

Agrarian Crisis, Artistic Rebellion

In a remarkable debut solo exhibition, artist KULPREET SINGH brings to fore the pressing issue of stubble-burning in Punjab. He speaks to CHINTAN GIRISH MODI about the motivations that inform his artistic practice.



On display at Mumbai's Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke from 12th of November to 27th of December last year was Patiala-based interdisciplinary artist Kulpreet Singh's first major solo exhibition titled *Indelible Black Marks* (*syāb kālē dāg*).

The offerings included a short film shown in a pop-up theatre—alongside paintings, prints and a massive installation made of cotton kurtas cloaked in stubble ash as well as ash from wooden stoves at protest sites from the Singhu border between Haryana and New Delhi and the Shambhu border between Haryana and Punjab—all of which transport the viewer to the farmlands of Punjab that Singh's work stems from. The pristine white walls of the exhibition space heightens the impact of Singh's heart-wrenching commentary on the poisons that have contaminated the soil, water, air and our food. The black, ash-studded kurtas suspended from the ceiling remind one of scarecrows placed in fields, but the circular arrangement they are mounted in evokes the sense of community around a bonfire.

The film—which has the same title as the exhibition—emphasises the intimate physical, emotional and spiritual connection that farmers share with their land. Before farmers started burning stubble (dry agricultural residue) to prepare for their next crop cycle, Singh thought of getting them to drag white canvases across the burning fields. The visual spectacle produced through these choreographed moments captures the despair that their lives are engulfed by. It is not only the farms that are on fire; their dreams, too, have been set ablaze.

Curator, writer and educator Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi invites viewers to read Singh's "transformation of the farm into a canvas" alongside the practice of American artists like Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, who are reputed for their site-specific environmental works. Closer to home, however, Singh's work reminds one of Prabhakar Pachpute's show *te tolanche dbaga navbate /no, it wasn't the locust cloud* at Mumbai's National Gallery of Modern Art in 2016. Pachpute studied the alienation of farmers from their lands and the health hazards they faced when they were compelled to work in underground mines for a living.

It is not only
the farms
that are on
fire

their
dreams, too,
have been set
ablaze.



Over our phone call, Singh shares, “People blame farmers for causing pollution by burning stubble, but they forget the fact that they are being forced to take these steps because of policies that do not favour them.” While conducting research for this exhibition, the 40-year-old met with farmers who confided in him that they wanted to end their lives but could not muster the courage when they saw their children’s faces. “The suffering that farmers have to go through seems unbearable at times,” Singh adds.

According to him, the Green Revolution of the 1960s, intended to address hunger and achieve self-sufficiency, instead gave rise to new problems that continue to plague us today. “The high-yielding hybrid varieties of wheat and rice introduced at that time required huge amounts of water, chemical fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides. These artificial substances have interfered with nature’s processes, and the harm that they have caused will take us a long time to recover from,” he says. Their impact on the ecology is integral to his artistic practice.

It was in 2018, while attending a workshop called *Kheti, Khana aur Hum* (Farming, Food and Us), that Singh encountered Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* (1962), which exposed the long-term damage caused by the reckless spraying of Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) that was intended to kill mosquitoes but ended up leaving toxins that endangered human life. Though Carson’s work is based in the United States, it has significant implications for India as well. Singh says, “DDT was banned in India before it was banned in the US but it is illegally available and used even today.”

Nikhil Purohit, a writer who has been working with Singh on an upcoming book called *Syāb Kāle Dāg*, helped him discover Vandana Shiva’s book *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (1991). This book guided Singh’s exploration of the policies that have determined the course of India’s agricultural sector since the country attained Independence in 1947.

Purohit found that Shiva’s work resonates with Singh owing to her critique of industrial

agriculture, and the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in particular, as they promote corporate interests at the cost of food security. Singh’s own political awakening, which made him want to reconnect with his agrarian roots, took place during the farmers’ protests of 2020-2021 that arose in response to the Government of India’s oppressive anti-farmer laws.

