUTPUT Gallery works exclusively with creatives from or based in Merseyside. It has quite a high turnover of exhibitions and it aims to support its local art scene and raise the profile of artists in the area.

I'm your host Gabrielle de la Puente, I run the space and because - as of today - we are back in local lockdown when this episode is being recorded, we understand that a lot of people don't quite feel comfortable visiting exhibitions and doing all the things we used to take for granted. So, the conversations we're having on this podcast hopefully give you a way to engage with exhibitions and artists' ideas from afar.

In this episode, we are joined by two of Merseyside's most iconic contemporary artists, the Singh Twins - the collaborative identity of Amrit and Rabindra Singh.

Wirral-based artists the Singh Twins have an international reputation and are known for their highly-detailed, narrative, symbolic and eclectic style which is rooted in Indian aesthetics. They work in painting, illustration, writing and film, and engage with issues around society, politics and culture. From October 1st until the 25th, the Singh Twins will be exhibiting at OUTPUT Gallery. We'll talk about their plans for the show soon, but a good place to start is at the beginning, and it's something that we've been asking all of our interviewees. So I just wanted to ask - what has your relationship been like with art from even a young age?

It's always been there! Ever since we can remember, we have been scribbling, drawing on something, I think we started drawing in books and on our walls at home. And then our father saw that we were very keen on our scribbling and drawing and you know, they used to be the regular stocking filler - felt tips, pens, art pads and paints. So ever since we can remember - I can't remember a time when we haven't had a paintbrush or a pencil or a felt tip in our hands, really.

Did you find then that the home environment was a good incubator for that, or was there other things in Birkenhead or Liverpool that helped to grow that creativity?

I think a number of things, yes. Having that home environment, the materials, that's obviously where it starts. We also had a lot of books, as we still do, at that time they weren't purchased by us but they were on our shelf and we used to dip in and out of those, some of which were books that had the Victorian illustrators. A lot of fairytale books, with the likes of Edmund du Lac, Edward Burne-Jones and Aubrey Beardsley. They'd always

fascinated us, I think that got our initial interest in the technical skills of a detailed, decorative drawing style, which we first used to do when we were younger.

I remember as children we always used to bemoan the fact that whenever you went to a shop to buy a colouring book, it was never the kind of things that we wanted to colour. It was always the big fat teddy bears and beach balls and nothing really challenging. We always longed to have a colouring book that would have the kinds of intricate, challenging drawings that were in the fairytale books we had at home, but they just didn't exist. I think another influence of growing up in the area was we went to a Catholic convent school which had a beautiful chapel attached to it, and with that, being in the Catholic tradition it was very iconographic with stained-glass windows and sculptures and stations of the cross. We used to have R.E. lessons with these beautiful posters of the different Catholic saints, and we were mesmerised by those. Just the beauty of them, but also, we knew there was something much deeper happening within those artworks, you know, the symbolic, narrative nature of them. We weren't able to interpret everything ourselves at that age, we were very young, but I think that's something that stayed with us. I think that stimulated our early interest in renaissance art, and being able to understand the symbolism within that, as a starting point. Obviously renaissance art was very religious based, simply because of the fact that the patrons of those times were, that's what they were interested in commissioning from artists.

So the other thing that I think has really inspired our work since an early age, and living in the area, is obviously the wealth of museums and galleries that we have on our doorstep. I have to confess, I think two of our favourite places have always been the Lady Lever, which is on the Wirral side of course, and the National Museums, the Walker Art Gallery. I think probably they were our favourite because we have always been more inclined towards the traditional types of art forms. The Walker in particular has such a - well, both the Lady Lever and the Walker have such a diverse scope of artworks from across the ages, from the Medieval period all the way through to the Victorian period. So we used to go there on occasion and just be awestruck by all types of art, not just painting, but the decorative arts that they had there as well. And also the ethnographic objects that they had from around the world in the World Museum next door to the Walker.

So then did that feed in to the stuff that you made, even at that age? Or was it an influence that manifested later?

At that age I think everything did feed in to our influences and they changed accordingly, because I remember, initially we started off with the whole illustrating fairy tales that we'd been reading on the shelf, in the style of the Victorian illustrators that we just loved. And then, after going to the convent school, in our early teens we started to draw a lot of Christian imagery basically. Around Easter or Christmas we would create cards and post those out to people rather than buy our own. That all changed when we went to India, again as teenagers, roundabout 1980. Almost overnight, we suddenly stopped doing all

