Inward Identities

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Abstract

Through a cultural viewpoint on a hyphenated identity, I examine ways of displaying relationships between spaces. My studio and material-based research reveal my personal experience as a Hindu Canadian. I produce paintings, mixed media, and installation artworks using materiality, artist techniques, and experimental processes. As I address themes of cultural hybridity, movement, displacement, and memory, I develop new ways of representing the social institutions, achievements, spiritual symbols, and traditions that epitomize South Asian and Canadian cultures.

I express a conflict of feelings through colour and materiality to create an environment that will encourage healing. By looking at how mandalas are discussed and used in Eastern and Western practices, my investigations include intersecting ideas about the mandala in Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist cultures. I examine how the materiality of salt can be used to accentuate spirituality and convey a sense of displacement within my cultural experiences.

An autoethnographic research approach is used to address hybrid cultural identity as a language, as well as to communicate-the aesthetics of material, in combination with spiritual and meditative practices. As I highlight the space between what is tangible and what is a distant memory, I integrate two diametrically opposed cultures to embrace the contrasts of my identities.

Key Words: Identity, Movement, Cultural Disruption, Cultural Hybridity, Materiality, Mandala, Spirituality

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

I address culture and identity in my research as it plays an important role in my artistic practice. The places where I grew up and lived make me who I am today and, therefore, part of my research. The primary goal of this research and my artwork is to express the impact of having no place to belong, of the tug-of-war between western cultural values and practices (e.g. individualism, capitalism, and racism) versus Hindu cultural practices (e.g. community, family, and the impact of gender identity), and how that can be expressed through colour and materials to create an environment that will encourage synergy between the cultural values and norms that have influenced how I see myself in society.

I was born and raised in Ontario, Canada. At the age of 13, my parents moved our family to New Delhi, India. They firmly believed that their children needed to learn about our Hindu culture and heritage and follow the traditional values they believed in, in India. I remember arriving in New Delhi and feeling entirely out of place. I did not understand Hindi very well at the time and could not speak the language. My first day in an Indian school was traumatic. Signs surrounding me read, “Speak Hindi Only. No English Allowed.” I was placed in a classroom where visual arts was not a taught subject. Mathematics and science were the primary subjects, and I could not relate to the teaching practices or my peers.

Above all, my new home did not feel familiar, which left me feeling displaced. My parents decided that my brother and I would settle better into the culture and practices by placing us in Mussoorie boarding school. Mussoorie was a hill station in Uttarakhand, and the school was on

top of a mountain, and as a student you are isolated from the surrounding community, from city life and from external influences. The students all spoke Hindi throughout the day, as was required in classrooms.

The cultural disruption I experienced left me feeling confused about my identity. The term "Cognitive dissonance, coined by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, describes the discomfort people feel when two cognitions, or a cognition and a behavior, contradict each other" (Aronson and Tavris, web). My experiences of cognitive dissonance led to a distinct separation of self. The contradiction between my authentic self and my new experiences of trauma and alienation required that I seek out healing, and this was accomplished through drawing in my sketchbook.

I would spend countless hours by myself after class just drawing whatever came to my mind. It was through this art practice that I felt calm and at peace. Within a few months, my parents realized that we were unhappy and found it difficult to settle into an environment completely different from where we lived in Canada. My parents moved us back to New Delhi, where I was placed in a British School. I met many other people experiencing the same cultural disruption, which made the changes I encountered easier.

At 19 years old, just as I began to find some semblance of camaraderie, feeling like India was my home, my parents unexpectedly and permanently moved us back to Toronto, Canada, recreating a traumatic experience all over again. With each relocation, I left an important part of myself behind. My starting point in each new place was one of incompleteness.

As I examine my family history, I question how spiritual symbols are used and followed throughout centuries-old Hindu religious traditions. Although I grew up in a traditional Hindu Punjabi family, certain cultural practices were not practiced. My immigration experiences, living within two different cultures, led me to question the challenges faced growing up in two distinct places. My feelings of displacement were also due to the conflict I experienced between the generational religious practices after marrying into a traditional Hindu family, for example, during religious rituals, such as the festival Karwa Chauth, which is performed in celebration of the bond between husband and wife.

The married woman is told not to eat or drink from sunrise until the moonrise to ensure her husband has a long and healthy life. I remember performing the special prayers in front of the Hindu god and goddess statues such as Lord Ganesha, Parvati Karwa Mata, and Lord Shiva with devotion. When I first got married, I did not know the significance of the mantras I was asked to recite, and I was too afraid to ask because I felt I was expected to understand the importance of these rituals. But I didn't. I questioned why the women were required to fast. Why did I have to perform the rituals and not my husband?

Now I am a mother and wonder if my daughter will feel the same as I did about these spiritual practices. How do I intentionally shift this awareness to know she can choose what rituals she wants to practice? We talk about how she can make her own choices based on her decision, not family expectations. I continue to teach her to ask questions and create meanings for these practices instead of playing the role she is expected to because of her Hindu identity and gender. These personal and cultural experiences have led me to investigate the internalized oppression

within my Hindu culture. The various identities expected by South Asian women to perform while married is due to the cultural expectations brought on by traditional values. My western and eastern values led me to have a conflict of feelings about my hyphenated identity. Family traditions and the need to engage with Western traditions led me to navigate this interstitial space. In the essay, *Negotiating Identities: Second Generation South Asian Women's Endogamous Marital Relationships,* Anju Sohal describes this identity conflict and its impact on South Asian women who struggle to conform to cultural expectations. I identify with Sohal in times when I feel conflicted with my identity. Sohal examines how other South Asian women arrange their expectations involving their identity. Sohal states:

> As a South Asian woman growing up in Canada, my world has been shaped by two competing identities. I find myself situated in a constant struggle between being "Canadian" as my birthright guarantees me and being "Indian" as my cultural heritage and skin colour define me. As I have journeyed to make sense of who I am and where I fit in this world, I am left with the notion that despite my strong connections to both communities, I am neither Canadian nor Indian. I am a woman who is defined and shaped by one pigeonhole in which the dominant white society places me and another pigeonhole in which Indian people categorize me. Despite where I'm placed or how I must shift my identity depending on the circumstance, neither of these identities represent me (7).

Sohal is a South Asian woman just like me. When I feel a conflict with my identity, I am comforted knowing other South Asian women also feel conflicted within the traditional values

we encounter in our culture. Sohal describes how she has adapted to these experiences and expectations. But this conflict in conforming to generational Hindu traditions and practices makes her feel angry, frustrated, and speechless. My "identity conflict" (Sohal, 7) and adaptation to the expectations placed on me left me feeling a sense of "double consciousness" (Pawa, web).

> Double consciousness is the constant feeling of in between-ness and it is the feeling of straddling multiple borders at once. It is not knowing where your body fits in either place that you call home and not knowing how to respond to the way these homes will exploit you. W.E.B Du Bois presented this term originally in the realm of being African American during the early 1900s, and the idea has grown into something that is applied to the experience of living in diasporic spaces as a whole, as well as the feeling of otherness. How can one be multiple identities at once? (Pawa, web)

Through art, I have expressed my multiple identities and confronted my own sense of double consciousness. I have found that the act of creating and expressing provided me with a way to heal from the cognitive dissonance and cultural disruption experienced. I have found a way to embrace this feeling of in-betweenness by picking and choosing my own path to follow my religion. Creating art has not only impacted this part of my life, but it has also allowed me to heal from daily life. As an elementary visual arts teacher, I encounter numerous events in the classroom which have me feeling exhausted and upset. For example, one of my students has been diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Teaching her involves patience, kindness, and empathy. At the end of my day as a teacher, I often go to my studio and create. This practice allows me to ground myself and self-heal.

In my performance creating a mandala design, I convey the totality of my inner experiences. My paintings float at different levels on the walls of the gallery. The textile installation is hung from the gallery's ceilings so that viewers can walk around the soft chiffon material, allowing me to observe how people move through the space and how the fabric moves with their presence.

There are no instructions on where viewers are to go first. I intentionally offered this choice as I did not want to direct their experience. I wanted my viewers to choose to look at my paintings, installations, or recorded performances on their own terms. This choice is offered to viewers intentionally, just like the conversations I have with my daughter involving religious practices.

Chapter 2
Theoretical and Practice-Based Frameworks & Research Questions

In thinking about the installation layout, I want to anticipate how viewers will participate in the installation. Although, I am aware that the emotions I encountered while painting will differ for them, the 'perceiver' will play an active role in this encounter as it will be filtered through their own experience. This raises the research question: How can colour explorations create embodied experiences through their installation? This chapter focuses on how I install artworks by discussing theoretical approaches to my interdisciplinary practice and research that include Jane Bennett's New Materialist Vibrant Matter theory and the Embodiment theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I will also explore the psychology of mandalas, as defined by Carl Jung, and their significance in Tibetan Buddhism.

As I investigate the life of matter in the studio, I encounter a healing experience. Through my reading of Jane Bennett's theories, I have come to realize that this would not be possible without the presence of Himalayan salt. Through Bennett, I now know that material has meaning and that humans can participate in their material surroundings by just being present. Salt is an essential component of my explorations of embodiment. In response, I have created a large mandala light installation made exclusively of Pink Himalayan salts.

In salt cave treatments, I have personally observed how the Pink Himalayan salt rocks surrounding me contributed to an embodied experience (e.g. see fig. 1). During halotherapy and

hand and foot salt detox treatments, I believe that the healing experience would not be possible without the presence of the salt, (e.g. see fig. 2) due to the energy I can feel emanating from the rocks. Touching the salts in the cave produced an embodied experience through their tactile texture, cool temperature, and luminous pink tones. Together, these connect me to the earth and my inner self to enable mindfulness.

Bennett draws on many theorists and scientists including Deleuze, Guattari, and Bruno Latour. They support her concepts of assemblage, agency, and actors, which I find beneficial in my exploration of materiality and how they also apply to objects. Through Bennett's idea of assemblage and agency, I am learning how humans are connected to materials and examine how I can use materiality and colour to navigate visceral feelings of in-betweenness in my social identities. Bennett provides evidence on how matter, objects, and materials are alive holding vitality within them, which she refers to as 'thing-power.' My aim is that my mandala installation allows viewers to be open to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "assemblage." This new theory of Assemblage-is different than what it reminded me of before such as Picasso's cubist work begun in 1912, *The Bicycle Wheel* by Marchel Duchamp, from 1913, and Jasper Johns' use of assemblage in the 1950s and 1960s. This reflection encouraged me to look at examples of the assemblage technique and process that remain influential today.

As I anticipate the viewer's engagement with the objects like salt mandala installations I reflect on my understanding of "thing-power." I explore assemblage in terms of how one object can impact another object within an installation. I now look at non-living things and perceive how they can form agency and how we are interdependent.

(Fig. 1). Vicky Talwar receiving Halotherapy in Holistic Salt Cave Spa, 2020.

(Fig. 2). Vicky Talwar receiving Hand and Foot Detox treatment at Holistic Salt Cave Spa, 2020.

