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Amrit & Rabindra Singh

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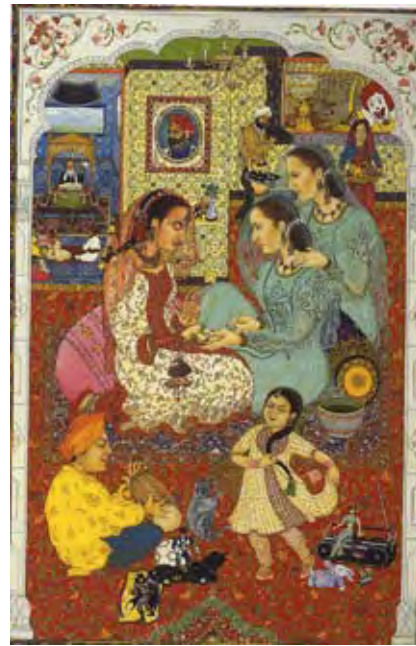
by *Saloni Mathur*

Daughters of a Sikh doctor who immigrated to North England from the Punjab, the London-born artists Amrit and Rabindra Singh are identical twins: they have the same DNA, they look and sound exactly alike, they wear the same clothing, and they received their training in art together. Often referred to as “The Singh Twins,” the sisters have adopted the language of Indian and Persian miniature painting to depict the complex urban and domestic landscapes of the contemporary world. The twins have exhibited their work to international audiences in Britain, Europe, India, and North America: a recent show, titled “Past Modern: The Singh Twins,” featured more than sixty paintings, and was hosted by UC Riverside in 2003 and the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool in 2005. Significantly, Amrit and Rabindra’s collaborative practice is not simply an innocent expression of an affectionate bond between sisters, but rather a self-conscious engagement with the notion of singular authorship and the cult of the individual that has pervaded post-Enlightenment art historical tradition. Not since Diane Arbus’ 1967 black-and-white photograph of identical twin girls in New Jersey has such a memorable rendering of sameness and belonging, normativity and exclusion, and identity and difference, been sustained so provocatively within the contemporary art world.

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Struck by Amrit and Rabindra's performance as a single artist, I decided to write about the politics of "twinning" in their work, which I saw as a complex prism through which to view their art practice. My research was facilitated by a residential group titled "Cloning Cultures" at the Humanities Research Institute at UC Irvine, for which I received leave from UCLA during fall 2004. The idea of the residency was to use the concept of cloning as a broad interdisciplinary metaphor for questions of sameness, difference, and mimesis in culture. The stimulating discussions I had with other scholars in the group helped me to think about the figure of the twin, or the double, in the Singh sisters' art practices as a motif through which to map a range of dualities crucial to contemporary subjectivity in the South Asian diaspora. I felt that the sisters' success was not simply reducible to the currency of the figure of the twin within the cultural imaginary, or the long history of novelty that has attached itself to twins, even if these may well be elements of their recent international visibility. Far from being a gimmick, what is meaningful about the peculiar politics of identity practiced by the Singh Twins is that it re-organizes the hierarchies through which such pairings as modern/traditional, original/copy, high/low, and home/abroad have historically emerged to structure colonial and postcolonial subjectivities.

In interviews with the artists, I learned that the twins – who were raised in a conservative Sikh joint family in Liverpool – were instructed by their teachers at art college to "follow their own individuality" and to be as dissimilar in their art practices as possible. Their adoption of a singular persona – Amrit and Rabindra always exhibit and paint together, sign each other's work, and refer to themselves as a single artist using the pronoun "she" – is in this sense a playful and explicit rejection of the normative conventions of their disciplinary training. Their turn to the formal vocabulary of the Indo-Persian miniature is similarly a response to the Eurocentricism they encountered in their art school education in England. The twins are by no means the first contemporary artists to take up the miniature form, nor are they invested in probing its limits in the manner of the Pakistani-born New York artist, Shahzia Sikander, also known



Amrit & Rabindra Singh, *Nyrmla's Wedding*, 1995/96 ©The Singh Twins, www.singhtwins.co.uk

for her experimentations with the genre. However, it is the twins' distinctive blending of the Indo-Persian miniature tradition with the more popular genres of twentieth century art practice in India – for instance, the mass produced phenomenon of photography, poster art, Hindu calendar art, and the urban kitsch of Bollywood cinema – that blurs the distinction between high and low in their acts of borrowing South Asian visual forms. In fact, the twins do not merely borrow from India; they raid the mythological menagerie of the subcontinent. The result is a compelling set of "twinning" at stake: between Britain and India, high and low, past and present, modernity and tradition, original and copy, home and diaspora, and collective identity vs. individual subjectivity, to name only a few of the coordinates that structure their work.