these Catholic, Christian imagery and started to then draw things that we had been experiencing as we were travelling around India. We were very fortunate, because we didn't do the normal thing and get on a plane and fly there. Our father was a lot more adventurous than that! He built a motorhome with his brothers and we all jumped in, from the Wirral, and we drove across land to India. We travelled around India for eight months, just absorbing anything and everything to do with Indian culture, its history and all its diversity. At that time we also kept diaries and a lot of those were illustrated memories of what we were seeing at the time. So all of a sudden, we start to have images of the Hindu iconography, for example, the temples and cave-carvings, the intricate screen work you would get in a lot of the Islamic architecture, such as the Taj Mahal or the ports in Delhi. Also the miniature painting, the Indian miniature style of painting, that's where we first came across that particular genre of art. And we were just totally blown away by the Indian miniatures. They were just so exquisite, the sheer skill that's involved in creating those jewel-like images on such a small scale. But also the narrative and the symbolism, and political satire was something that the Indian miniatures really got us interested in. Because a lot of those miniature paintings were again commissioned by the rulers and depicted scenes of military campaigns or life at the court, and very much about "bigging up", if you like, the politics of the day. So it's all social historical documentation, but done in a very beautiful, jewel-like way. I think we were quite disappointed actually when we saw, in India, that the miniature style itself wasn't something that was really valued in India, particularly within the contemporary arts scene. So we did go to, you know, modern art galleries as well as all the museums and more historical sites. And it seemed to us that all the artists at that time were aping western standards and role models within contemporary art. Nobody seemed to be drawing upon their own heritage and traditions. That was something that really struck us as being quite sad - why was India aping the West when they had this rich tradition of their own they could explore? I think coming back from India we were so instilled with a sense of pride in our Indian heritage. We've always grown up in a very white-dominated area, we were the only Indians in our school. We lived with that peer pressure to conform to Western ways of thinking and dressing and socialising and all the rest of it. We were very much made to feel inferior in terms of embracing our own Indian traditions. Particularly through the media, there was a lot of attention on negative stereotypes, particularly arranged marriage, and extended family and all of the usual gripes. So the miniature was, well it was an extension wasn't it, of India rejecting its own heritage. We just felt that it was an extension of maybe, a hangover from the Raj, if you like. India had three, four hundred years of being dominated by the British, and that West-is-Best attitude is something that still exists in India. Maybe not as much as it did back then, but it certainly exists today. A colonial mindset. This idea that to be progressive, to be seen as forward-thinking, you have to be Westernised - it wasn't something we subscribed to ourselves. I think that trip to India, we came back really fired up, thinking nobody's going to make us think our Indian heritage is inferior to western heritage. They're both equal, they both have positive things to offer, and why can't we take the best of both worlds? One of those things was the Indian miniature style of painting, which as soon as we came back from India, we were busy then trying to teach ourselves the style of Indian miniature

painting. We picked up two books during our visits in India which are kind of our bible, they're actually still on our shelf, falling apart at the seams, because we've handled them so many times. But we used to just try and copy the miniatures from there. Then as time went on and we were able to do a bit more independent travelling around the UK and visit collections in the V&A museum, we were allowed to take photographs of the miniatures they had there. And from those we were able to blow up details of the artwork and try and get a sense of how each little dot and stipple and stroke had been put down on the paper, and hone our own skills that way. So it's a completely self-taught style, if you like. We draw upon the aesthetics but we don't use the traditional materials.

It sounds like such an education then, as you're saying completely self-led. I personally still think that travelling to other places and just spending time there, maybe not in such a scheduled, in-and-out way is the best form of education, and it has done that for you.

Yeah, definitely. We missed a year of school but it was the best education we ever had. Definitely life-changing. Doing that kind of travelling and meeting different people as we're travelling through Europe, and the Middle-East, and in India itself. Learning about the diversity of people in the world - such a brilliant education, absorbing all the arts and culture along the way was just an added bonus really.

Did you ever formally study art, or was it just making an effort to go and find these artefacts and things in collections and then studying them on that scale - or was it ever formalised?

Just school level really, we did O-Level art and A-Level art. But we were really geared up towards doing the sciences, because we wanted to follow in our Father's footsteps and become doctors. Unfortunately, our teachers at school didn't have the same idea, they felt that we had a talent in art and they basically put a spanner in the works of our own choice of wanting to do medicine. They were pressurising us all the time to do art. We actually had no intention - we battled against a career in art, or becoming artists, we battled against that. The more our teachers were trying to push us into art, the more we were trying to fight against it. Partly I think because their attitude was driven by the stereotypes that they had of Indian families, and particularly the stereotype that Asian parents don't want their kids going into the arts, they want them going into professions of doctor, nurse, lawyer, engineer. And that might be true, but which parent does actually want their child to go into the arts? You know, I don't think it's the number one career choice for most people. Most people want their children to have a stable job - it's true of other cultures too, a stable job that will bring in a decent income. We all know being an artist is a very hit and miss career. It's very hard to make a success of it, and I'm talking about pure art in the sense of being an artist and selling your work, I'm not talking about going into professions where there's creative skills but it's nine to five. Like architecture or engineering or a more stable way of being creative. I guess because they thought that, and our teachers never really

thought to ask us to our face whether or not we wanted to do art, they just assumed we were being pressured. We actually applied to University to do medicine, and we didn't get any offers even at interview. Basically because our teachers wrote a really horrible report, which we caught sight of, that said in the first sentence that we were only pursuing medicine because of parental persuasion and family tradition. Which was completely not true!