The pink Himalayan salt rock's energy is activated when handled by a human being. During halotherapy treatments with pink salt, my experiences enable me to believe in what I feel yet can't see. Each rock in the caves is a different size, tone, texture, and form but although independent, together they harmoniously form a healing environment. Bennett explains that although inanimate objects do not form societies like animate ones, they can collectively "vibrate" and serve a purpose to human beings. I wonder how they might become an assemblage? and this inquiry compelled my ongoing explorations. The decision to make assemblages, like my textile and mandala installations, came to me by expanding its definition outside of a Western historical context. I began to consider the role that material assemblages have on my well-being and whether my knowledge of salt as a spiritual material thing has changed its status?

Assemblage reminds me of the technique and processes of artists like Sarindar Dhaliwal and Pamila Matharu. In this chapter I will focus on Toronto artist Pamila Matharu's exhibit, *One of These Things is Not Like the Other,* in which she incorporated new media, poetry, and objects like the *Baithak.* These seats were a part of the lounge in the installation (e.g. see fig. 3).

(Fig. 3.). Pamila Matharu, *One of These Things is Not Like the Other: Pamila Matharu and Sister Co- Resister*, 2019, installation view, A Space Gallery, Toronto. Curated by Vicky Moufawad.

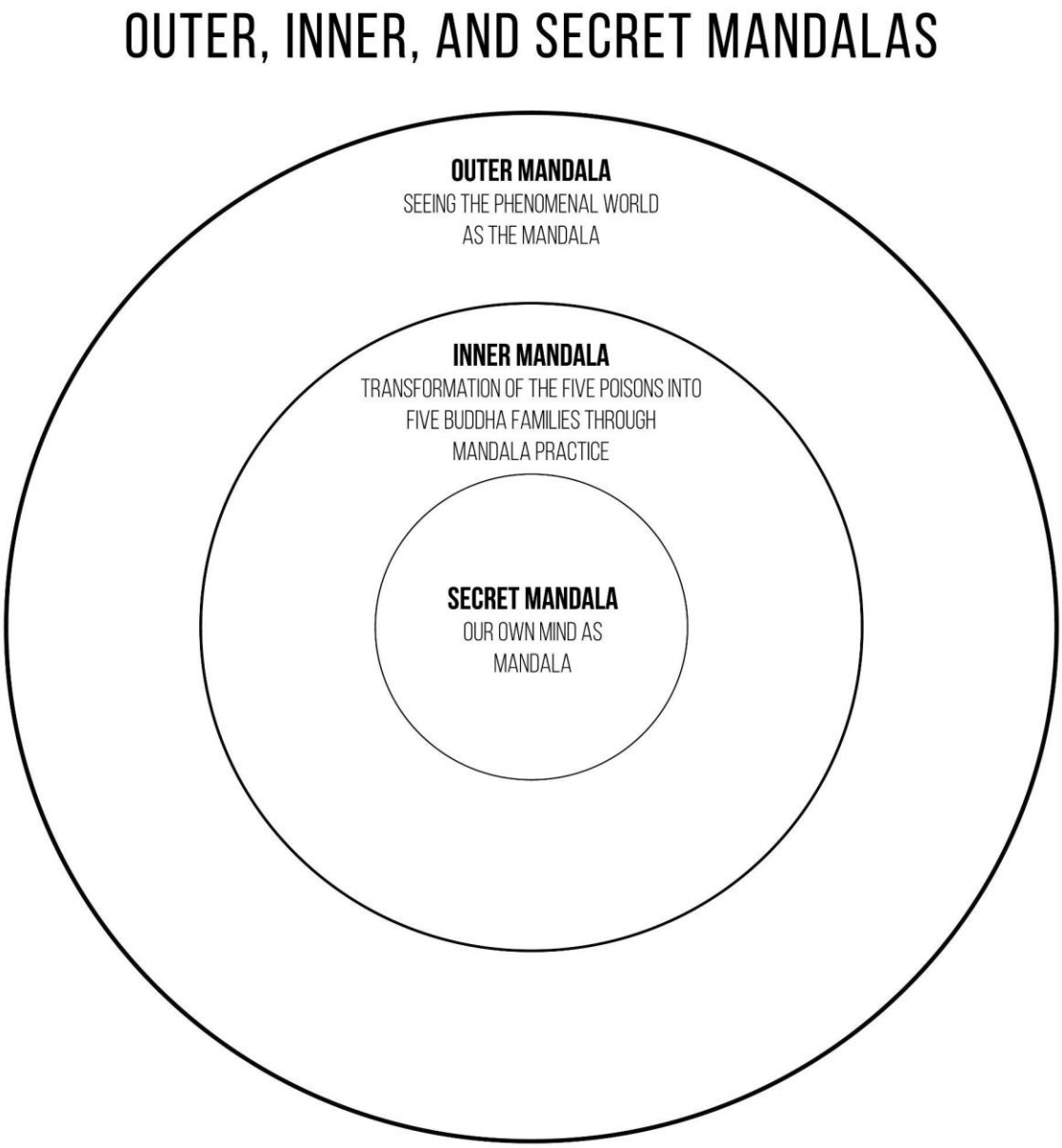
Viewing Matharu's assemblage of work, generated memories of living in India. This analysis of assemblage led me to consider how I can explore the interstitial space between my Hindu and Canadian identities through materiality and colour. The turquoise and yellow hues reminded me of the saris and shawls worn by the women in my family. As Bennett states, "An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span" (24). We, as humans, have an impact in our interactions with materials. From Bennett's view of assemblage, I am curious to discover how objects will interact and have impact when placed together in my exhibition? I view my salt mandala, textile installations, and paintings, each as an assemblage but also the installation of them together as one. I consider if the assemblage also includes the spaces in-between things and how the placement of materials (i.e., hard rock salt and soft chiffon fabric) can reveal my hybrid cultural identity?

The assemblages of the two mandalas have become vital to the installation and to my goal of healing by engaging with my inner self through making. By working with the mandala form in my art practice using LED light fixtures, I aim to engage the viewer and address living material. As Lama Tsultrim Allione writes, "Our spiritual intelligence searches for wholeness, coherence, and attunement to the universe. The mandala is a tool to accomplish this and thus has continually appeared throughout human history in diverse forms and cultures" (Allione, 46). She describes the goals of spirituality and how a mandala can be used as a tool to achieve these goals. As a spiritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, a mandala is used in meditation to assist in healing the maker as well as the viewer**.** For me, the making of the mandala design is more about the recognition of time, intention, and focus on my inner self. In Tibetan Buddhism mandalas are constructed from sand and can transmit positive energy to viewers within their environment. From here I wanted to learn how it is used in Western practices.

I recognize that the associations with mandala, Himalayan salt and other "wellness" trends have been co-opted by Western culture, yet I feel they are still important to express in my art. Although I feel Jung appropriated the mandala for his practice, as described in my Literature Review, he still used it to help patients process their emotions in his therapeutic approach. This deliberate process became a meditation tool similar to how I mindfully handle the salts and acknowledge the issues or emotions that arise.

Based on the three aspects of the Tibetan Mandala principle (outer, inner, and secret), I create designs that conveys the totality of me (e.g. see fig.4) beginning with the centre and gradually working outward. I relate to my mandala installations as an assemblage of the self. The "outer mandala" relates to my body as it is publicly seen. Coloured salts reveal the emotions I

experience when thinking about the outer parts of myself, like my body and clothing. This is the "lens of the mandala" through which I present myself (Allione 50). The second portion of the mandala is the "inner mandala." As salts are laid in this section, I reflect on emotions to do with transformations from within. The feelings expressed in this section are intense and I must allow them to pass without judgment. The "secret mandala" is the third mandala, manifested in how I feel about myself. Sitting with my emotions through this entire process has encouraged me to be comfortable in this raw state. Allione calls this "the potential" as it encourages the maker to appreciate every aspect of themselves and embrace their feelings of in-betweenness including acceptance of my hybrid cultural identity (51). This healing practice relates to the research question: How does the experience of engaging with art affect our bodies?



(Fig. 4). Image from the book *Wisdom Rising: Journey into the Mandala of the Empowered Feminine.* Atria/Enliven Books, 2018. Image courtesy of Lama Tsultrim Allione.

Chapter 3
Literature Review

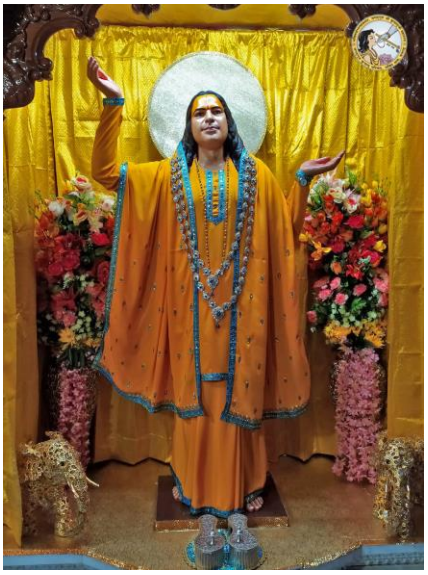
Introduction

In this literature review, I will be analyzing the work of culturally diverse artists, particularly those with a hybrid cultural identity that sense a cognitive dissonance due to cultural disruption. I propose the following research questions: How can I explore the interstitial space between my Hindu and Canadian identities through materiality and colour? How can colour create embodied experiences? How can I, as an artist, use materiality and colour to navigate visceral feelings of in-betweenness in my social identities? How does the experience of engaging with art affect our bodies?

These questions will be explored through new ways of creating that focus on colour and materiality using the form of the mandala. I will explore their psychology, as defined by Jung, alongside Buddhist conceptions and spirituality in contemporary art in general.

I will be looking at examples of autoethnographic research to interrogate how personal experiences can be connected to and reflect the experiences of the artists explored. This will consider how cultural beliefs, methodologies of thinking through making, and individual creative practices impact the maker as well as the experience of the viewer. These artists will provide possibilities for me to embody an expression of my inner life and identities in my paintings and installations.

Examples of Spirituality in Art



(Fig.5). Statue of Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat, 2021. Image Courtesy JKP Connect.

(Fig. 6). Tibetan Buddhist Sand Mandala, 2021. Image Courtesy of Judson Davis.

I encounter the spiritual when working with colour and material in my interdisciplinary practice. Now I want to consider how I could use colour to create embodied experiences for the viewer?

Living Indian yogi and spiritual leader, Sadhguru, wrote about the significance of colour and its role in life as a spiritual seeker in his article, *Meaning of Colors and Their Role in Your Life.* Most importantly, he explains how colour can have a transformative effect on people.

He raised the intriguing question: - "How is colo[u]r significant for human consciousness as such, or for any kind of spiritual process?" (web). This statement resonated with me as I witness my parents performing many Hindu ceremonies and rituals. While living in India, I embarked on

religious retreats where devotees (spiritual followers) in ashrams wore orange clothing, including our guru, Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat (e.g. see fig.5).

I often remember this shade of orange with accents of blue. The sky tone present of his religious attire is reminiscent of the blue skin of Hindu god Krishna and Lord Shiva. It is said that these gods emanate a blue aura. When I engage with blue in my artwork, I sense a calmness and peacefulness. The visceral affect of a colour like blue can evoke a sense of peace and tranquility. Each of the many tones of blue; can have multiple meanings and be felt differently by each individual. Sadhguru describes, the colour blue as "the col[u]or of all-inclusivness" (web). In other words, an existence that is beyond perception like the sky or ocean.