What I find fascinating about the Singh Twins' images is that the sisters frequently portray themselves, almost always together, in their own work. In these cameo appearances, they are presented in various states of likeness and difference, and the "shifty" portraiture that emerges reveals the role-playing and mimicry that is at stake in the construction of identity itself. At times, for example, as in *Nyrmla's Wedding II* (1995/96), they depict themselves as identical yet autonomous (one is painting *mehendi* on the bride's hand, while the other takes a photograph). But they remain deeply connected to one another, and through the physical touch of a hand, they are almost like an extension

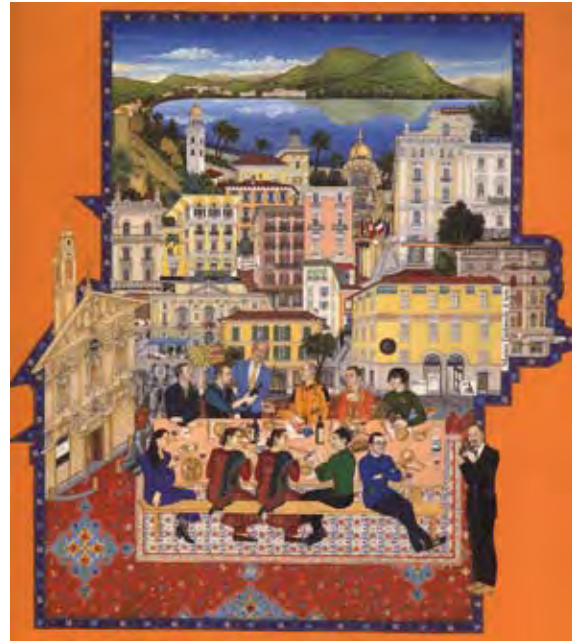
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of one another (*see above*). At other times, as in *Les Girls* (1993/94), they are dressed the same, but clearly figured as different individuals, with different mannerisms and personalities, and separate postures in their relationships to others (*see right top*). Still elsewhere, as in the 1998 painting, *Follow the Leader*, they present us with the riddle of alterity (which one is which?) by showing themselves as exact copies, perfect replicas, precise reproductions of each other: here even the spoon the sisters are holding is cocked in exactly the same position (*see right bottom*). Finally, in one last picture, titled *Our Father* (1995), the twins show themselves as mirrored reflections positioned on either side of their father, clearly an affectionate tribute to the man, one that nevertheless triangulates their mother out of the scene (*see page 6*). And yet, the presence of the halo signals an exaggeration of sentiment, and reveals the title, *Our Father*, as an ironic ploy.

It is this sense of irony and play that makes one feel in the presence of the twins and their artwork that the sisters are winking at each other behind our backs, that they retain the power to control both the representation and performative articulations of their subjecthood and its unnerving dualities. It seems that, somewhat paradoxically, the full enactment of the Singh Twins' autonomy and agency as individuals – in particular, as young women and minorities in a dominant white society – emerges in the way they are able to manipulate a range of self-images as a unity, or as twins. In looking at this “doubleness,” I am reminded of the questions of originality in the work of art that Walter Benjamin and other cultural theorists explored at the beginning of the twentieth century: for these questions are also reflected in uncanny ways in the sisters' own doubleness, and the way they elude the viewer's attempts to discern original, copy, imposter, or fake. In this way, the twins come to physically enact some of the most troublesome tensions of the postmodern era and its discourses of cloning, reproduction, and mimesis. Rather mischievously, the sisters allow us to see that they know they remain enigmatic to everyone but themselves: in this there is something rather powerful at work, and it leaves its trace most compellingly in their art.



Amrit & Rabindra Singh, *Les Girls*. 1993/94 ©The Singh Twins, www.singhtwins.co.uk



Amrit & Rabindra Singh, *Follow the Leader*. 1998 ©The Singh Twins, www.singhtwins.co.uk

Saloni Mathur is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History. Her research interests include modern South Asia and its diasporas, colonial history and ethnography, and postcolonial museology. She has recently completed a book titled *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, forthcoming from the University of California Press in 2007. Her essay on the Singh Twins, from which this text is partially extracted, was recently published as “Diasporic Body Double: The Art of the Singh Twins,” *The Art Journal*, Summer, 2006, 35–56. She recently received a Getty Collaborative Grant for a project concerned with the history and theory of museums in India and Pakistan .