Wow.

And how they thought we should be doing art, because that's where our talent was. We were so naive at the time. We saw these reports, well we helped ourselves, we weren't really meant to see them. To put it in context, we had one interview in London, a pre-University interview, and we had asked our teachers not to mention anything on our application about our interest in art. Because, we said, we hadn't mentioned it, we hadn't even mentioned it in the hobbies section because we knew if we did, they'd pick up on that and start blowing it out of proportion. So anyway, we went to this interview in London, and after a couple of questions on why we there, for the reason we were there, they suddenly turned their attention to well, we believe you're good at art, and why aren't you doing art... so we went back to school really angry. How did these interviewers know about our art when we didn't say anything? Our head of class, our teachers said, oh I can assure you twins, we haven't written anything in your report. We didn't believe them anyway, so we got a friend to watch - this is in sixth form, obviously - we got a friend to watch the door, and we went into the files and pulled out our reports. And this is what these reports said. Of course, it all made sense as to why we didn't get any offers for interviews. Why would we? If the teachers are telling us basically that we don't want to do what we're applying for. But we were too scared to actually admit that we'd seen them - because we felt, we'd get into more trouble. So we bottled it all up really didn't we, and just basically, promptly told our teachers to forget any applications for art. Because alongside of that, they had persuaded us to apply for Oxford and Cambridge to do an arts course, and we'd said to them we would only apply to those two institutions as a fallback to our science applications. And that was the compromise, if you like. So the only thing we could do by way of retaliation without giving the game away that we'd been doing something we shouldn't have been doing was to basically tell them to withdraw those applications. Which- I don't know if they ever did or they didn't, anyway, we just said to them, forget about it. We're not doing art. So we kicked and screamed against doing art actually, right up until school leaving age. And because we didn't get any interviews for our chosen subject, to go into medicine, a tutor that had been helping us with our biology subject, she recommended we just get our foot in the door with any University and then maybe transfer. So that's what we did. We decided on our next love, which was comparative religion, that's something we've always been interested in. And we applied for a BA Honours degree in combined studies at Chester College which at the time was affiliated to Liverpool University. So it was a Liverpool University Degree. We registered to do Comparative Religion and Ecclesiastical History, which was so fascinating, the first three centuries of church history. And we had to

pick one more subject that fitted, for the degree, it was three subjects altogether. As luck would have it, the only thing that would fit into the timetable was a course on 20th Century Western Art History. So we kind of thought, oh OK, we're destined to do some art again. We enrolled in that and we thought, it'll be a light-hearted subject alongside what we perceived to be more academic and heavy-going. Our whole outlook then was to become then academics in the field of comparative religion and church history. It was really the attitude within that art department at Chester that drove us to become artists. The attitude within the department was so Euro-centric in its outlook. You know, we were encouraged to develop our own style of art, because it wasn't just theory. There came a point where you were also developing your own practice. But there wasn't any practical instruction, you were just left to your own devices. And it wasn't the kind of art we were remotely interested in, so it didn't really inspire us to go into the art department and see, you know... a bed-spring hanging up from the ceiling, with bits of paper stuck in and out of it... which is OK if you're into that kind of thing. We thought we were going there to learn how to paint like, you know, Michaelangelo! All the proper techniques, in our opinion, what art is really about. You know, all those skills. Or at least learning that first and then progressing onto other things. It just wasn't our interest. So when it came time for developing our own style, we turned towards the Indian miniature style of painting and took that opportunity to develop that style, then. That just went down like a lead balloon with our tutors, because they'd basically, in no uncertain times, told us that this tradition we were inspired by was backwards and outdated and had no place within contemporary art expression. So, you know, to us that really staggered us, because it was just another extension of the kind of peer pressure and prejudice that we'd had growing up, to conform to "western norms", so initially we did try and compromise our style because we thought, we've got a degree to get. So we started toning down the colours, painting in a more realistic style. Still on a very small scale, like the Indian miniatures are, but trying to, in our own mind, make it more westernised in its aesthetics. Nothing that we did really was good enough, they kept telling us to develop, this was their favourite phrase. And I think there came a point in the second year where we thought, well, enough is enough really. They're telling us, one of the ethos' within the department was, the be all and end all of being an artist was about self-expression. And they were encouraging self expression, yet at the same time, they were trying to tell us how to express ourselves, which was a complete contradiction. They were telling us also, I think, the fact that we were twins didn't go down too well either, because they saw that we were developing a very similar style, simply based on the fact that we were both inspired by the tradition of Indian miniatures... just as a consequence of our common interests and level of skill. So this aspect of contemporary art being about self-expression, our being twins and doing similar styles went against that. The irony was, of course, we were the only artists in our department doing anything remotely different from the rest of our peers, who were visibly churning out clones of Matisse and Gauguin, and Picasso, and all the role models that had been presented to us as being the right artists to follow. I think at that stage we thought, OK, we need to use our work to challenge these mindsets. What we perceived from our own experience as being institutional prejudice. I mean, it wasn't deliberate in that sense, but that's the way it was expressing itself in terms