On January 2, 2013, Sadhguru was interviewed by Fausto Aarya De Santis in Coimbatore, India. Sadhguru expressed his belief that spirituality is "going beyond the physical" therefore about inclusivity. Interestingly, he notes that although everyone is spiritual; some are conscious of it while others are not. He states, "The orange/ochre coloured clothing that devotees wore meant that the "spiritual seeker" was moving towards a holy path known as *Agna*. As Sadhguru stated, "People who are on the path where the whole process is about enlightenment and opening up that dimension of perception referred to as the third eye, will always seek ochre because they want to radiate that color" (web). In specific meditations, this orange colour is evidence of *Agna*. Hinduism attributes 114 chakras to the human body, with 112 of them associated with a specific colour. Only two do not have a colour due to it not being present in nature. The chakra known as *Agna* is about enlightenment and is familiarly known as the third eye, situated on the forehead.

The Muladhara chakra is yellow-orange in colour, as a result, any spiritual seeker will wear orange to reach enlightenment and radiate its light. Orange also symbolizes maturity and new

beginnings such as the rising of the sun or "a new udaya" (web). Similarly, in Buddhism, monks wear ochre robes if they have reached the level known as "arhats" (web), and the rest wear yellow-orange.

I relate my personal experiences with the colour orange to Hindu religious practices, such as lighting a Diya in religious retreats I participated in as a child. Growing up in India, I associated this colour with a spiritual seeker/ guru as well as with spices like turmeric that is used in Indian rituals and cooking. Now however, living in Canada, I associate the colour with "Orange Shirt Day" commemorated on September 30, 2020. From the 1870s to the 1990s, Indigenous children were taken away from their families and forced into residential schools and the colonial culture of Canada. The "orange shirt" is in reference to Phyllis Websted's new shirt, given to her by her grandmother and taken from her on her first day of school at St. Joseph/s Mission residential school in British Columbia.[1]

The bright orange t-shirt I wore on Canada Day and on September 30 this year symbolized my solidarity with Indigenous communities. Many Canadians like myself were grieving due to the recent discoveries of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children found throughout Canada on the grounds of the former residential schools.

Western teachings on colour are as influential to me as the Eastern ones. Colour has been studied for a long time. As an elementary visual arts teacher, I was taught to introduce an understanding of primary, secondary, and tertiary colours. Black and white are shades and tints, and pigments

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[1] Visit Webstad, Phyllis, and Joan Sorley. "Orange Shirt Day." *Orange Shirt Day*, www.orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html. Orange Shirt Day takes place to remember residential school victims and honour survivors and their families.

can be mixed to create complementary and analogous colours. Yet, as a painter, I understand my hyphenated identity and my emotions in connection with colour. Similarly, the Russian art theorist and abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky (December 16, 1866–December 13, 1944) believed that colour evoked feelings and vibrations in an artwork. In the book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* by Wassily Kandinsky and M. T. H. Sadler. Kandinsky described how he could see colours when listening to music.

He believed that the geometric forms and colours in his artworks carried vibrations that affected the viewer at a spiritual level. He intended the viewer to look at his paintings and question what it evoked. Colour in his paintings transmitted spiritual vibrations, as shown in his statement: "A warm red will prove exciting, another shade of red will cause pain or disgust through association with running blood. In these cases colour awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul" (65).

As an abstract painter, Kandinsky moved away from representation and focused on the spiritual in art. Claude Monet's paintings influenced him because of the colours and objects he used, especially the Impressionist style of his series of Haystacks. I could relate to Kandinsky's fascination with paintings because of the emotions they evoked in me. I often wondered what was Monet's experience with the colours he used? His titles don't give this away, whereas Kandinsky's paintings had musical titles, based upon what he listened to when he created the work.

Through this investigation of Kandinsky's work, I began analyzing my own paintings and realized that the music I was listening to in my studio was portrayed as visual rhythm in my

paintings and encouraged me to explore the idea of colour evoking vibrations. When I paint, I often listen to Buddhist and Meditation sounds. The soothing sounds of nature I listen to and the story of my experiences with colour are visually portrayed on my canvas. For example, the tree branches emerging inwards remind me of the rhythms present in the meditation music I was listening to when I was painting (e.g. see fig. 7).

(Fig.7). ***Multiverse*****,** Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 40 inches, 2019.

I consider myself an empath as I feel deeply tuned in to the feelings of people, colours, and material objects around me. By responding to the elevated emotions, I encounter the colours that I paint with are used to create a conflict of emotions that allows me to experience spiritual vibrations. Other artists like Kandinsky feel visual art is like music and which can tune us to a higher vibration. As Kandinsky stated, “But to a more sensitive soul the effect of colours is deeper and intensely moving. And so, we come to the second main result of looking at colours: their psychic effect. They produce a corresponding spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the elementary physical impression is of importance” (64).

The main focus of my practice is to see how the application of specific colours evoke emotions and memories. I try to embody the experiences felt when working with colour into the artwork, and through this process, I have realized I am connecting with my soul. As Kandinsky notes, "No more sufficient, in the psychic sphere, is the theory of association. Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul" (66). I have begun questioning my experience of a specific colour (e.g. orange) and considering my assumptions. The meanings of colour change whether my perspective is that of a teacher, student, South Asian, or Canadian. Not every emotion evoked by that colour will be the same in the present as it was in the past.

In the article, Spirituality *and Contemporary Art*, Rina Arya, a question raised a question that made me reflect on my use of colour in my paintings and installations. It was: "What is the nature of the dialogue between art and spirituality, how do the two come together, and what form does the meeting take?" (1). Arya refers to the importance of our perception of spirituality in contemporary artworks in the section, *Refiguring the Spiritual in Contemporary Art.* She states, "Most contemporary artists are drawn to secular sources—ordinary objects, motifs, symbols, and metaphors—but in the encounter with them, transformation occurs" (8). This statement helped me understand that using coloured stained salt, for example, could be a way to generate transformation in my creative process.

Autoethnography

In the article, *An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography,* Sarah Wall explains how autoethnography is performed and what displayed in this research methodology. She describes how autoethnographic research approaches can take the form of short stories, fiction, poetry, personal essays, photographic essays, journals, social science prose, and layered and fragmented writing. She states, "Autoethnographers tend to vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the cultural link), and -graphy (the application of a research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, paraphrasing Reed-Danahay, 1997)" (6).

In the section, *Understanding Autoethnography By Example* Wall notes, "Methodology arises out of philosophy. I am solidly committed to qualitative research, itself a subjugated field of inquiry because the aim of qualitative inquiry is to connect with people on the level of human meaning" (10). This statement resonated with me because I feel that the qualitative research that I collected allowed me to self-heal by observing my own thoughts, emotions, and experiences. My own reflective journaling throughout this experience reveals my embodied exploration of material and colour. Methods of collecting- have included engaging with self through process-based making which has also connected me with others in my Hindu and Canadian community.

Additionally, in the online video *Design Ethnography for Ph.D. Students, Autoethnography,* Stacy Holman Jones, and Shanti Sumartojo outline the different autoethnographic techniques researchers use independently and collaboratively with other researchers. The principles discussed reflect how they have used this methodology in their research. One of the key points that resonated with me was how the researchers' own experiences were essential research

materials. Specifically, autoethnography in a research project enables the researcher to understand and make sense of their own embodied experiences and lived reality.

Jones and Sumartojs describe the concept of reflexivity as a generator that initiates power in an autoethnography research project. For example, Jones explains how she used reflexivity in her own research about identity politics. Her father had a stroke just when she was coming out to the world and this identity shift initiated thinking about reflexivity in relationship to him. She realized she would need to re-engage with her father each time they met because of the alteration in his memory. In her discussion with Sumartojo, I recognize how central reflexivity was to her project and reflection of daily observations. This made me think about how my research will help me to understand myself as an embodied individual with a hyphenated identity.

Research Methodologies and Artist Analysis

Qualitative research methodologies, namely, reflexivity, autoethnographic, studio, and material-based research, permit artists to examine their social identity within a global context. An exploration of culturally diverse artists allowed me to reflect on how their artwork changes over time. Through art inquiry and research into the process, artists have chosen various types of investigations such as interviews, journals, publications, and interpretation of other artists' literature. However, some may argue that the most critical form of research for artists lies in their studio art practice.

As a result, artists that identify as racialized or culturally diverse can be heavily influenced by the work of other culturally diverse artists, particularly those that explore themes of identity, gender, and healing practices. In particular, it allows artists to question if it is possible to have more than one identity. Critical reflection on an artist's visual research trajectory can include finding fluidity in hybrid cultural identity, the impacts of cultural disruption, the relevance of double consciousness, and self-healing through art. In *The Self and Creativity: Several Constructs in Search of a Theory*, The Handbook of Creativity by Thomas Gowd, Gowd noted that

> "the self possesses unity in that the experiencing individual is reflexively aware of only one identity. Although we speak colloquially of "better self" or a "weaker self," it is tacitly understood that these are only metaphors expressing various aspects of a unified self. Only in the case of true multiple personalities does the unity of selfhood as experienced by the individual break down. There does seem to be a deep human fear, however, that the unit of the self is fragile and can be easily destroyed. The tremendous fascination with Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, which magnificently expresses this dilemma, may be due in part to this fundamental fear" (Dowd, 234).

Dowd's argument begs the question; do we all have multiple personalities? As artists are we afraid of how to identify ourselves that results in a lack of understanding of the concept of self. For many racialized artists, therefore, the personal journey of understanding the self can lead to the desire to connect with other racialized artists. This would explain how, as a young artist, I was drawn to the work of Sarindar Dhaliwal.

Dhaliwal often reflected on her experiences when she spoke about the art-making process. Born in Punjab, raised in the United Kingdom, and now living in Canada, Dhaliwal expresses the deep

connection that a shared ancestry encapsulates. Like my personal journey, I felt a deep connection to how she expressed her bi-cultural identity through art installations and paintings.

The *Collected Resonance* exhibition (Sept.23, 2011 - Jan. 8, 2012) curated by Nicole Stanbridge brought together three South Asian Canadian women artists that included Sarindar Dhaliwal, Shelly Bahl, and Farheen HaQ. These artists form narratives illuminated by their "ideologies and mythologies" within their cultural heritage. Although I did not view the exhibition in person, I had personal interviews with two of the artists. Reading the publication allowed me to examine how they explored traditional South Asian cultures in their installations. In the stories they tell of their diasporic state, they engage with themes of hybridity, memory, and dislocation. They each explore different ways of illustrating their memories of childhood, home, and family. Although all three female artists use different media to present their work, the media they all use is video. Each artist unravels their own representation of the female form in complex ways to convey meaning. For example, in the catalogue HaQ stated, "Women's bodies are wrapped up in layers of codes" (21). Video and performance are media she uses to understand her own body and express her struggle with her identities. The rituals practiced in her performances are a way to assert her body and her belief for the need for inclusivity, shifts in attitudes, and diverse representations. Her use of gestures, movement, and ritualistic performance is inspiring as these are potentials for the medium for me.

