



TATE ETC
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'We Were the Peacocks'

As Tate Liverpool prepares for a major refurbishment, Liverpool-born artists *Chila Kumari Singh Burman* and *Linder* reminisce about their experiences growing up on the Mersey and finding a way to art



Chila Kumari Singh Burman as a student at Leeds Polytechnic in 1979
Courtesy Chila Kumari Singh Burman

LINDER When I look at your work, Chila, there is always a sense of material exuberance and an accompanying abundance of ideas. Where did that come from? Did you used to draw at home?

CHILA KUMARI SINGH BURMAN No, but I used to stay late after school for the art club. There were only about three or four of us and we would stay there until we got turfed out. When I went home, though, I had to do other stuff. I had to iron my uniform, polish my shoes, and help to clean my dad's ice cream van. It wasn't as if I could go home and relax. We also had those preparation sheets to do in sixth form, didn't we? We had to do the drawings at home and then bring them into school.

L I'd completely forgotten about those!

CKSB I remember having a fight with my brother Billy over who got to have the car one night, and I won – but when I got back, I found he'd cut my preparation sheet into tiny pieces. We'd been given 'woodland' as a theme, and my drawings were all to do with trees. I had to take the pieces into school the next morning and Sellotape them all together. But I still got an A grade!

L And that cutting later became part of your signature collages...

CKSB Exactly! When did you know you wanted to study art?

L My mum and dad were terrified that I'd leave education without a 'trade in my hands', so I had to study graphic design in order to reassure them that I wouldn't be unemployable and penniless when I left. Unfortunately, though, I was both.

CKSB You never hear that word 'trade' now, do you? So, you did graphic design after your Foundation course?

L Yes.

CKSB So did I! Marc Almond, one of my fellow students, went into the fine art department at Leeds Poly because he was painting clowns. We were both on the same foundation course and bezzie mates. I used to walk around the art department open-mouthed, though, thinking: 'Thank God I'm not in here.'

L It was the same for me at Manchester Poly – I couldn't see the attraction of fine art. The great thing about studying print media was that you could duplicate and develop an image rather than spend a whole term on a single painting.

CKSB I know! I made bodyprints there that are now going to be in the *Women in Revolt!* exhibition at Tate Britain. At one point, we had to do a project about texture, and I thought: I'm definitely not doing potato prints – so I used my body instead.

'In the graphic design studio it was all about listening to Roxy Music, going out each night dancing to soul and disco'

Chila Kumari Singh Burman

L I chose illustration because I was thinking ahead about doing record sleeves and book jackets. Also, in the fine art department, everyone wore baggy jumpers, whereas in the graphic design studio it was all about listening to Roxy Music, going out each night dancing to soul and disco, while longing to buy Biba lipsticks and an airbrush. We all looked fabulous on a shoestring budget. We were the peacocks, weren't we? Birds of a feather without a penny to our names.

CKSB Yes!

L Do you think that, because we grew up in a port, it gave us a very visceral sense of another world waiting for us beyond the Mersey?

CKSB I knew I had to get out of my parents' house because of the expectation that I'd have an arranged marriage. It's why I went to art school in the first place.

L Because of the pressure to marry a stranger?

CKSB Big time. My dad was on my side, though. He was the one saying that we had to think about this, that I needed to continue my education. So I went to art school. I definitely know now, 100 per cent, that I did not go to art school to be an artist –because I didn't know what that was.

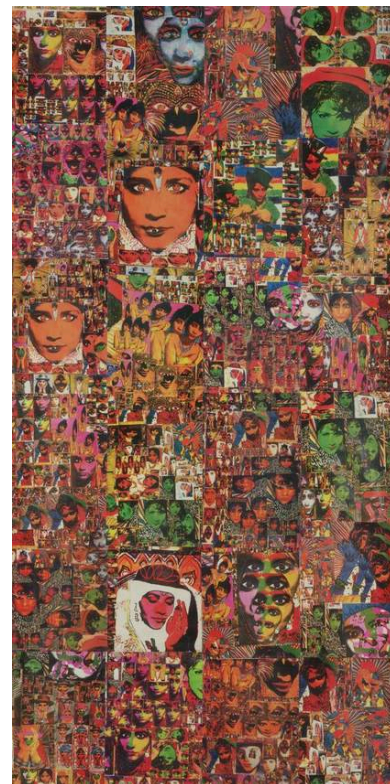
L I was the same. I remember being taken to the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and seeing those huge allegorical Victorian paintings there. That was what 'art' meant to us.

CKSB Yes, that was the only gallery that I knew too!



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Articles from Tate Etc. magazine featuring articles on Sarah Lucas, Women in Revolt!, Philip Guston, El Anatsui, A World in Common and much more



ARTIST

Chila Kumari Singh Burman MBE

born 1957



ARTIST
Linder
born 1954



Women In Revolt!
Art, Activism and the Women's movement in
the UK 1970–1990