of how we were being perceived and our work was being judged by our tutors. There was also an irony there because a lot of the role models we were being pushed towards, like Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso. They themselves, as everybody knows, had been inspired by non European art forms, by and large they developed their uniqueness within the western canon of art because they looked outside of the western traditions. I mean, not entirely, but that played a large part of it, and it seemed to us that wasn't being recognised. It also seemed a double standard, that it was OK for them to look beyond their own traditions, to the world outside, to create something unique, but it wasn't OK for us to do the same thing. So again, the way that we started to progress from that point onwards was to exaggerate everything that we felt made the Indian miniature the Indian miniature. So this idea of flattened perspective and multi-perspective views, the use of pattern and contrasting colours, this was everything that we started to exaggerate from that point onwards. But I think the real crunch came really, not so much with the practical work, which I think the tutors still didn't really accept, but by that time we weren't bothered - to be fair they recognised, as they put it, the skill involved in producing the works. But they just didn't value it, they didn't approve, at the end of the day. But I think the crunch came when we actually submitted our theoretical work, we both had to create a dissertation for the final year and the dissertation really had to somehow connect with your practical work and the theories we were being taught through the art history side of the course. So we both chose different artists to study, but artists who had nevertheless been inspired by traditions outside of the western canon of art history. I chose Henri Matisse and Gustave Moureau, and I was looking very much at the relationship between the two of them as master and pupil, and at some point in their lives both of them had been inspired by Indian or Persian art. Rabindra chose a number of artists, ten artists, across the board of different movements within western art history, where they were inspired by different aspects - whether it was Japanese art or Tahiti or Persia or Africa, whatever. Analysing their work and picking out all the stylistic conventions that had come from those non-western traditions. Each in our way, we were trying to justify our own positions by stating through our dissertations that what we were doing was following in the footsteps of these so-called great masters of western art. Unfortunately one of the external examiners, it was confided in us that he didn't like what we'd written about western art being influenced particularly by Indian art. And he refused to mark our dissertations, and that pulled our whole degree category right the way down to a 2:2. We'd been told that if we pulled out the stops we would get a first, so we had gone, you know, no bars held, we'd really pulled out every stop to try and research these dissertations. We'd gone to France and visited the various different studios of different artists as far as we could, we'd looked at their diaries... it's a really long story. Basically, because of that refusal to mark that particular piece, the whole degree was pulled down. It went further than refusing to mark it, he refused to mark it but also he tried to accuse us of cheating, to justify why he wanted to give this work a zero. Even though our own tutors had actually given it a first class, the internal tutor had given it a first class mark. He wasn't open about it because he had no proof of cheating, obviously, he couldn't justify giving us a zero without somehow accusing us of doing something untoward. He basically accused us of plagiarism, and collusion, and at one point he was

saying our sister had done it... but in a very roundabout way, not using direct terminology, so we couldn't really pinpoint him and complain. But we knew something was wrong when the results came out, and we were given this really low category. It was actually our friend who picked up on it and called us, she'd obviously had her results and said you won't believe what they've given you twins. When she told us we nearly fell through the floor! So we went to the college and we tried to find out what had happened with the grades, because we knew we felt there was something wrong, because we'd had an awful interview that nobody else had had to go through. And the attitude of this particular examiner and the nature of his questioning made it clear to us that he was accusing us of something, even if he didn't use direct terminology. So we felt that was what had underpinned this whole situation, and it was at that point where one of the internal examiners confided in us and let us know exactly what had gone on behind closed doors. Apparently this examiner had not liked what we'd written, and there was some debate about the grades, and when some of the tutors were arguing for a higher grade he had said something to the effect that no, give them a 2:2, they'll be happy with that because they'll only be going off and getting married anyway. And I think that was basically the last straw, for us! Whether that was a sexist thing or a racist thing I don't know, you know, the sort of little Indian girls... or whether it was just because we were women, who knows. Our tutor said he didn't like what we'd written - how dare we suggest that western art has been inspired by non-European art forms. Even though it was thoroughly researched and backed up all of our arguments. And actually, the only hint that we had of that first hand, in the interview we had that no other student had, where this one interviewer was basically grilling us and- not really asking us questions about our dissertations but asking us about how the dissertations were put together, which is what raised our suspicions. For example, I think one of the first things he said was- he had our dissertations in front of him and he said these are superhuman, how do you explain it? Where does all this knowledge come from? And being thrown into that situation out of the blue, as a student at that age... so we tried to explain about the months of research that had gone in, first-hand, going around and being told that we could get a first if we really pulled the stops out and that's why we were way above what we needed to do to get these dissertations through. And towards the end of the conversation which lasted a good hour or so, towards the end of it this chap was getting really frustrated, because obviously we weren't admitting to any level of cheating because we hadn't cheated. It finally came out, in the final moments of the interview, what his gripe was. Because he then proceeded to say, in a very begrudging way, well anyway you say that western art is influenced by Indian art and you talk as if it's fact, but how do you know it is fact? So I kind of plucked up the courage at that point, both of us I think were about to fall apart because it was such an awful experience, but I managed to pluck up the courage to defend our corner and say, well look, we don't argue that it's fact unless we have first-hand sources, information. I explained that we'd gone to the studio of Gustave Moureau and we'd looked at his diaries and in his own handwriting, there's these sketches of different head-dresses from Indian sculptures and he's written in his own hand where the sources are from, these Indian sources. And I said to the examiner, surely in those circumstances you can speak as if it's fact? He's inspired by