In the image stills from her four-channel video installation, *confess, conceal (2011)* (e.g. see fig. 8). HaQ's "performative autobiographical portrait" (17) transports the viewer to the domestic spaces she investigates. A soft curtain-like material is used as a link between the spaces in her work.

Interestingly, HaQ recalled a memory to me when I saw her image stills. She connects this curtain-like material to a *dupatta*, a long scarf usually worn over the chest in Indian clothing. She remembers her mother putting the *dupatta* on her head and pretending to be a heroine from Bollywood. The fabric reminded me of this as well, but also the soft chiffon textures of *sarees* that were given to me when I was getting married. I remember feeling anxious to wear them because I did not know how to drape them in the traditional Hindu style.

The "portraits" by each artist share their narratives by engaging with desire, body, and memory. As Stanbridge states, "The three artists present conceptual images of a person, time, and place without pretence. They then ask the viewer to meditate on or enter into the artists' autobiographical or biographical portrayal" (14). An example of how autoethnography can be used in art practice is evident in Dhaliwal's installations in how her use of colour, texture, and materiality reveal, as she describes, " half-forgotten storylines rooted in inner landscapes" (14).

In a conversation that Stanbridge had with all three artists, she asked Dhaliwal how she felt about the idea of "collected resonance" in her work that is included in the exhibition. Dhaliwal expressed how the autobiographical work was linked to the events in her movement from Britain to Canada. With the use of photography, installation, painting, and drawing, Dhaliwal presents memories of self. She explores childhood in installations like the *Green Fairy Story Book (2009)*[2] (e.g. see fig. 9).

[2] The installation *Green Fairy Story Book* by Sarindar Dhaliwal is an installation made up of fourteen handmade books and expressing the fairytale-like feeling of a young Dhaliwal's love of books and images.

She was influenced by her memory of learning to read as a child. In the installation, each book was created using handmade paper dyed and textured with leather and silk. However, the vibrant colours and the text, including the titles, are from the Andrew Lang children's anthologies of fairy stories. Dhaliwal shares another memory of her mother's disapproval of her youthful skill in reading as she felt it would disrupt her in the rest of her studies. She felt this event created "emotional challenges" as a child and is similar to the "cultural dissonance" represented in her installation. As Dhaliwal describes, "This is the conceptual territory in which the work is located: using beauty as a means of reparation of the ugliness and dislocation of the past and as transformative cultural act" (31). This statement resonated with me as it made me think of how certain colours in my paintings remind me of memories from my childhood. For example, I associate the colour red with the sacred thread called the *mauli*. After performing a cultural ritual, I tied a *mauli* on my right arm to be blessed and protected, but as a left-hander, I would always raise my left arm first and was reminded that it was bad to tie the *mauli* on this arm because it was considered unclean. As a child, this made me feel like I wasn't accepted within the Indian culture.

Similarly, Bhal experiments with storytelling but uses a biographical approach. She experiments with cultural hybridity with surreal characteristics in her narratives. Stanbridge's interview with Bhal brought back a different set of memories. As Bhal notes, "I am interested in how distinct cultural experiences have shaped us all, and I am also researching the points where these distinctions overlap, and where unique, hybrid, and odd cultural forms emerge" (33). Cultural schizophrenia and cultural dislocation are addressed in her mixed media projects such as the installation, *The Peacock Wallpaper* (e.g. see fig. 10), created between 2009 -11. This installation included audio that was 12:20 minutes long, sculptural elements, and photography.

Bhal was interested in the violence women encountered due to their psychological issues. The surreal ideas she portrays in her work were influenced by the short story called, *The Yellow Wallpaper,* created in 1891.[3] In the article written by Janice P. Nimura from the New York Times, *Why 'Unwell Women' Have Gone Misdiagnosed for Centuries,* I understood why Bahl was intrigued by these stories of women with illnesses that went untreated and were dismissed. The article also helped me understand how she formed her installation around a bedroom setting inspired by the colonial era with Victorian wallpaper from the story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Bahl's installations included photographs, Anglo-Indian furniture, and writing on William Morris-style wallpaper. The setting of this fictional story influenced all these materials.

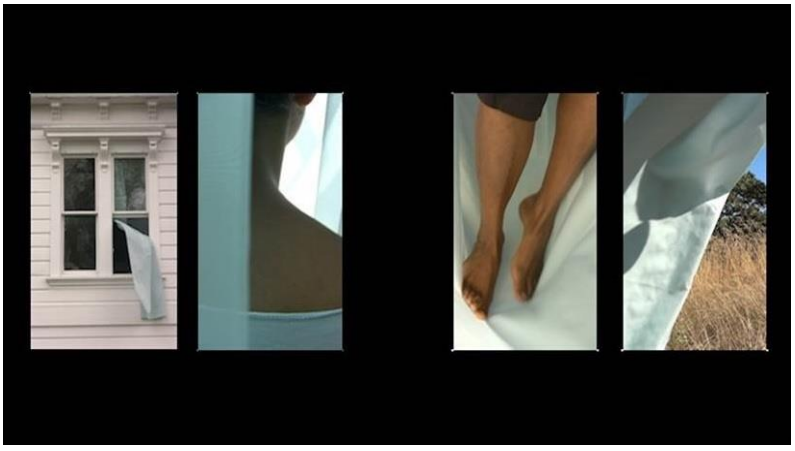
Consequently, what I found interesting is how Bahl used an interdisciplinary approach to her art-making. She included audio speakers playing recordings by the main character, an upper-class Indian woman experiencing "hysteria" caused by her husband's treatment of her. This fictional character was portrayed in a series of photographs on the walls and in a photo album. The installation has an intentionally ghostly feel. The installation speaks to universal issues. By comparing and contrasting how the female body can feel controlled and confined within various cultures. The familiarity of the story comes from the fact that it has been occurring throughout generations.

Although Bahl's work does not portray personal narratives, her work is informed by her observations and life experiences. As described by Bhal, "It is too uncomfortable for me to be directly in the spotlight, and so I often use avatars/performers to enact narratives based on my

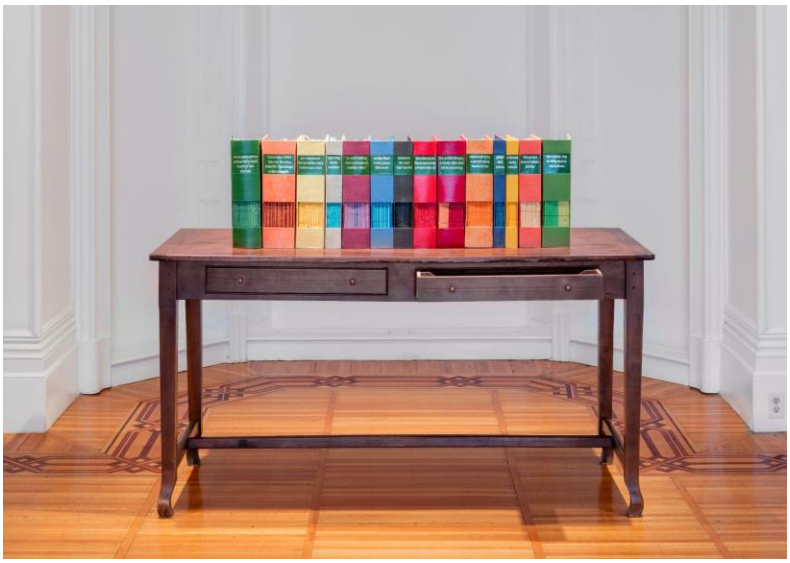
[3] The story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was about a woman who encountered domestic abuse because of her poor health.

lived experiences, observations, and reflections as a woman living in, and in between, simultaneously distinct and yet hybrid cultures" (36).

I have come to realize that artists unravel the self directly and indirectly in their work through the use of media, colour, texture, materiality. HaQ, Dhaliwal, and Bhal reveal parts of themselves in their work. They all use beauty and immersive environments to encourage viewers to critically engage with their narratives.



(Fig. 8). Farheen HaQ, four-channel video installation, *confess, conceal, 2011.*



(Fig. 9). Sarindar Dhaliwal, *Green Fairy Story Book*, 2009. Photo Credit: Toni Hafkenscheid.

(Fig. 10). Shelly Bhal, *The Peacock Wallpaper II*, 2009-11, Mixed-media installation (audio, 19:20 minutes). Installation view, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Intersectionality

Academic theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw, coined the concept of intersectionality to denote the "various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of ourselves"

(Crenshaw, 139). Taking an intersectional approach to the complexities of my selfhood: South-Asian, female, post-colonial, diasporic, Canadian, etc., I use this framework to inform the conception of my paintings. How can the lived experience of plural identities impact self-expression? The gestural brushstrokes that record my movements are as important as the colours so I question how can implied movement conjure ideas of identity? How do we as artists use our social identities, material, and colour to navigate the viscerality of feelings of in-betweenness? How can exploring the multiplicity of our personal and cultural identities alongside boundaries, trauma, and loss help us heal? These are some of the questions I will be asking myself while I explore my creative process.

On an excursion to further understand my own intersectionality, I explored the work of Canadian Indigenous artist Robert Houle. The panels of fields of turquoise and blue in his painting *The Pines 2002-2004* brought me a sense of calmness and ease. The solid tones in these panels made me think of his indigenous culture, spirituality, and colonial thinking about the colonial landscape. My curiosity about Canada's past and present historical events for indigenous peoples is vital to me as a Canadian artist examining Canadian identity. Houle's abstract expressionist and traditional style of paintings are intertwined with the influence of his Saulteaux heritage. In the article, *"*Reconciling cultural differences" by Liam Lacey Houle states: "In any culture, the closer we get to our own heritage, the closer we get to the key to our identity and to universality" (1). Houle's use of colour panels in contrast with a landscape painting allowed me to think about how he connected two different types of visual languages into one work.

Similarly, Guyanese Canadian artist Sandra Brewster displays her layered and complex identities in her artworks. Brewster's exhibition series, *Blur,* explores memory, representation, diaspora, movement, Guyanese Canadian identity, and culture through material exploration.
Brewster has the subjects move while photographing them. Once their movements are captured, she uses a transfer of the photographs by applying a gel medium to the images on paper. This process transforms the photographs by capturing beautiful imperfections such as creases and tears as well as losses in the image where the ink doesn't embed. In the artist talk in conversation with writer Canisia Lubrin on October 16, 2019, Brewster explains how she uses a 'barebones kind of method' when beginning her creative process. Brewster's work attempts to discern how movement conjures ideas of identity. Using a low shutter speed to capture the blurred effect in the images, Brewster then applies an interpretation of the movements. The medium transforms the photographs by capturing the beautiful imperfections such as creases and tears, in addition to spaces in the image that do not embed the ink to it. In *Untitled* (2015–16), a series of portraits in profile on wood panels, she expresses her concerns about the impact of these transitions like migration on her subjects. Brewster's artistic experimentation in displays intrigues me; for example, the series of portraits on wooden panels are displayed on the gallery floor, unlike her other works on archival paper. As these two artists reveal, this intersectional approach to examining art could be used to consider intersections of my own identities.

Buddhism and Mandalas

In the article, *The Primordial Mandalas of East and West: Jungian and Tibetan Buddhist Approaches to Healing and Transformation*, Judson Davis compares the use of the mandalas in Eastern and Western philosophies. Davis describes the different ways that mandalas are created

and used in the East and West even though it still symbolically represents a sacred space. I first became fascinated with mandalas when I saw Tibetan Buddhist ones constructed from sand (e.g. see fig. 2). The mandala was introduced by the Buddha as a tool to facilitate healing and teaching in Eastern philosophies. This illustrative activity was also introduced in Western philosophies and used as a tool for healing as well.

I aspire to self-heal by engaging with my inner self through the act of making. I aspire to work with the mandala in my art practice. As described by Lama Tsultrim Allione in her book *Wisdom Rising: Journey into the Mandala of the Empowered Feminine*, "Our spiritual intelligence searches for wholeness, coherence, and attunement to the universe. The mandala is a tool to accomplish this and thus has continually appeared throughout human history in diverse forms and cultures" (Allione, 46). The mandala is a spiritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism and is used in meditation as a form of assistance in healing.

Swiss psychologist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875- 1961) used mandalas when treating his patients. Mandalas allowed his patients to process their emotions and feelings in therapeutical approaches referred to as "Jungian depth psychology." In this theory, Jung stresses focusing on the unconscious mind to engage the individuation process. I find it fascinating how Jung focuses on the unconscious mind to bring up repressed feelings in his patients. It was in the modern era when Jung made mandala drawings familiar in contemporary western history. Although his way of using the mandala is different in technique, material, and ritualistic practices, he believed that the mandala was a "mythic symbol." that had a therapeutic effect.

Jung felt it represented wholeness and healing and these concepts are the primary purpose of the mandala. This discovery led Jung to research further into Eastern Spirituality and the Mandala's symbolism within Tibetan Buddhism but above all, he felt they expressed the 'whole' of an individual, including their inner and outside experiences or in reference to a specific point. Jung realized that creatively expressing oneself was helpful in him understanding the effect of the process. He believed that emotions and thoughts are brought up by playing with sand and drawing mythical images from dreams. Jung's approach promotes the recognition of one's own identity and the unfolding of the process among the interactions between the unconscious and the ego. Most importantly this healing is achieved by the process of the making of the mandala. My mandala design has been inspired by the Dharma Wheel and the Nava Padma Mandala. Although I work with a set intention, I do not form a planned diagram. This spiritual practice is similar to performing prayer, but it does not restrict a person from being part of a religion or belief.

Reflection on Research

Engaging with colour can be subjective, personal and reveal different vibrations to different individuals when viewing it. Artworks can remind us that we can participate in our material environment as embodied humans by just being present and fully aware of our visual perception. This engagement with colour has encouraged me to analyze my own embodied experiences. I was recently introduced to the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908- 1961) philosophy of embodiment in relationship to the meditative state I immerse in while creating. Through examining Merleau-Ponty's theory and how it reflects on how the body absorbs what is visible over time. I recognize this when I make

brushstrokes as they act as tools to express the energy felt in the moment. My studio-based methodology involves responding to different materials and colour combinations. I use my body to feel the materials and sense the colour vibrations while creating which enables me to think about my experiences and emotions. I have gained a deeper understanding of my body in my experiences with working with Himalayan pink salt and rock salts (e.g. see fig. 11). Through art-making, I indirectly address internalized racism in my Hindu culture, resulting from the dominant white culture in which I live. I express this conflict of feelings through colour and materiality to create an installation environment that will encourage a healing experience.

(Fig.11). Vicky Talwar handling pink Himalayan rock salt rocks, 2020.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

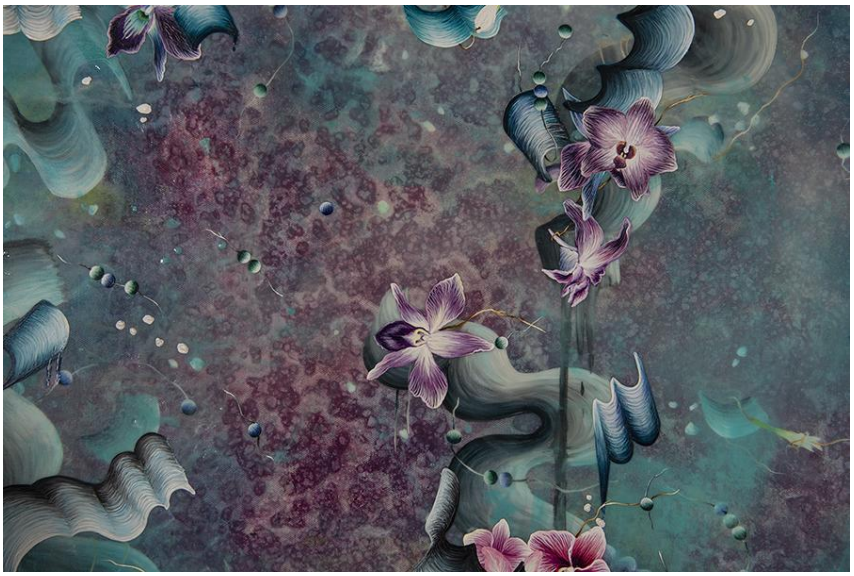
The methodologies used to guide my thesis include research into theories of academic history and autoethnography. It is also studio-based, encompassing materials, process, journaling, and via artist work analysis. I strive to bring my energies and creative practice together to explore the potential of materiality and colour. I find that my colourful ribbon-like brushstrokes trigger a state of tranquility and so I connect Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Embodiment theory with my studio-based research of materials, and process. As John T. Haworth states, "The embodiment theory of art views the artwork as enriched being in its own right ... not produced primarily by intentional acts, but by the reciprocal influence of consciousness, the body, techniques and materials" (86). I wonder how colour, when used on materials such as salt can generate a different reaction in the viewer than on canvas? This puts me in mind of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception about becoming familiar with, acknowledging, and discovering an environment within the material, e.g.: "The perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of some other thing..."(4).

I soak salt particles in acrylic inks to create coloured rock salts for my light installations. I begin by letting the stained salt soak into the stretched canvases (e.g. see fig. 12) with the intention of employing the physical presence of the salt rather than representing it. As the salt rocks partially dissolve, they stain the canvas surfaces. These impressions communicate a memory of the earth.

Although the salt is absent, yet its presence remains. In a detail of the triptych, *Essence of the Soul* (e.g. see fig. 13 and 14), little bubbles of salt can be seen.

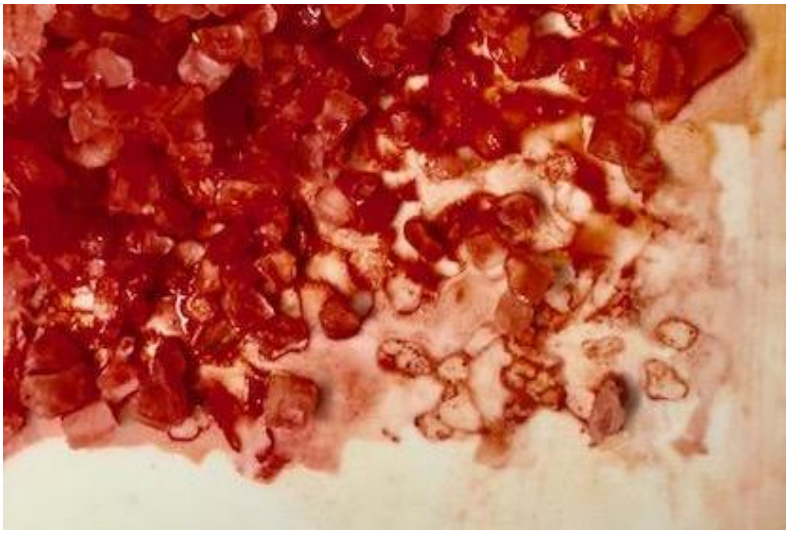
(Fig. 12). Salt soaked with water on canvas, (process work), 2020.

(Fig. 13). *Essence of the Soul*, Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 120 inches, 2021.



(Fig. 14). Detail of *Essence of the Soul*, Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 120 inches, 2021.

I discovered that Pink Himalayan rock salt reacts differently to pigment than pure rock salt. For example, the pink salts did not react to the inks as expected and did not stain the canvas. With rock salt, water, and acrylic inks, colours are absorbed leaving a lustrous coloured shine. As pigments were absorbed, a negative bleed occurred on the salt-soaked paper. In contrast, Himalayan rock salt and Epsom salts rejected the paint. I experimented with how the colour changed when applied to different materials (e.g. see fig. 15 and 16) and continue this with the materiality of vellum, glass, and watercolour as metaphors for my hybrid cultural identity.



(Fig. 15). Vellum, pure rock salt, and acrylic soft body paint (process work), 2020.

(Fig. 16). Epsom salt in boiling water, soft body acrylic paint on glass (process work), 2020.

I started journaling to record how colours made me feel and what they symbolized. Although some viewers are skeptical about healing through colour, my experience is validated by my perception and relationship to specific colours.

As I deepen my research into how embodiment is encountered in a contemporary context, these sensations encouraged me to trust my intuitive, bodily impressions. Both the environment in which I create my artworks and my experience with colour, and materials. I relate to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Investigating how materiality and colour affected my emotions has allowed me to analyze my behavioural patterns. I relate my use of colour and mark makings in this responsive approach to his description of a "perceptive" individual. "How do I perceive my own paintings?" and "Who am I at this moment?" Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "primacy of perception" points out that the word "perception" can take a variety of forms. My studio activities are conducted within my lived experiences as such are always in relation to what I am confronting in life at that moment.

Here is where the politics of materials becomes important. I recognize that seeing a specific colour can transport the viewer to personal and cultural experiences and memories. My painting *Let It Go*, consists of three panels (e.g. see fig. 17) that were created after researching how Himalayan salt is imported globally. I came across the political issue of India's re-exporting salt worldwide and the claim that it came from India**,** although actually the point of origin is Pakistan, where miners are paid very poorly.

My relationship with natural resources continues to change as I learn more about the politics of the salt trade, poor labour conditions, and country of origin~~s~~. Analyzing my own attachment to the identity of the source country has reminded me of stories told around me and in the media. The negative criticism of Hindus towards Muslims elicits a conflict of emotions. Through the act of painting, I am able to embody fear, dishonesty, anger-and use mixed media techniques to reify

my dual identity. The juxtaposition of one painting style against another suggests cultural disruption or dislocation. By embodying my painting with these feelings, I strive to cleanse myself with the power of Himalayan salt. These insights into my materials and process transform my hybrid cultural identity into a language that communicates.

(Fig.17). Vicky Talwar, *Let It Go,* Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 120 inches, 2020.

As I continue to experiment with various painting media, I realize that my use of mixed media techniques was not conveying my intention wholeheartedly. However, in playing with actual salt rocks, the variety of pink tones, and textures, I felt my intention was communicated more directly. I was eager to learn how other culturally diverse artists explored materiality to consider different ways of thinking.