“My father sold his land and became an officer at the electricity board. My elder brother moved to Australia. He worked as a driver and then started his own business. I was inclined towards art, so I was not deeply connected to the land either. I remained connected to the land as a farmer’s son, though without a large farm. But now I grow *sarson, baldi, paalak, gaajar, baingan, bbindi, tori, gbiya, nimbu* [mustard leaves, turmeric, spinach, carrots, aubergines, okras, ridge gourd and lemons] and a few other vegetables on the small plot of land on which my studio is located,” elaborates Singh, who has a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science, Physical Education and Fine Arts, and a Master’s degree in Fine Arts (Painting and Printmaking), both from Punjab University in Patiala.

When Singh sought to explore these issues through his artistic practice, it was not difficult to secure the support of farmers. “They are my friends. They trust me. They have seen me during the protests. I am not an artist who has a transactional relationship with them,” he says. They supported him throughout the physically demanding process of shooting the film, which uses a range of sounds to underscore the urgency of the agrarian crisis. The soundtrack builds in intensity, featuring gasping, sighing, panting, as well as sirens, drums, heartbeats and an explosion.

The artist managed to assemble a large team, comprising around 80 people. In addition to farmers like Rashpinder Singh and Davinder Singh, who were part of the film, artists from all over India—Aakshat Sinha, Rajesh Pullarwar, Parvesh Kumar, Pratul Dash, Satya Vijay Singh, Raj Sahani, Sujit Mandal, Syed Ali Sarvat Jafri, Shiv Kumar, Aishwarya Sultania, Sanjeev Sonpimpure, Navpreet Kaur, B. Ajay Sharma, Saini Barkha, S. Zafar Tahseen, Rajesh Kumar, Anoop Bagri and

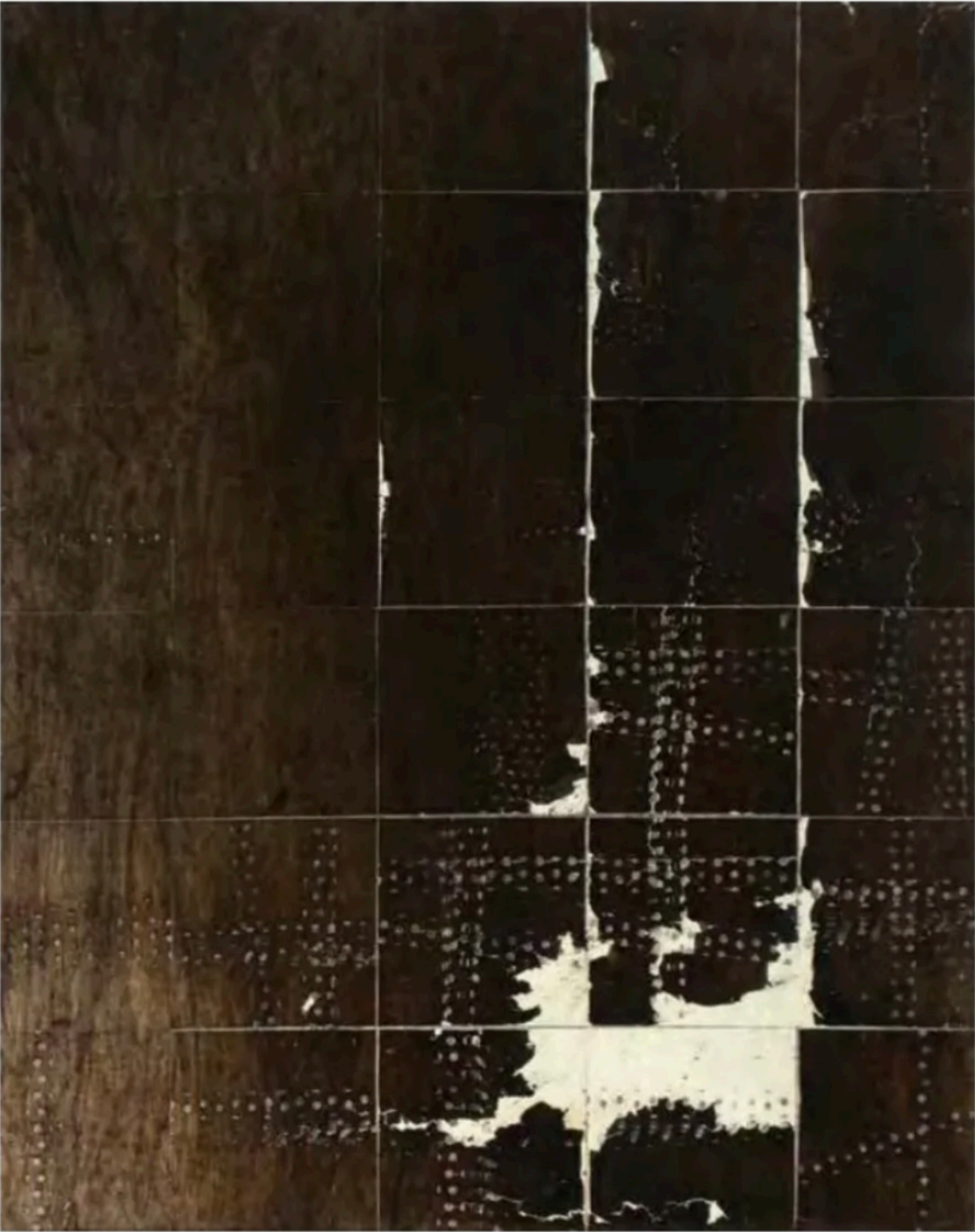
Dewanshu—joined him to be part of the filming. A fire brigade, an ambulance and a team of doctors were also present on location for their safety.