India! And his reply to that was well, he could have been hallucinating at the time he wrote the diaries. I think that just stunned us, that was the moment that stunned us into silence, we realised he wasn't interested in what we had to say about our work. We didn't know what to say... it was just an awful situation. That betrayed what we felt to be the underlying cause of his disapproval of these dissertations. Because of all of that we refused our degree, actually, we refused to accept it, we demanded an appeal. First of all we were told there wasn't an appeal system we could go through, until there was a lot of publicity about the whole case. We had some people within the college who were able to speak on our behalf. Not everybody could because of confidentiality restrictions and things. There was someone within- the chaplain, actually, who was not bound by those same regulations. He very kindly got statements from different people within our departments and he put something together and sent it to the University. About our standard of work really, to counteract this guy saying our work was too- you know, it was beyond BA level, and he was trying to support us. So the whole thing ended up in the papers and all of a sudden we were told there is an appeal we could go through, so that was the first hurdle, but it was several years later, battling with the University until we finally got the degrees upgraded to a 2:1. Which we still didn't accept, we sent that back and said we're not accepting it until we know exactly how you've got to the figure. And then there was another battle of trying to get the mark sheets, and when we did finally get to them, it seemed there was so much scribbling out... it's very precise, they have these grids that they cross reference different subjects, and that finally determines what your overall degree is. It seemed to us from looking at this grid that we should have... the 2:1 they were now trying to give us, we should have had that even without any marks for this dissertation. In fact, we should have had a first. We did know actually, one thing that was in our favour is that we did know we had a first granted to these dissertations by our internal examiner, because the mark sheet was left on them when we had this interview that no other student had. We were handed these dissertations, there was a marking sheet on there that stated what we'd been given. So we then went through a period of trying to question how this final upgrade, if you can call it that, had been achieved. Unfortunately we didn't get very far, I think we got as far as the privy council but then we hit a brick wall, because the privy council weren't prepared to take it any further. They said that they felt we'd been dealt with fairly, and when we questioned how they came to that question we were told they weren't in the habit of giving explanations for their decisions. We were left with that, so we never accepted the degree, we don't officially have that degree. But we are very pleased to say that we were finally given an honorary doctorate from both Chester and Liverpool University over the last five years, which in a sense is an acknowledgement to the fact that we were treated unfairly. It's taken a long while but it still means a lot!

It's absolutely wild... I was not expecting that answer! But at the same time, you're not going to want to hear this, but I've got friends that I studied with who are brown and have had almost the exact same experience, like three years ago.

I was hoping things would have changed a little bit!

Oh, no.

Oh dear, OK.

I think people are still in very white institutions that don't acknowledge anything outside of Anglo or even American centric imagery and styles.

I think the worst thing is that they don't recognise it's a racist perspective to have, because it's the norm. And it's the way they've been brought up. As I say, I don't think necessarily in all cases there's an intent to be racist, but it's ingrained, it's part of the system.

It completely is. It's interesting that your relationship with education then, initially you had teachers earlier on who stripped you of your agency. Now they're sort of happy that they did, because you've gone on to so much success.

Well, people say they kind of did you a favour, and we say, they weren't intending to at the time. It's the intent that counts, not what the outcome was.

Exactly.

And we've had to battle hard to get where we are, it's not necessarily... OK we ended up treading the path of art, but the level of success that we have had has been down to hard work and we still face the same kind of barriers. It was prejudice that put us on the road of becoming artists, because it motivated us to use our art in a way that had meaning and purpose, as a political tool. Not just as a hobby, but to challenge that whole Eurocentric outlook that the contemporary art world has in the country. It's not just about non European art versus European art, there are lots of artists out there who are not fitting into the dictates of the London art scene. You know, they're doing figurative work or decorative work, or work that's not being considered serious contemporary art, these days.

I know many of them! It's interesting that that happened, and then when you did find your own agency, after being so inspired by the trip as well- I hope those people are kicking themselves, I hope they regret everything. I cannot believe they didn't respect you enough to think you could have written that.

