

[When a Tiger Leaps into the Future: Our Art Editor on Chila Kumari Singh Burman's 'The Smile You Send Returns to You' \(wasafiri.org\)](https://www.wasafiri.org/content/when-a-tiger-leaps-into-the-future-leon-wainwright-on-chila-burmans-the-smile-you-send-returns-to-you-whats-in-a-cover-image/)

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10 September 2024

When a Tiger Leaps into the Future: Our Art Editor on Chila Kumari Singh Burman's 'The Smile You Send Returns to You'

Editor's note

For our [40th Anniversary Issue](#), titled and themed around 'Futurisms', it is with great pride that we feature Chila Burman's 'The Smile You Send Returns to You' on our cover. This installation, which unites imagination, history, and visual culture, tells a deeply personal yet universally resonant story of migration. At the heart of the piece is Burman's father's Ice Cream Van, 'The Rocket,' a recurring motif in her work that symbolises both a cherished childhood memory, and the broader narrative of the family's move from India to Britain.

To offer further insight into this powerful piece and Chila Burman's broader artistic legacy, we asked our Art Editor, Professor Leon Wainwright from The Open University, to provide a deeper understanding of how Burman's work continues to inspire and provoke thought — encouraging us to envision a future shaped by the stories and struggles of the past. We hope this issue resonates with you as much as Chila Burman's work has resonated with us.

Personal Discovery

I first came across the art of Chila Kumari Singh Burman MBE (b. 1957) in the late 1990s, when I was a student at SOAS, University of London researching my thesis on British artists of the Caribbean, Asian, and African diasporas. I was lucky enough to spend some time with the artist too, as Burman very kindly allowed me to conduct a set of interviews. They took place in her studio and at her home in northwest London, but I am pretty sure that we also just sat about having coffee together down at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. I don't really recall. What I do remember fondly is that it was a time of discovery for me. I felt honoured that an artist I had read about (such as in the groundbreaking monograph on Burman, *Between Two Cultures*, published in 1995, written by the preeminent art historian, Lynda Nead) had time for an emerging academic; I was only about 22 or 23 then.

In a Local Accent

The work she was making seemed to show me where a hopeful attitude toward the social divisions of contemporary Britain could lead. And there was the surprising discovery that we shared some personal histories too. Burman is from Merseyside, as am I. When she and I speak, it is in a local accent from that region of England that some might struggle to comprehend down in London. The accent – ‘scouse’ – is my mother tongue. During the interviews, we found common ground and were amused by our shared roots, communicating in a relaxed but rapid way. But we also share Hindi and Urdu, languages related to the Punjabi that Burman has from her parents’ family, which I have learnt as an adult, first as a student, and then from friends. Switching between each of these helped me as I explored her art – and the way she sees the world – before I went away and got writing.

A Critical Adversary

When we did our interviews in the 1990s, Burman was at a mid-point in her career, already having built a wide reputation for a corpus of works in a massive range of media that included photography and photomontage, graphic and plastic arts, video, sound, installation and performance. Much of her art aligns with subtlety to traditions of graphic political satire and social commentary — carrying a powerful voice in contemporary art that crosses the fields of gender politics, postcolonial identity, and class consciousness. Although she is a critical adversary of the status quo, her art can’t be flattened out and reduced to some sort of textbook reading of themes, such as about a female artist articulating the myriad experiences and agonistic positions of life in a diaspora. That is largely because, as an artist, she presses the viewer to share her fascination with the visual world. Through a very selective use of materials, she provokes physical sensations that never fail to deliver an intellectual punch.

Making a Phenomenal Difference

Many of Burman’s works are figurative, pivoting around portraiture and self-portraiture, and exploring the paths that she has taken in constructing her own sexuality and creative dynamism. Around the turn of the millennium, she told me how she was concerned with two industries that have never stood far apart from a critical and feminist perspective: on the one hand ‘glamour’, and on the other, pornography. But rather than augmenting a polemic on that proximity, she decided to make them the basis for an investigation that was as much phenomenological as deconstructive. She then celebrated perceptual ambiguities, such as the ‘othering’ of the female body energised through the epochal vogue for the Wonderbra. On a visit to Burman’s studio,