Sarah Wall describes an autoethnographic study by Margot Duncan in 2004 as a way to support the researcher to answer difficult questions. Duncan believed that autoethnography was a way for makers to analyze their own behaviour and reflect on their field of expertise. My own art-making experience reveals my embodied exploration of material and colour. Studying different meditation practices, exploring different art techniques, and pushing the boundaries of material use within my process have contributed to my interdisciplinary approach.

Therefore, to support my thinking through making, I have been analyzing culturally diverse artists, to find connections to my cultural identity. These include Chrysanne Stathacos, Yoko Ono, Farheen HaQ, and Charwei Tsai.

Yoko Ono's exhibition *The Riverbed* includes the word "imagine" inscribed on a piece of stone brought back memories of places in nature.[4] I look at her use of natural materials to convey meaning and transformation. Ono's exhibit made me realize that I needed to use actual rocks in my light installations. I analyzed how a variety of Himalayan salt blocks revealed light in my installation and in doing so, highlighted the spaces in-between. The spaces between rocks act as a metaphysical space where air is like a glue that merges identities (e.g. see fig. 18).

(Fig. 18). Pink Himalayan salt mandala light installation detail (process work), 2021.

[4] Yoko Ono's exhibition at the Gardiner Museum titled, *The Riverbed* in 2018. The stones in her installation transform the gallery space and suggest temporality and memory. Visit http://ocadu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/docview/2033624653?accountid=12991.

Ono's stones are like my rock salt pieces in that they express emotions. The exhibition theme allowed viewers to release their anger. Ono's *Stone Piece* the earth's memory and served as a reminder to recognize the beauty of the earth we live in. In my belief that our actions and thoughts create our reality, I created a mandala form for healing and as a space for viewers to express their emotions.

As noted in my Literature Review, my fascination with mandalas originated when I saw Tibetan Buddhist ones constructed from sand and symbolic of their religion, philosophy, and psychology. These Buddhist teaching tools involve specific colours, psychic centers (chakras), and the cosmic elements of ether, water, earth, fire, and air. I want my work to create space for viewers to cleanse and heal, release what no longer serves them, and allow salt's energy to empower them. Analyzing Ono's installation and Buddhist mandalas taught me how healing and mindfulness could be used as a methodology.

This information led me to learn more about artists who apply Buddhism as a methodology such as Farheen HaQ and Chrysanne Stathacos. They demonstrated ways I too could bring these ancient devotional practices into contemporary art. Farheen HaQ has inspired me to use " touch" to reveal the embodied self. She influenced my examination of my body, through gesture, in studio-based ritual and material explorations. Her fascination with exploring the female body through culturally significant materials, such as the sari or hijab, demonstrated how new relationships can be formed between the fabrics and the body. Like me, HaQ's practice comes from her cultural and personal experiences and encounters within rituals.

Consequently, exploring her embodied practice led me to investigate new materials such as chiffon, a fabric is used in many Indian garments like the sari. The touch and feel of this sheer material bring back memories of India. I printed with Himalayan salt rock onto this fabric. Its semi-transparency allowed me to integrate the salt into the material and observe how it moves in the presence of viewers.

The multidisciplinary artist Chrysanne Stathacos is American, Greek, and Canadian and a practicing Buddhist. Her work demonstrates ways of using tools and materials which led me to explore how they can become research. Analyzing her installations has informed how I think of mandalas and how they might be used in art. As I explore eastern spirituality using materials from the natural world, my work is informed by how Stathacos adds a sentimental attachment to the colours of the natural materials. *The Three Dakini Mirrors (of the body speech and mind)* includes three flower mandalas that engage with the energies of speech, body, and mind.

(Fig. 19). Chrysanne Stathacos, *The Three Dakini Mirrors (of the body, speech and mind), red mandala,* 2021. Installation at the Gwangju National Museum, part of the 13th Gwangju Biennale. Photo credit: Subin Cho.

She symbolizes these energies with specific colours and materials like red rose petals that are related to notions of romantic love. (e.g. see fig. 19).

The installation included healing sounds and rose scents to create a multisensory experience. Through a ritual performance, Stathacos dismantled the mandala by blowing on it as a metaphor for the ephemerality of the process. Because she did this, I made the decision to dismantle own mandala in a ritualistic way. In this I realized that I could use my spiritual practice in my work. In current work, I consider how I can use Buddhist wisdom/practices and how Buddhism in my daily life influences my art practice? By researching the use of mandalas, as a healing tool I began looking at how Stathacos uses other methods of healing as well. In thinking of this I considered integrating performance into my practice. For example, the “Sound Energy Healing" performance made in collaboration with Buddhist Monk Lama Jam that took place after the examination of Taiwanese contemporary artist Charwei Tsai. She has collaborated with Buddhist monks in her practice. Tsai’s solo exhibition, *The Womb & The Diamond*, included a mandala made of a diamond, glass, and mirrors[5] (e.g. see fig.20).

The exhibition included a video of monk, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, reciting the ‘*Dependent Arising Mantra’* and sharing his wisdom on the mandala in Buddhism. I thought of the use of breath in meditation as it was as if Khyentse Rinpoche had infused blessings within the glass forms representing wombs. Breath was also used while they were being made ~~in~~ a way similar to

[5] Visit https://cutt.ly/BbOwJ70 to learn more about the interview with Luise Guest on Charwei Tsai’s, *The Womb & The Diamond Installation.*

Stathacos's practice. Similarly, I believe Lama Jam infuses positive energy and healing into salt rocks as he performs with Tibetan medical singing bowls and Buddhist chants.

(Fig.20). Charwei Tsai, *The Womb & The Diamond Installation View, 2021.*
Photo credit: Live Forever Foundation, Taiwan.

Chapter 5

Studio Investigations

This section engages with my studio investigations, looking at how process connects to my embodied explorations. In it, I reflect on my embodied experience of colour, Eastern spiritual teachings, as well as Western teachings about colour. I investigate the spiritual processes that occur in my studio practice that have affected my artmaking.

As I challenge myself to make my mark making more universal and connect the physical to the spiritual, I also investigate the politics of each material, such as salt, and how to integrate my hybrid cultural identity into my practice. My identities and social location allow me to engage authentically with themes of identity, temporality, displacement, movement, and memory.

I begin my process by cleansing my studio space using sacred smoke such as White Sage candles, sandalwood incense, or Palo Santo. These scents release stagnant energy, calm my soul, and allow me to create without being burdened by daily responsibilities. I surround myself with Buddhist chanting and healing objects such as Himalayan pink salt and mala.

I explore the nature of colour and materiality by investigating how these affect my body and emotions. In the studio, I think about the gestures and movements I make while working and why I place certain strokes on my canvas. Could my colours, in combination with the mark made reveal my feelings of in-betweenness? Both come out of my responsive approach to making. I experiment with broader brushstrokes that create illusions of movement and allow drips. The

results excite me as I find that my unexpected choices generate healing. For example, an explosion of splattered paint can feel like a release of pain that is therapeutic.

Sarindar Dhaliwal and JJ Lee have influenced my practice in how they address multiple cultural influences. Dhaliwal's use of coloured powders allowed me to consider how colour relates to the shape, size, and tactility of an artwork and how a colour affects one's emotions and operates across the composition. For example, when choosing a background colour, I consider how it will effect multiple layers of glaze-and how the visual mixture of colours interact and alter our perception once the painting is complete?

I have been encouraged to explore my hybrid cultural identity using new materials as well as contining with my current materials and their potential. In the paintings, drawings, and installations of JJ Lee, I relate to her responsive approach and use of materials that are personally significant, like rice paper. Lee used rice paper as the surface for a 60-foot drawing installation titled: *ReOriented* (e.g. see fig. 21). Through this elongated piece, she painted gold lines resembling threads and noodles as a metaphor connecting her Chinese and Canadian identities. Lee spoke of how creating spaces with materials that evoke identity can be disruptive in a culture. This makes me realize that it is acceptable to create uncomfortable relationships, such as sharing my feeling of in-betweenness and the studio-based rituals that I use to counter them.

(Fig. 21). JJ Lee, Detail, *ReOriented*, Mixed Media on Rice Paper, entire dimensions 18″ x 60′, 2018.

In addition to looking at the elements of art like colour, texture, line, etc., I realize the importance of the medium to my practice. Working with acrylic paint and mixed media has become a metaphor for working through complex personal and cultural issues. When diluted, the paint cannot be controlled, and this is similar to how I feel navigating daily life. Learning to let go has helped me work through cultural conflicts. Experimenting and taking risks with new painting mediums (high gloss mediums, fluid acrylic techniques like pouring, watercolour effects, glazing, and dripping) has created suggestions of water and reminded me that change can be good.

When I encounter painterly problems like cracking or crazing, I find solutions through experimentation. The high gloss of fluid mediums like pouring mediums allow me to create depth by highlighting certain parts of the composition while fading others. Molding paste and clear glossy gels have solved many of the problems I have encountered.

(Fig. 22). *Release,* Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 48 x 108 inches, 2020.

In my painting, *Release,* (e.g. see fig. 22) I juxtapose painting styles and examine how colours change when placed together? Although my process is experimental, I strive for a transformative affect. The vibrant yellow panel reminds me of the yellow marigold garlands in temples and wedding ceremonies in India and of the candles I light in my studio space. The dark red panel reminds me of the red sari I wore on my wedding day and the ruby red jewels my mother gave me. I am curious about what happens to these memories when these colours are placed together? The large scale of these panels allow viewers to engage both physically and optically with these colours and textures and bring their own memories to the work. By merging marigold flowers and garlands, I encourage my viewers to look closely at these blossoms and the many layers beneath.

As I reflect on my artmaking process, I realize that my use of vibrant colours, textures, and multiple frosted layers allow me to represent fluidity of memories from multiple specific places

and times, that form the basis of my current reality. Sacred threads weave and intertwine through natural objects in these paintings. By combining elements from the natural world with sacred threads, I find a metaphor for my hybrid Hindu Canadian culture. Expressing the interaction of my two cultures has encouraged me to paint spiritual symbols-as a way of expressing emotions on canvas. Like Lee, I paint colours with playful brush strokes and directional strokes and in these forms, I investigate movement, lived experience, and space (e.g. see fig. 23).

(Fig. 23). *Divinity*, Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 36 x 36 inches, 2020.

I have always wondered if viewers will understand what I strive to convey about my hybrid cultural identity and the cultural disruption I have experienced. I came across an artist interview that Shaan Syed had with Swapnaa Tamhane in conjunction with his exhibition, *Maghrib,* at Parisian Laundry in Montreal. Tamhane discussed the varied ways viewers can interpret Syed's

work based on their experiences and personal context.[6] Syed divides his paintings while still integrating the two halves. He reveals the contrasts of cultures by exploring abstract shapes, and forms that can be seen differently by everyone depending on the viewers' identity and circumstances. For example, as a South Asian - Canadian I identify with the deconstructed images as a metaphor for feelings of in-betweenness. However, if another person had visited the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq, they might identify the minaret staircase in his abstract forms. My viewpoint was through culturally specific perspective similar to-the artist. This made me conscious of the politics of perception. Syed's explorations of these contradictions also occur by adding and removing materials in parts of the work, then eventually bringing them back together. *Double Split Minerat 1*[7] (e.g. see fig 24.). I related to Syed's minaret paintings as they include layered, vibrant, and divided surfaces to express his identity, and his approach influenced my desire to further explore abstraction.