I don't think it was the case that he believed that, I think he needed an excuse not to mark the work, and that was as good an excuse as any. It couldn't be that he didn't like what we'd written, because how do you justify that. He actually wrote, his assessment of the work was literally that it was beyond BA level, superhuman, PHD, undoubtedly scholarly, yet he refused to mark it. So our appeal was more based on the fact that this guy has given his opinion of the work, why doesn't the mark reflect that? Why's he giving it zero?

I now go through many art schools as a visiting lecturer and so much of it is about, this is the history of art, what are you going to add to it, what are you going to challenge? And the fact that he couldn't see that as more contemporary discourse, and instead as a threat to his whiteness...

That was one of the most disappointing things. We had this view of Universities as these bastions of free-thinking, discussion, discourse, as you say. Challenging opinions. And yet when we were trying to do that... in fact we weren't trying to do that, we were just following our heart with the kind of work that we were interested in. But incidentally, because of that we were challenging the status quo. That should have been accepted, we felt as a positive thing - not something that was negative.

One of the things I wanted to ask, having worked outside of a formal practice-based art school in developing over the years, how have you managed to keep that development going? Has that been through people writing about your work, discussions with other artists, reading- did you do more travel?

In terms of our progression as artists, creatively, do you mean?

Yes.

I think it's been stubbornness on the one hand, because we've refused to kowtow to the dictates of the contemporary art world. We want to stay true to our work. But also because the miniature does offer so much, it's a language - it's so diverse, with so much depth. People do often say to us, we've had that question - when are you going to move away from the Indian miniature? And actually, we have moved away from it quite a lot. Our work has never been just about one thing, ever. We've looked at so many different traditions, combined with the original Indian aesthetics that our work more definitely started off being. Even our change of mediums - we're not just painting now, but film, digital, mixed media, all of that. It's largely been a natural progression. I don't think anyone has forced us to move in those directions. There's also the argument - why do you have to change to be seen as progressing? Why does progression mean continual change? There's the old adage - if it's not broken, why are you trying to fix it? So, if you're happy in a particular style, and it's your language at the end of the day, people pick a different aesthetic and style to work in, that's their means of expression. If you're comfortable talking a particular language, why should you be expected to change to a different language because people see that unless you are changing, you are not progressing? We've always challenged that view. But there have been turning points, and one of those turning points for us stylistically was probably around 2008, when we were involved with Liverpool Capital of Culture. As part of that project we created an animation about one of our artworks in partnership with a team of animators, at that time Sparkle Media, now its Draw & Code. I think the way they approached the animation of the artwork, and one of the briefs that we had - we were fully involved in the whole project in terms of storyboarding and directing the whole thing, but

we didn't have the hands-on know-how to actually create the animation. But I think their vision, the way that they did it according to our brief that we wanted to retain the painterly quality of the artwork within the animation - we didn't want it to look like Disney, all-singing, all-dancing in that sense. I think that really influenced our next phase of creative development, because the use of digital technology to present the artwork through moving images, and the use of digital tools like drop-shadow and the two-dimensional effects that the animation portrays, are something that we then started to develop in 2D works. So a lot of our mixed media works use those same digital tools to create similar kinds of effects. I don't think, being honest, that would have happened without that creative partnership with the animation team we had at that time.

And now you do combinations, don't you? Some collages live digitally even though some elements are made from hand-painting and scanning.

Yeah, digital technology has been part of our work ever since. We're probably going more digital than hand-painted. We're still painting, but the works we're making now - the files only exist in the computer, by and large, over the last four or five years. It's been a long while, apart from the odd private commission in between other works, that we've create a purely hand-painted work that stands on its own as a hand-painted work. So it's had a huge impact. The more you use digital technologies the more you learn about the scope of what they can achieve, sometimes even accidentally, you press a button and something happens that you didn't know was possible. It starts to inform the work and the way that the work develops stylistically. I think what digital technology has enabled us to do as artists in terms of presenting our work, its enabled us to work on a much larger scale than would have been possible if we would have to hand paint everything. So our Slaves of Fashion exhibition that was in 2018 at the Walker, I mean, they were huge pieces for us. We had life-size portraits, and still very detailed. If we were painting one of those by hand it would have taken a year to do each one. As it happened it took four years to produce the Slaves of Fashion series, I think there were 20 works at that time, we've since added to it. But without the digital technology in combining the hand-painted with the digitally created details and also allowing us to bring archive material as well into the artworks, there's no way we could have presented those works on the scale that we have done.

It's like what the printing press did for writing - you can scale things up. What type of software do you use, out of interest?

