

IN THE GALLERY

UNICON

NANCY LEE 李南屏

KIRAN BHUMBER ਕਿਰਨਜੀਘ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ



April 24 – June 5

In partnership with Cinevolution Media Arts Society

Featuring a new body of works created by interdisciplinary media artists, Nancy Lee 李南屏 and Kiran Bhumber किरनदीप कौर उषर, *UNION* is a speculative sci-fi exhibition centred around a narrative of two beings discovering their ancestral memories through the longing for touch and the rituals practiced in their post-apocalyptic wedding ceremony. The exhibition incorporates XR, performance, sculpture, multi-channel sound and video. Drawing on parallels between our world and the speculative future while working through the artists' diasporic identities, *UNION* is a potent critique of modern surveillance capitalism, but also a gesture towards hope through the generative possibilities of intimacy, performativity, and presence.



Exhibition Statement

We dream of weddings. The lush decor, the elegant dresses, the intricate mehndi, the promise of love and belonging. Search for #wedding on Instagram and 198 million posts instantly rise to our fingertips, ready to sell us our dream of a perfect union. This is but one corner of the wedding industry complex: an industry that feeds on the proceeds of manufacturing ever more expensive fantasies, often while reifying cis heteronormative and patriarchal standards. Central to this fantasy is the wedding dress, one of the most powerful symbols of the wedding, and a portal into the world of *UNION*.

UNION is a deeply personal work for Nancy Lee 李南屏 and Kiran Bhumber किरनदीप कौर उषर. Their complicated desire for wedding dresses became the impetus for the creation of the distant, post-apocalyptic future of the exhibition. As queer and diasporic subjects, Lee and Bhumber are drawn, reluctantly, to weddings as a ritual and a rite of passage integral to their respective cultures. However, homophobia, sexism, classism, and the challenge of growing up in single parent households complicate their access to this tradition, which compels compliance with oppressive gender norms and social expectations.¹ Paul Connerton in describing the transmission of tradition as "meeting its preformed ideologies at 'the horizon of expectations'" captures this tension.² Under this description, "tradition is seen as a far reaching, foreign landscape with which [members of the diaspora] long to unite."³ Yet understanding and reconciliation is only possible through compliance with its terms,

and feelings of displacement, loss, and yearning inevitably arise from non-adherence and endless scrutiny by those who mandate the rules. For the queer, non-conforming body that finds itself on this horizon of expectation, then, the wedding dress is no longer merely a garment, but an instrument of coercion encoded in logics of capitalism, patriarchy, and xenophobia.

The story *UNION* tells is set in a distant post-apocalyptic future precisely because my experience as a Taiwanese, non-binary femme in the present feels so constricted that I felt it necessary to abandon the present world entirely. – Nancy Lee

In order to interrogate and subvert these systems of oppression, *UNION* unravels the wedding dress to expose the silent but powerful engines that not only propel us toward Instagram's picture perfect weddings but increasingly drive every aspect of contemporary social life by co-opting our desires for belonging and acceptance. While the effects of neoliberal cultural production, surveillance capitalism, and biopolitics are magnified in the world of *UNION*, the dystopian future it imagines bears a troubling resemblance to our own. Media technologies have overrun every aspect of our lives as humans living in physical isolation turn to the new cyberworld for connection, as well as experiences of pleasure and intimacy. GAFA, a large tech corporation whose name is eerily reminiscent of critics' acronym for Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon (GAFA), operates the massive industrial complex through which memories are harvested and sold. Our bodies and behaviours have become the final frontier for resource extraction and exploitation.⁴

Through the creation of this post-apocalyptic universe, Lee and Bhumber seek to shed light on the ramifications of mass-mediated technology in culture and everyday life, and carve out a space of resistance amidst surveillance capitalism's wholesale commodification of individual identity and experience. Drawing upon Mieke Bal's definition of "cultural memory as the process of linking the past, present and future through performed cultural practices"⁵, *UNION* imagines cultural memory as a construct of the spiritual and ancestral past, encoded not in the wedding dress as a cultural artefact, but in the genes of the human body. Passed down from generation to generation, it remains dormant until accessed through sacred rituals of spiritual union, such as weddings, and physical intimacy. As Lee and Bhumber enact their ritual *union*, joining through the physical language of touch, "knots of memory" are tied across the fabric of time and redefined by the presence of the queer diasporic body.⁵ Through

the cultural act of performance, the meaning of the wedding ceremony is woven anew.