[6] Visit- https://cutt.ly/PbYmHLG for Swapnaa Tamhane's interview with Shaan Syed, "'A Stubborn Way to Encourage Real Looking."

[7] *Double Split Minerat 1* was inspired by the spiral staircase of the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq but depicted as flat as he's never seen it in real life.

(Fig. 24.). Shaan Syed, Double *Split Minerat 1 2020,* Oil on linen 90 1/2 × 60 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Bradley Ertaskiran - Photos: Maxime Brouillet.

In the left half of my painting, *In Perfect Harmony,* the turbulent background and energetic lines are intensified through colour and form. In contrast, the right panel uses turquoise green hues and spacious mark making to convey a more peaceful effect (e.g. see fig. 25). This high contrast and intensive colour choices create an immersive encounter for the viewer like Syed's paintings.

(Fig. 25). *In Perfect Harmony*, Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 48 x 72 inches, 2021.

Alongside the physical work of painting, I do studio-based rituals like my performance with Buddhist monk Lama Jam. The spiritual weight and meaning of the Tibetan medical singing bowls and their vibrational sounds help Lama Jam relieve pain and improve energy flow to areas of the body. I experienced these soothing and tranquil sounds with Lama Jam when he treated me with “Sound Energy Healing” in his temple (e.g. see fig.26).

(Fig. 26). Lama Jam performing Sound Energy Healing treatment at Five Wisdoms Temple, 2021.

In the article, *Effects of Singing Bowl Sound Meditation on Mood, Tension, and Well-being: An Observational Study,* Tamara L. Goldsby, and other authors examine how listening to sound meditation with these bowls provides relaxation, positive energy, spiritual well-being, and positive effects on mood. Through further research and discussions with Lama Jam, I am learning how the sound transfers positive energy even to inanimate objects such as salt. As Goldsby states, "The bowls were used in a psychotherapy model in combination with deep breathing, visualization, and a loving-kindness meditation. The authors reported that this

combination of healing methods may be a catalyst for emotional and psychological healing in counseling sessions" (402).

I wonder if these treatments might contribute to my creative practice and what bodily responses occur when working with the different coloured salt rocks while listening to the Tibetan medical singing bowl sounds? How have my emotions changed within this sonic environment? In Sanskrit Mandala means "circle" and symbolizes unity and completeness. I have noticed how the circular shape of my own mandala installations make me feel balanced. Listening to the healing Tibetan medical singing bowls in my studio has enabled me to connect emotions with colour when making the salt rocks. I created a colour chart to record what I was feeling when interacting with them. The colours and emotions associated with the chakras are embedded in my colour chart.

Chapter 6
The Exhibition

As I reflect on my experiences installing and sharing the exhibition, *Inward Identities*, I learned to expect changes throughout the installation process, the importance of letting go of perfection, and trusting the curator in the gallery. Within this interdisciplinary investigation, I realize that connection to my work will be unique to each individual. I, therefore, encourage viewers to participate in the exhibition to build relationships and promote community engagement.
As an artist, I strive to influence the viewer's thoughts on my work but found that viewers respond with their own knowledge and lived experience. Some visitors told me my references to nature and objects drew them towards my paintings, while others related to the work's colour and texture. For example, the pink Himalayan salt rocks reminded some of the taste of salt on foods or a recent spa experience.

Throughout my research and installation process, I wondered if the viewer benefits from their intended healing functions and how the agency of the object might disrupt the history behind the object being created like a rock of salt. I have been thinking about how objects can influence changes. For example, how might my use of Himalayan salt disrupt its use spiritually and culturally?

Mahatma Gandhi's salt campaigns and the Salt March that followed in March to April 1930, have been on my mind. I was reminded of the Salt Act implemented by Britain in 1882. This history transformed the material of salt into a political object which signifies colonialism. How might I use Himalayan salt to bring back its geological and my own personal memories? I use it

to evoke its healing qualities, such as the absorption of negative energy or toxins from the environment. As I reidentify this material beyond the global context, I aim to give it authority and integrity. As I delve into my personal use of salt as a creative medium and tool, I recognize that how it is presented will contribute to the communication of my intentions. Working with this material in the form of the mandala has emphasized its sacredness and spiritual value and alludes to its significance historically.

In the "*Handbook of Material Culture"* from 2006, Janet Hoskins describes Alfred Gell's theory as a formation that incorporates all forms within material culture. She states, "He asserts that … objects which have previously been theorized as simple objects of aesthetic contemplation – are in fact made in order to act upon the world and to act upon other persons" (75).

Like Gell, I see how art can influence the action of others and how seeing things from another person's perspective can contribute to how art functions even without a defined purpose. Due to COVID-19, my exhibition opening was postponed, giving me time to rethink my work throughout the installation process. The idea of Affect Theory came up in discussions with the exhibition curator Carolyn Hickey. Although I have not researched this theory thoroughly, I understood how Hickey felt the images of salt on the chiffon fabric panels in *Interconnectedness* (e.g. see fig. 27) created an affectual and physical interaction.

Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe in *The Affect Theory Reader* that the making of affect can extend from one body to another, "That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise)... and sometimes stick to bodies and

worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (1). As I observed how viewers looked at my installation, *Interconnectedness* (e.g. see fig. 27), against the yellow wall and how they navigated the space, I now think about the affectual interaction. I intended that they experience the movement of the sheer fabric panels hung on horizontal poles. The images of Himalayan salt rocks and light against the sheer fabric created a push and pull effect between artwork and viewer. I became aware that the viewer's body was part of the exhibition and how it responded to their movements as their bodies navigated the space.

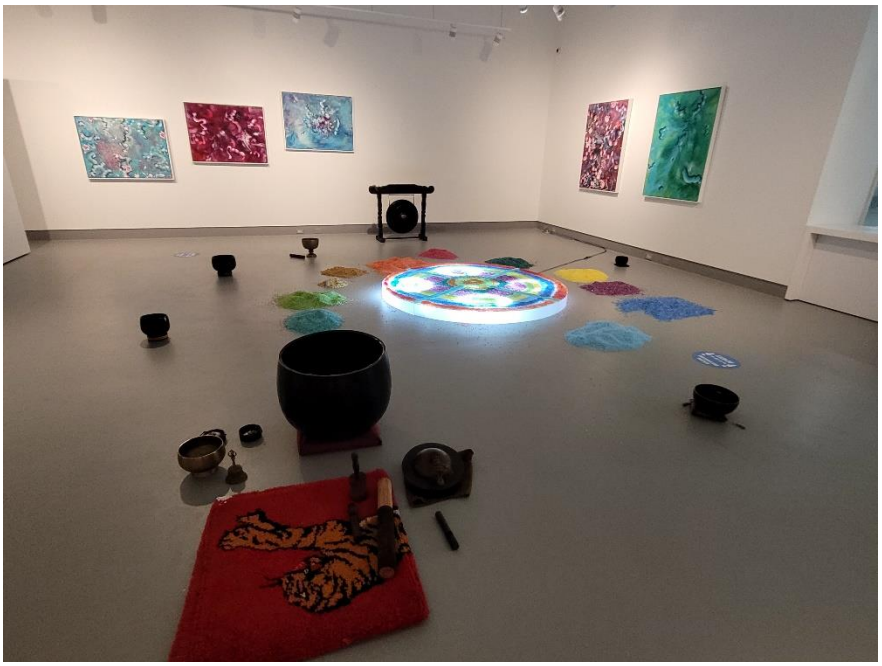
(Fig. 27). *Interconnectedness*, Chiffon, Pink Himalayan Salt, Latcham Art Centre, 48 Square ft. Height 9 ft. 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 28). *A Moment To Myself,* Plastic, LED Lights, Salt Rocks, Acrylic, 7ft in Diameter, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

I created a 7 ft diameter mandala precisely so that viewers had to walk around and interact with the work. While installing *A Moment To Myself* (e.g. see fig. 28), I considered the colour placement and wondered whether the coloured salt rocks had any physiological or emotional effect on my body? What colours impacted me most-and how did I adapt to these effects as they arose?

Connecting my meditation process to studio explorations encouraged me to analyze the process of making of the Mandala. For example, as I perform a mandala, I look at the light illuminating from below as a metaphor for the spaces in-between, which helps me concentrate on setting my intentions. Coloured salt rocks crushed by my bare feet left a residue around the mandala. I intentionally left this residue so that people could understand the process. As viewers entered the gallery, you could hear the sound energy vibrations playing in the video. Sharing these moments with my viewers was essential.

During my one hour performance with Buddhist Monk Lama Jam in the gallery, I bowed and thanked him for his presence as he organized the instruments he used on my sound energy treatment at his temple. The bells, gongs, and seven different Tibetan singing bowls were displayed around my mandala installation (e.g. see fig. 29). In reflection, I remember listening to how the mallet he used to strike/tap the bowls encouraged me to let my thoughts/emotions pass. I observed how Lama Jam used high-intensity sounds when I worked with specific colours like yellow and low-frequency sounds with cooler colours like blue (e.g. see fig. 30). The sound energy vibrations produced by him acted as a guide in creating my mandala-and allowed me to stay calm yet embrace all the emotions encountered during the experience.



(Fig. 29). *A Moment To Myself* set-up performance with Buddhist Monk, Lama Jam. 2021.

Photo Credit: Latcham Art Centre.

(Fig. 30). *A Moment To Myself* performance with Buddhist Monk, Lama Jam, 2021. Photo Credit: Latcham Art Centre.

When I watched the video of the performance displayed in the gallery, I was reminded of how even the participants were impacted by my creation. Lama Jam expressed how proud he was of me for recognizing the importance of the mandala and how happy it made him to see me apply Tibetan Buddhist mandala principles into my artwork like my decision to dismantle my mandala at the end of the exhibit.

I continued to reflect on viewers' reactions throughout the exhibition. Hickey, the staff at Latcham Art Centre, and I created a “Community Mandala” wall at the entrance of the gallery space which included a table with different sized coloured stickers in salt rock shapes. The question “How would you describe your experience with the exhibition?” was displayed to encourage engagement regardless of age *(*e.g. see fig. 31*).*

(Fig. 31). Community Mandala Wall, Latcham Art Centre, Stouffville, 2022.
Photo credit: Latcham Art Centre.

Through the experience of making this exhibition, I have gained insight into how negotiations with objects without a defined purpose can initiate personal discoveries and how discussion can strengthen the artist-curator relationship.

List of Figures

All figures are the work of Vicky Talwar except where indicated.

Figure 46. *Close Encounters*, exhibition detail, 2021. 91

Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

Cover Page: *Rising Above*, Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 40 x 62 inches, 2021.