We use Photoshop, we've always used Photoshop, even before using it to create artwork we would use it very much in the development stage of work, to help us think about the composition of something that we would then 100% hand-paint. Before that it was just drawing everything straight onto board, pencil, rubbing out... it was a time consuming and messy process, although I do miss that, in a way. In the last year we've started using Procreate, which is handy because you can just have it on your iPad, it's very portable, you can work anywhere, as opposed to taking your laptop. That's opened up other

possibilities for us. We have to bounce between the two, because it has some features that Photoshop doesn't have - the cut out tool for example has saved us a lot of time now, using a pen rather than a mouse, clicking along in points and not being able to make smooth cut-outs. But it has its downfall too because once you resize something in Procreate it becomes a little bit fuzzy. So what we have to do is cut things out and then export them back into Photoshop and do all our resizing there, and then jump them back into Procreate to colourise and use the tools in Procreate that enable us to do things that Photoshop can't do as easily. So we still bounce between the two. When it comes to doing the animation and films, we're still plugged into Final Cut Pro. Which is why our machines are not updated, we keep hanging on to so many because we've got this Creative Suite... if we upgrade our computers we won't be able to use Final Cut Pro, we just can't upgrade them any more.

I completely respect that decision, it's so expensive.

It's annoying, I guess it goes back to this question of progress - why do we need to keep progressing this software when it's doing a perfectly good job? Because Apple can charge you through the nose to have to re buy all your software again, which we refuse to do until we absolutely have to.

Now it's all subscription based, isn't it?

That's even worse!

It is even worse because it means that you pay forever, it never stops.

Even if you're not using it, I mean OK if you're a designer who's using it day-to-day. But if you're artists who aren't necessarily using the software on a daily basis, it's an awful lot to outlay for 20% or 40% use in the year. We went to the Apple store which infuriated us, we ended up having this argument with them about the software, why you keep updating it. If you updated it but still offered support for the previous versions, that wouldn't be so bad. But to totally drop you, so our whole website, for example - which was originally created using i-web, Apple's i-web, and they completely dropped it after so many years, which meant that we had to redesign our whole website using completely different software. Their answer to that, when we pulled them up in the shop about why we have to keep paying for software, is because apparently their customers want to keep updating their software and anyway, it would be nice for us to recreate our website. He also said something about we're earning from it. So we said, how do you know what we earn and what we don't earn using our software? So the assumption is that as a creative you're constantly using it day in day out, they don't think that there's circumstances, where you just want your disk there that you can put in and out as you need to without having to worry about costs that you're not using.

It's absolutely ridiculous. One thing I did also want to ask about was when you were talking about approaching the degree as individuals and having that tension against your identity together, when did you start to make work together as a collaboration?

After University I think, as a collaboration. In terms of hands-on, but we've always been working together, since the age of dot. Not on the same work, but in the sense that we've always inspired each other, if that makes sense. Whenever we'd have a spare moment we'd always be sitting side by side doing our own thing, but we've always had that interaction, looking over each others shoulders and offering constructive criticism. Not even constructive sometimes, just criticism. So in a sense that's always happened, but I think, yeah, I guess since the experience at University. Because we came more of a united front against the contemporary art world. We had a point to prove and we were on that path together. So I think that was when we also challenged the whole idea of this notion of individuality by wearing identical clothes daily, because I guess initially it started off just to get up the nose of your tutors. We were criticised, why haven't you ever tried to be different? That was one of the questions that our art tutors fired at us in our final exams which seemed to us a completely irrelevant question. But it was about challenging this notion of individuality in the context that, where does this ideal exist anyway? We were being criticised as twins, yet as we mentioned earlier, our peers were all churning out very similar artwork and conforming to a particular style. We're told what to wear, what to eat, how to dress, which group to belong to, every day of our lives through advertising and through the TV, and peer pressure. So where is this notion of individuality, really? So by dressing the same we were challenging that notion. We call ourselves twividuals, as opposed to individuals, and we feel that our twividuality is what sets us apart and makes us more unique to other artists.

I work in a collaboration outside of my job with the gallery, and one of the problems we come up against all the time is, when we come into contact with arts organisations and funders and things like that, people trying to pay you half the fee instead of twice the fee...

Yes, because there's twice the amount of work involved sometimes! One of the reasons why we work together more so now is that as our profile is grown, we have a lot more commissioned work, and we always want to both have a joint input into those commissioned pieces, which naturally are worked on together. We are the Singh twins but we each get paid for our time at the end of the day, and our commissions are worked out accordingly. When we give professional talks we get paid accordingly. If it's any other duo, the Two Ronnies or whoever it may be, they're not going to get paid one fee for two people even though they're a double-act. It should be the same for artists and for collaborations - everybody's got their own mouth to feed, so why should it make a difference?

Exactly. And then, you mentioned it briefly, but I was going to ask if you would tell any of the listeners about the animation that you're going to show in OUTPUT.