With each stitch on our gowns, movement of our skin, and bodies cemented into sculpture, we are defining who we are within our respective cultures and bringing awareness to younger generations that their existence and practices can also influence the evolution of culture. – Kiran Bhumber

Amongst other things, *UNION* is a disavowal of the view that culture is a static set of rules. Lee and Bhumber assert it is ever-changing and must always be performed in the present, subject to intervention and reimagination.⁶

Text by Yun-Jou Chang, Executive Director of Cinevolution Media Arts Society; Curator of *UNION*.

Visit www.union.land for more information.

1. Notes on exhibition themes, page 4-5, 2021. Nancy Lee on the message behind the exhibition and the concepts that were explored in the creation of *UNION*.
2. Excerpt from Phulkari by Kirandeep Kaur Bhumber, page 14, 2018. Paul Connerton discussing Gadamer's notion of tradition. Quoted in Liedeke Plate's *Performing memory in art and popular culture*, 2013.
3. *ibid*
4. Notes on exhibition themes, page 2, 2021. Nancy Lee on Biopolitics, surveillance capitalism, and neoliberal cultural production.
5. Excerpt from Phulkari by Kirandeep Kaur Bhumber, page 15, 2018. Discussing Mieke Bal's notion of memory from *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, 1999.

UNION is the featured artist exhibition for Digital Carnival Z.

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Nancy Lee 李南屏 is a Taiwanese-Canadian interdisciplinary media artist, curator, filmmaker, DJ and cultural producer. Their work stimulates and enlivens space, making a provocative statement about how inescapably interconnected we are with our surroundings. This notion of staging is a constant in Nancy's work and underpins their projects, from their early work as a filmmaker, through their conception of live events, and into the realms of XR, new media performance and installation, where their art practices continue to coalesce and evolve. Nancy is a co-founder and co-producer of CURRENT Symposium, an intersectional and multidisciplinary initiative featuring programming for and by women, nonbinary artists and artists of colour.

Kiran Bhumber बिरनचीप वेंर डेवत is an Indo-Canadian interdisciplinary media artist, composer, performer and educator. Her practice considers the mediation of memory through emerging technologies and how the body reinscribes memory into the present. Her work results in constructing interactive installations and performances that examine movement, touch and cultural memory. As a composer, Kiran's practice centers around multichannel and spatial arrangements and how the choreography of sound can influence the listeners notion of space, time and narrative. Kiran is a co-director of INTER/MEDIATE, a media art educational festival focused on cultivating growth within Vancouver's media art communities and empowering marginalized communities with access to workshops, artist talks and collaborative opportunities.

Cinevolution is a grassroots, women-led, migrant-driven non-profit arts organization based in BC. Our mission is to promote innovation and critical discourse through film and new media, bring new ways of thinking and expression into cross-cultural communication, and foster creative exchange and collaboration among media artists in Canada and around the world. Founded in 2007, Cinevolution has been committed to making experimental film and media art accessible for all since its inception, with a particular focus on connecting and empowering immigrants and other historically marginalized communities through community festivals, participatory projects, screenings, workshops, and events.

Co-Creators: Nancy Lee and Kiran Bhumber

Creative Team: Aziz Ahmed, Simranpreet Anand, Aram Bajakian, Adam-Lin Bunngag, Laine Butler, Jun Chen, Sammy Chien, Chris Coburn, Emmalenna Fredriksson, Cyrel Gonzales, Arran Henn, Char Loro, Pia Massie, Ian Nakamoto, JP Pascual, Rio Quann, John Raham, Robyn Reekie, Sammie Jo Rumbaua, Josue Sanchez, Tamar Tabori, Jennifer Tai, Muro.studio, Conner Singh VanderBeek, Venom-s / V. Xio, Courtney Yellowquill, Aleksandar Zecevic.

Left: Ian Nakamoto, Nancy Lee & Kiran Bhumber, engraving at the cusp, 2020, white-light scan & digital render. Courtesy of the artists.