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Appendix A
Thesis Exhibition Details

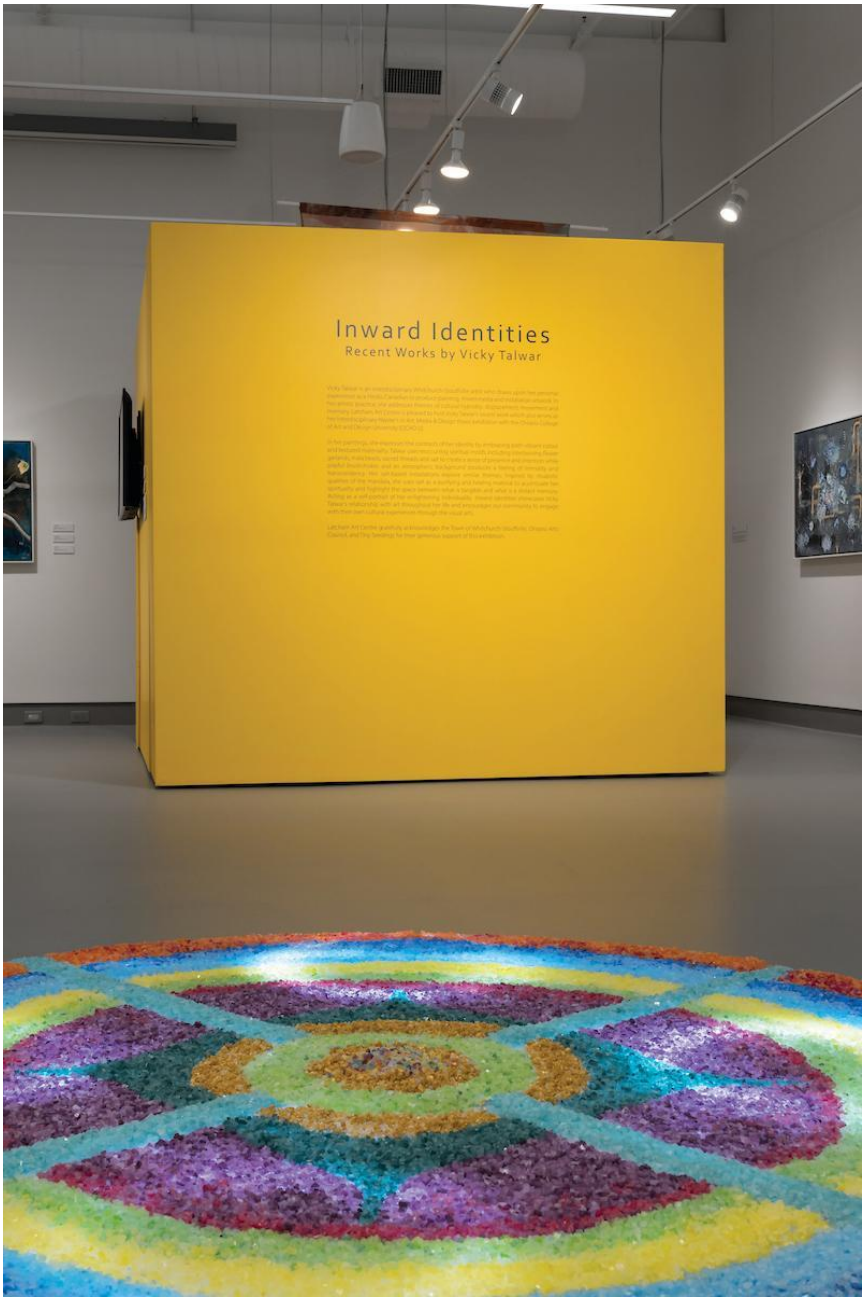


Fig. 32. *Inward Identities*, exhibition detail, 2022. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig.33). *A Moment To Myself*, installation detail, 2022. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 34). *A Transformative Shift*, installation detail, 2022. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 35). *Inward Identities,* exhibition detail 2, 2022. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 36). *Inward Identities,* exhibition detail 3, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

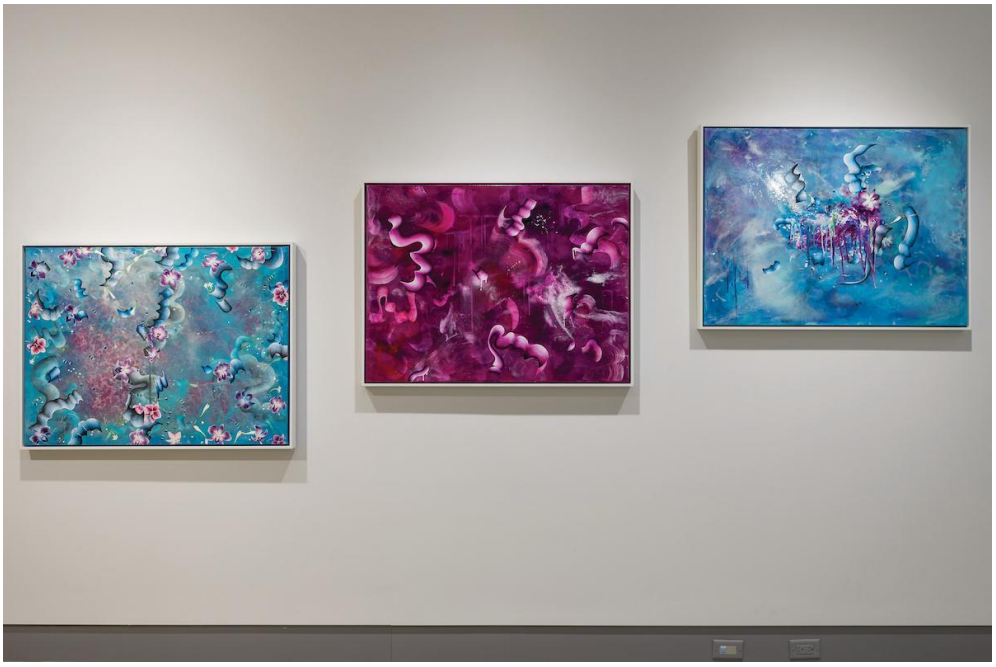
(Fig. 37). *Inward Identities*, exhibition detail 4, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 38). *Interconnectedness*, exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 39). *Rising Above*, exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

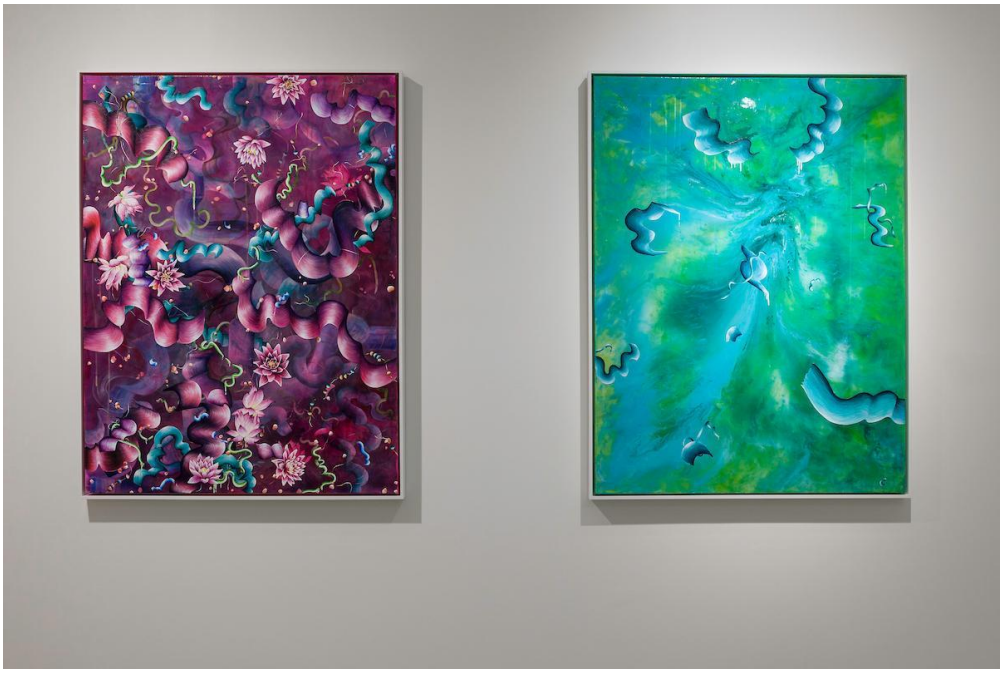
(Fig. 40). *Inward Identities*, exhibition detail 5, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 41). *Release*, installation detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.



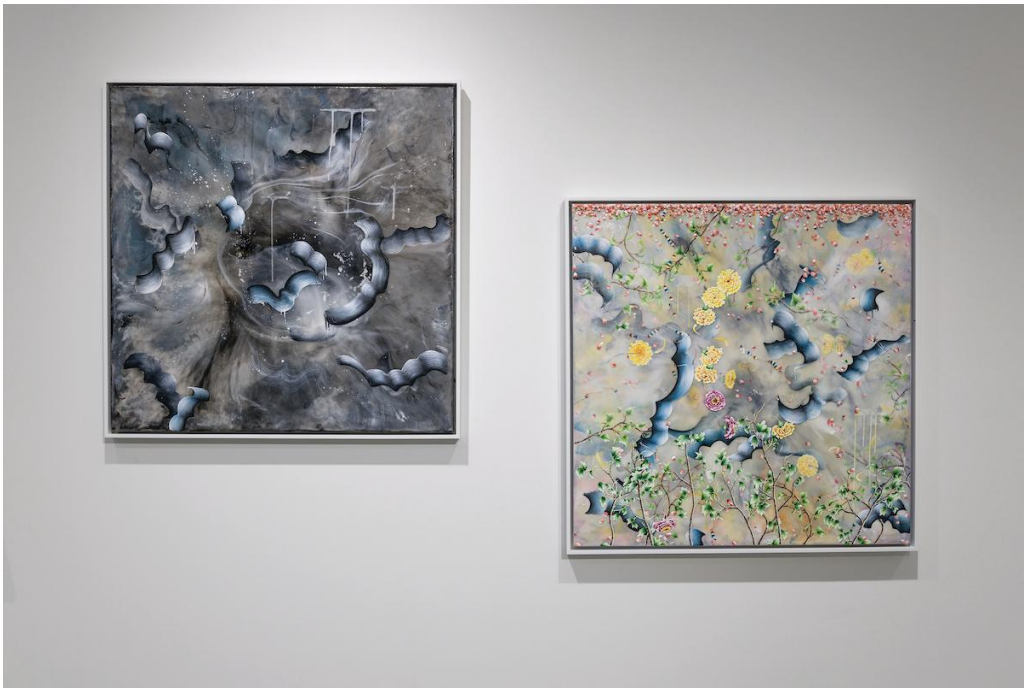
(Fig. 42). *A Look Within*, installation detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 43). *A Journey of Deep Transformation*, exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.



(Fig. 44). *In Perfect Harmony*, exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.

(Fig. 45). *Willing Release,* exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.



(Fig. 46). *Close Encounters,* exhibition detail, 2021. Photo Credit: Dennis Hristovski.