The animation that we're going to show in OUTPUT is something that we created as a response to Liverpool being European Capital of Culture in 2008. We were very fortunate to be invited to create two new public artworks for that event. One was celebrating the 700th anniversary of the city, that happened to coincide with that whole period. Sorry, the 800th, which coincided with 2007, but it was taken up as the whole capital of culture celebration. And then another piece, Arts Matters, I guess it was a legacy piece. It was looking at how that year was celebrated, which was quite difficult to do because we were trying to create it before a lot of the programming had been confirmed or finalised. I think off the back of that, because the one that was about Liverpool's history became a permanent display in St George's Hall. It's still there. We had a lot of feedback from people wanting to know what the meaning of the work was, because like most of our work, it's a very detailed narrative piece with lots of symbolism and lots of different stories to be told, across the whole 800 years of Liverpool's history. I think that got us thinking about a medium that would be more accessible than text on a wall, and would get over this whole notion of galleries often limited the amount of text that you can put next to a physical piece on the wall. I think we've always been interested in film, I think if we hadn't have been painters initially we would have been film makers. But as we were going through the system it didn't seem like an option that was available to us. I think film making's become a lot more easier now for many people. It's something we certainly would have pursued. We had actually done a kind of video production course, way back in our post-University years, when we were trying to follow up what we were going to do after University. That got us interested in film making and we thought OK, what about animation? So we applied for a grant to enable us to hire, to collaborate with Sparkle Media, Draw & Code, in Liverpool. We wanted to make it a project that was all about Liverpool talent or creativity. We were the visual artists, we had Draw & Code animation team on board, we hired Steve Mason, a local songwriter - we had hired another artists from America who we wanted to bring in, not as a Liverpool artist but someone who would be responding to Liverpool through their creativity and make it an international project. Unfortunately for various reasons that fell through, although the song was produced. Instead we came across a song we'd heard on the internet by Steve Mason, which was a brilliant song about Liverpool. He'd actually entered it for a competition, I think he came second. He did really well. It just fitted so perfectly with the sentiments of our artwork and the animation, that we approached him and asked whether he would like to be part of this creative team. To our delight he said yes. And we had Mark McGann, one of the McGann brothers, to narrate the animation, so there's another Liverpool link there. So the film became something not just about animating the story of the artwork, but also we wanted to give an insight into how the work was created. So it starts off with Mark McGann's narration, which is basically a poem we both composed that captures everything that's happening within the artwork. Then, as the poem finishes, it kicks into a second part of the movie where Steve Mason's song comes into play and there are other animated sequences that interject parts of our artwork with actual photographic footage of places within Liverpool. So we were combining the creative people of Liverpool, the different types of creative mediums, and then also

Liverpool as an actual physical city. We wanted people who were watching the film to make connection between all of those and then understand, at the end, that what they were watching was not just an animation that came out of nowhere but was actually the animation of a painting. So all those threads are followed through, each stage if you like is revealed as the film progresses from beginning to end. It's a 13-minute film which took about six months to produce, but it was a brilliant project. We became close friends with everybody involved and I think that's one of the wonderful things about being part of this creative community, you do find that the people we work with often become friends for life. We collaborated more recently with Draw & Code again, they produced an app for us to go alongside our Slaves of Fashion exhibition, which allowed us to explore one of the works looking at the history of Indigo dye. So that was another kind of branch off into the world of digital technologies.

That's a really nice place to end - a local community with so much going on and so many things to draw from. It seems like a fitting artwork to go into a gallery like OUTPUT.

Definitely! It's about Liverpool in every sense, not just in theme but the community, the whole production, the talent of our region and how as a creative community we tend to pull together.

Have you got anything coming up that you'd like to plug?

What can we plug? We're working on several commissions but we can't actually say anything about them right now because they're not formally released. We are still in the process of touring Slaves of Fashion and bringing out a publication on that series of works. We're bringing out two publications, in fact. One is the Slaves of Fashion coffee-table book that a lot of people were crying out for when the show opened but that unfortunately we didn't have at the time, so we're working on that, and there is a project we'd like to plug, which is a charity project we're involved in. It's a colouring book project, it's a Sikh project, young artists from the faith which is the same faith that we come from, who have got together to create an adult colouring book which is more about art therapy. It's looking at the connection between art and health and well-being. We were invited to create a couple of the drawings for that which are all themed around different aspects of Sikh art and culture, heritage and history. I think that's out this week, so if people could look out for that, it's going to a really good cause. All the funds are going to support underprivileged children around the world. The idea is that you buy one copy and you automatically give one copy for free to these communities of children who have never really had a childhood because of the dire circumstances they've grown up in. But they're also using fund to buy art materials for the children to encourage their well-being through creative activities.

That brings us full circle from the colouring books of teddy bears that you had no interest in...

These are very challenging! We've seen a preview of the whole book and all the artists have gone down the detailed route. Artists from Kenya, America, the UK - it's quite an international thing but they're going to be very challenging books so anybody who's interested, I'd recommend it.

It sounds right up my street! A perfect lockdown activity - I'll definitely get one. Well, thank you so much for speaking to me. If you want to check out the Singh Twins, their handled on twitter is @thesinghtwins, on Instagram @thesinghtwins_art and your website is singhtwins.co.uk, thank you very much. If you want to check out any OUTPUT stuff, we are just @OUTPUTgallery on everything. The next podcast interview will be with Nick Smith, who has the next OUTPUT exhibition. Okay. Bye!