she showed me images of bras among the petals and heads of flowers taken from the garden – a composition that she used for a series of billboards and installations – as well as cibachrome prints and ‘durotran’ lightbox works, and a set of drawings and etchings. Hyper-coloured photographic prints, they offered a disruptive response for her *For Tune* piece, for instance, made in the year 2000: a panel of eight photographs crammed with flowers that interpolate variously patterned bras. Reds of petals and satin dotted with magnolia and bright yellow, include a large white Chrysanthemum — a signifier of death in many global contexts. It is easy to see that this art is never simply a gathering of elements, but an entire statement on visual experience. Burman draws from her everyday life, her habits of dressing, her ways of presenting her body, certainly — and these become the means for her to get close to the viewer, to allow an intimacy of looking, a source or origin or basis for reciprocity. I wrote at length about this quality of her art practice in my book, [Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art](#) (2017).

A Sculptural Turn

In recent years, Burman has turned even more decidedly toward sculpture itself. Through sculpture, she has, in so many ways, fulfilled her long-standing aim for how art should reach the public. In the course of 2020 and since, I have kept coming across this new wave in her art, largely by chance. One evening, after I gave the inaugural professorial lecture for an art history seminar at a London university, one of Burman’s animal sculptures greeted me as I made my way home through St Katherine’s Docks. Another time, when I was in the city of Bath, trying to get a pre-Christmas look at the Holburne Museum, as it was beginning to interrogate the colonial stories around its collection, I stumbled across a magnificent neon-light work of Burman’s in the shop window of the clothing outlet Anthropologie. The placement of that piece, given the name of the shop, really made me laugh but also think. It seemed to encourage a reflection on how artists of colour have struck back against the history of academic disciplines that exoticise and racialise their art, and how the wider impulse to decolonise museums could also be felt on a nation’s high street. Then I went to Tate Britain, and guess what? Burman had only gone and decorated the entire façade of the building, including the steps! She had used neon shapes, like a central human eye, with luscious lashes, staring out from between the central columns. Neon spirals were trailed up and down the architecture like electrified snakes. There was text embedded in the composition, signage that said: ‘Remembering a Brave New World’ (which is actually the title of this work), and single words like ‘Love’, ‘Dream’ and ‘Truth’. This was a brilliant, pulsating, magnetic, riotous, and even futuristic way of conveying hope during the COVID-19 lockdowns. People thronged there in the evenings and socially distanced themselves while socialising on the steps.

Our Cover Image

The work we chose for the cover of our [40th Anniversary Issue, *Wasafiri* 119: Futurisms](#), sort of chose itself. I won't labour the symbolism of it, but quote from the artist herself: 'My father was a tailor and magician but when the family arrived from India to Merseyside in the 1950s he couldn't find work so he ended up buying an ice cream van and became an ice-cream man. His van was called Burman's and it had a big tiger on top'. ('Who is Chila Kumari Singh Burman?', Tate, [Who is Chila Kumari Singh Burman? | Tate Kids](#)).

This describes the image quite well. It is autobiographical and brings together all those references to childhood and 'becoming'; a Punjabi dad who stepped into shoes often worn by the Italians who migrated in the 1920s, by selling ice cream, bringing joy, and more than a bit of a magic, to the nation's poorest backstreets. The work touches my biography too, as I could easily have been one of those kids who queued up at Mr Burman's van for a screwball (a type of ice cream with a surprise chewing-gum ending!). Indeed, it is the condensation of all of Burman's works to date — with its explosive colours and eclectic, bejewelled decoration. A leaping, gorgeous tiger brings to life the original design on the van that her father had put. The work shows a sort of runaway imagination in every sense, as the van takes flight, blasting off on rocket packs, its zig zagging lines of combustion picked out in hot tangerine. There are Bollywood film stills and the silhouette of what can only be Mr Burman himself. Entitled 'The Smile You Send Returns to You', it gleefully treats what is quite a serious set of themes: reciprocity, karma, celebration. From what I know about her career, it suggests to me personally something about Burman's stoic perseverance as an artist over four decades of uneven and unequal opportunity in the visual arts sector. All told, the work is simultaneously an archival deposit, and sign of new birth for this artist.