The ash that remains after the stubble is burnt can be interpreted in multiple ways—as the systemic decline of the agricultural sector owing to misguided policies, the renewal of the land for another crop cycle, and as a reminder of the inevitable fate that awaits all humans at the end of life.

The artist, who was raised in a Sikh household, recalls a verse from Guru Nanak, recited by Bhai Baldeep Singh in the film, while a striking visual of Singh lying down on the earth appears as these words are echoed: “*Pavan Guru, Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mabat. Divas Rat Due Dai Daya, Kbeley Sagal Jagat*” (Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and the Great Earth is the Mother. Day and night are the nurses, in whose lap all the world is at play).

Singh’s physical contact with the land, where he lies with eyes closed, is also a carefully crafted statement of his politics of non-violence that seeks justice for the soil and the people who nurture it. The earth, after all, is not just a natural resource. She is designated as the ‘Mother’. And those whose lives are inextricably linked with her are surely deserving of respect and dignity. Unfortunately, today, their rightful demands are shut down with tear gas and lathi charges.

Singh, who witnessed the violent police crackdown on protestors, believes that violence does not resolve conflicts. It only leaves wounds on people’s bodies, and in their hearts and minds. “I want to use my art to make people reflect on what is happening,” says Singh, whose recent show, titled *Fossils of Force*, is on display at the same gallery between 9th of January and 1st of March 2025, and engages with this subject in greater depth. Continuing this work has become more challenging, following the passing away of his brother Iqbal. Singh says that Iqbal was to him what Theo was to Vincent van Gogh. Nothing can make up for this absence, but Singh takes strength from the Guru Granth Sahib. His faith sustains him, serves as a moral compass and encourages him to continue speaking up. [•]





[Left]
KULPREET SINGH
Indelible Black Marks
Painting II
Fire, stubble-ash and laser-cut rice paper on canvas
76.2 cms x 60.9 cms
2022-2024

[Above]
KULPREET SINGH
Indelible Black Marks
Painting I
Fire and stubble-ash on canvas
213.3 cms x 304.8 cms (diptych)
2022-2024

[Following spread]
KULPREET SINGH
Indelible Black Marks
Cotton cloth, thread, stubble-ash and ash from wooden
stoves at sites of farmer-protests
9 ft x 22 ft
2022-2024

Images courtesy of Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke