

# Prem Sahib Revisits His Past at Southard Reid, London

BY MATTHEW MCLEAN

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The artist's installation – based on the interior of a nearby gay cruising bar – invokes a haunted sense of refuge



Prem Sahib's 'Descent' was an exhibition in three parts, presented sequentially over the course of almost four months. The first chapter, *People Come & Go* (2019), was a single, all-encompassing installation which, like its title, invoked human presence, absence and return. A narrow corridor of corrugated metal was installed from the street entrance into the gallery. The lighting in the space was infernally dim and red-hued; the journey along the corridor short and un-signposted – a sharp right, then a left and it ended in a set of metal saloon doors, opening into a small, low-ceilinged chamber which the viewer couldn't enter. In the middle stood a raised platform covered in black plastic. Too small for a bed, it could have been an altar, the room a site of penance or pleasure. At times during the show, a male performer, naked from the waist up, lay still across this, motionless – suggesting, if not gratification, then perhaps its aftermath.



Prem Sahib, *Cul-de-Sac*, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Southard Reid, London

The whole space, a text informed the visitor, was in fact based on the interior of a particular gay cruise bar located not far from the gallery. Emptying it of all carnal energy, however, Sahib seemed to be emphasising this as a space where people seek seclusion from life. A cubicle, a bar, a chapel, or a stranger's bed: these places are sometimes havens, sometimes cells - and always hard to leave. There was one way out of *People Come & Go*, which was back the same way you came in: like our pasts, from which, any therapist will tell you, you can only escape if you first go back through.

# Frieze

Another word for a pathway closed at one end is a Cul-de-Sac, and this was the title of the show's second chapter. A regular white gallery space was dominated by a video work, also named *Cul-de-Sac* (2019), which tracks down a semi-suburban street of neat, two-story, semi-detached houses, two dark cypresses standing at its dead end. Shot by a drone, the field of view operates at a strange height, which evokes looking through the windscreen of a moving car, as if the viewer is scanning the houses for a destination. A text identifies this nondescript street as the one where Sahib himself grew up in Southall, a historically Punjabi area in southwest London. It appears tidy and quiet as a Sunday: the street empty, the driveways thick with shiny cars. Enhancing the sense of bored repetition, the camera tracks back and forth up and down the street, as if caught on a bungee. Voices, basslines and the ambient thrum of a house party emerge and become distorted, rubbery, a repeating grinding like the jaws of a raver. (I found afterwards I had scrawled in my notebook, one word, underlined: 'ketamine'.)



Prem Sahib, *Man Dog*, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Southard Reid, London

In the video's most thrilling moment, the drone rises up, affording an aerial view of the whole street and its layout, suddenly appearing like a great earthwork: the shape of the road with its terminal circular tip even, half-recalled the phallus of the Cerne Abbas giant. I thought about the Nazca lines in Peru – giant geoglyphs only visible from on high. A forgettable streetscape or an archaeological monument: a question of perspective, of where we choose to train our lenses. What is waiting to be unearthed in such sites was the subject of the adjacent vitrine, which displayed an archive belonging to Kamaljit Sahib, the artist's uncle, who – as the clippings, transcripts, drafts of letters and sociological studies show – was a community outreach officer engaged in the decades following the racially provoked Southall riots of 1979. As material, it's fascinating, but its inclusion here seems deliberately arbitrary: a fragment of the unknowable vastness of human biography. As a partial record of recent British Asian experience, it is also a reminder that one doesn't have to dig far in British history to find semi-sanctioned violence, rampant racism and media antagonism towards minorities. 'Pathetic miserable clubs for petty hoodlums', reads one headline on Asian gangs; 'Stop harassing us' reads another. 'I'm talking about how we treat each other', says a voice in the video at one point 'and the tone that we use, and the language that we use'.

At the film's closing, a fuzzy home recording of panpipe music bleeds into the soundtrack: the opening notes of The Eagles' 'Hotel California' (1977). The song's evocation of haunted refuge is summoned to mind like a spell: the 'a lovely place' where all the guests are 'prisoners'. There's a saying: 'you can't go home again'. Which can also mean: you're always already home, and you can never leave.

'You people are the most racist people on the planet' is one incendiary statement declared by a voice in *Man Dog* (2020), a sound work which gave its name to the exhibition's final chapter. Played through a wall-mounted panel of obsidian shards, brilliantly evoking a cracked phone screen, the piece soliloquizes a rant made by an anonymous, proudly American man to the artist in on a online gay chat room. (The artist's typing can be heard in between outbursts.) Nearby, a life-size sculpture *Beneficiary* (2020) refers to the large, view-blocking screens

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Prem Sahib, *People Come and Go*, 2020, installation view.  
Courtesy: the artist and Southard Reid, London

that demarcate 'dark rooms' for sexual activity in gay clubs: a wall, cut off towards floor level to reveal a peek of eight feet and ankles. The identities to which these parts belong are obscured: there is something egalitarian, democratic about the anonymous gathering, as if there are not four individuals behind the screen, but a single collective body. At the same time, the work's Latin title invites suspicion, evoking as it does the Roman orator's Cicero's famous question 'Cui Bono?': who benefits? In this case, not the viewer, surely: whatever frisky fraternal action is taking place behind the screen, we aren't party to it. And note how the participating figures, whose own visible body parts clad in identical, box-fresh trainers and long sports socks, are rendered all in monochrome: entirely white.

At floor level, Sahib had placed three assemblages (*Ozo*, *Sam* and *Bobby*, all 2020), formed of metal replicas of plastic baskets – the kind that might be used to stack shop shelves, or collect hotel laundry – over which were slung lengths of shirt fabric lined with shaggy faux fur. Seams of human and animal, silly, tender, but strangely abject: I didn't know if I wanted to stroke these ramshackle creatures or kick them out of sight. (Metal water bowls placed alongside each one implied care, but, the copper coins and unshelled monkey nuts also scattered about evoked a more degrading kind of charity).

This chapter was like a return to the same landscape of sexual connection and disconnection as *People Come & Go*, but with a new perspective: more ambivalent, more attentive to access and exclusion. The idea of revisiting as a kind of revisioning linked every chapter. Sahib seemed to be processing his past as an artist, too, bringing the staples of his language to date – the formal and material residue of urban gay life – to bear on expansive questions of identity, language, memory and belonging. Inspecting *Descent* (2020), from an ongoing series emulating beats of moisture found on the walls of sweaty clubs, as installed in the last chapter, I noticed Sahib had included a streak running horizontally across the plane, as if a new path across the surface had been swept by a hand. It looked, almost, like someone was beginning to draw the stripes of a flag.

Main image: Prem Sahib, 'Cul-de-Sac', 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Southard Reid, London



Prem Sahib, *Man Dog*, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Southard Reid, London