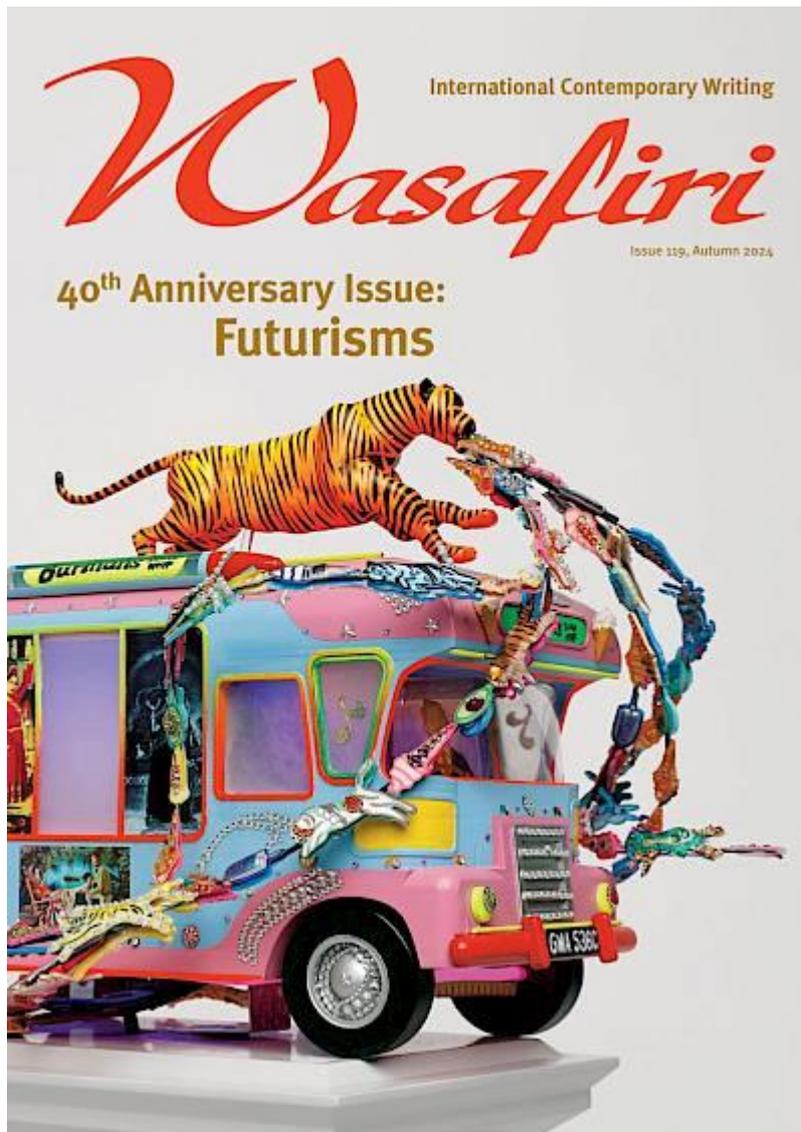
Following a second monograph on the artist, written by Rina Arya ([Shakti, Sexuality and Bhindi Girls](#), KT Press, 2012), a new book has been published this summer by Tate, entitled simply [Chila Burman](#), and written in a collected range of voices. The photograph we have printed on our cover shows a maquette, a model made in preparation for a colossal monument, a proposal of sorts, a projection into the future. It was one of seven competition entries nominated for the Fourth Plinth commission at Trafalgar Square. Burman's didn't win, sadly. But that didn't matter. It was an audience favourite, and a winning cover, certainly for us.

Photo by [sheri silver](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Leon Wainwright

Leon is Professor of Art History at The Open University. Along with a range of edited and co-edited books on modern and contemporary art and aesthetics, museums and curating, cultural policy and anthropology, he is the author of *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester 2011) and *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (Liverpool 2017).



Latest Issue - Autumn 2024, 40th Anniversary

Wasafiri 119: 40th Anniversary Issue – Futurisms

Introducing our 40th Anniversary Issue — *Wasafiri* 119: Futurisms.

This issue brings to the fore writers whose perspectives – on the present and on the future – have historically been side-lined. From alternative histories to critiques of the late-capitalist present; high fantasy, sci-fi and the posthuman; theories of landscape, the city, and the body; this milestone issue will showcase a branching network of writing on and around the power of persistence as resistance, as we continue to imagine into being futures that defy an increasingly oppressive present.