



Title

Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit

Author(s)

Vaishna Surjid

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About the author(s)

is a writer and curator based between London and Manchester.

Cover image:

Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit

by Vaishna Surjid • 04.04.2025

'It's like a cannonball' the gallery assistant remarks, as visitors peer over her shoulder at a ball of iron that sits proudly on a plinth **FIG.1**. This, she informs us, is a pomegranate. Yet, far from the familiar fruit with its speckled, pink skin – the kind that, when cut open, reveals sweet-sour rubies glistening among a web of bitter white flesh – this version is crude and weighty, resembling a ball of hardened sludge. This blackened lump forms part of *Furnace Fruit*, a solo exhibition by the artist Karanjit Panesar (b.1992), which is the result of a co-commission by Leeds Art Gallery and the British Library to create new work in dialogue with their collections. The artist's research began with the stories of Punjabi immigrants who arrived in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s to work in the steel and automotive foundries, including members of his own family. Drawing on works from the sculpture collections at Leeds Art Gallery and the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, alongside oral history archives held by the British Library and Bradford Industrial Museums, Panesar explores the intersections of industrial labour, memory and myth-making, while turning to his own life and community.

Shown alongside the iron pomegranate are delicate sculptures of other fruits: apricots, peaches and a pear **FIG.2**, cast in either plaster or bronze. Selected by Panesar to accompany his work, these pieces were made by the British modernist sculptor Bernard Meadows (1915–2005). Immediately identifiable, beautiful and tender, they are a stark contrast to Panesar's coarse fruit; such a juxtaposition enables the deformity and misshapen nature of his pomegranate to speak more clearly. It does not seek accolades of beauty but instead sits defiantly as a symbol of labour. As the exhibition unfolds, it comes to act as a monument to the transnational movement of people and capital in post-war Britain.

The central component of the exhibition is the titular two-channel film **FIG.3**, installed at the heart of a complex wooden structure that also serves as a display system for many of the show's two-dimensional works **FIG.4**. The film follows a man travelling in a car, accompanied by someone who appears to be a male relative. Their journey is interwoven with footage of workers in a modern foundry. Panesar's approach to filming is sensitive, with a particular focus on seemingly mundane moments: the protagonist's hand gripping the bonnet of his car **FIG.5**; his *kara* (a bangle worn by Sikh men) resting on his wrist; his back pressed against a pomegranate tree. The camera lingers on these still moments, which could easily be

mistaken for photographs. At times, only the subtle rise and fall of the protagonist's chest reveals that it is, in fact, a moving image.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024–2025, showing *Double fruit*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. Cast iron, diameter 10.5 cm. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

The film is punctuated by noises and imagery evoking the industrial foundry: the sharp clang of a hammer hitting an anvil signals a shift in scene. Shots from the car interior are interspersed with scenes of the tiresome work of a welder, who shapes and pours molten metal. It is a dangerously beautiful substance, its sparks terrifying, its glow bewitching. Not until the end of the film is the worker's task revealed: the casting of the pomegranate. Panesar gives currency to these tender and industrial moments. He opens up questions and signals the significance of the moment – of the car journey, of metal casting, of relationships to faith and to each other – but the film is diffuse, evading any clear reading.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024-2025, showing, on the right, cast of a pear, by Bernard Meadows. Bronze, 12 by 6.5 by 7 cm. (© Estate of Bernard Meadows; photograph Rob Battersby).

The foundry continues to reveal itself throughout the exhibition. A series of prints **FIG. 6** is displayed around the gallery, each of a photograph taken by the artist while undertaking research in the Archive of Sculptors' Papers at the Henry Moore Institute. Documenting the everyday realities of a Victorian foundry, the images offer a kind of behind-the-scenes view of the metal casting process. Each print is made using photogravure, the revolutionary nineteenth-century technique that enabled photographic reproduction. In utilising this historical method Panesar references the connection between the rise of photography and the expansion of the British Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The camera allowed administrators to document the 'truth' of the colonies, exoticising and othering 'subjects' and thus furthering the narrative of the civilising mission, the moral logic that underpinned the imperial project.¹



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024–2025, showing *Furnace Fruit*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. Two-channel film, duration 15 minutes. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

The processes of photogravure and half-tone enabled mass reproduction, creating a new market for imperial imagery that could appear in newspapers and other printed material.² The original photographs of workers and their labour, sourced from the foundries' archives, were probably never intended for public consumption, but they are a valuable reminder of the vast number of people in Britain who contributed to the maintenance and expression of Britain's imperial power. They form an archive of a different outlet of colonial administration, distinct to the expansionist fervour documented by early photogravure. Panesar's choice to photograph and reprint these images simultaneously distances us from their origins and forces us to reckon with them.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024–2025, showing *Untitled (John Galizia & Son Ltd. Foundry)*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. 2 photogravure prints on paper, each 59 by 42 cm. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

Traces of empire emerge in another film work, *Ormsgill slag heaps, Barrow-in-Furness* **FIG.7**, which pans across vast swathes of slag heaps – waste materials produced from metalworks – in a former industrial town in North West England. As the camera moves through derelict slag heaps and uneven terrain, Panesar plays two archival interviews with first-generation Punjabi Sikh immigrants to Bradford. They discuss the work that their fathers did in local foundries. Their fathers were among many men and women from across the Commonwealth who were invited to England to fill post-war labour shortages in industry, transport networks and the NHS. Layering these emotive audio recordings with the desolation of the polluted land is not only an overwhelming experience for the visitor, it also intertwines two archival systems: oral history and the land itself. The first is replete with nuanced power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, and absent of any visuals. The second is the dramatic, rugged, damaged environment: the remnants of a thriving industrial town deeply intertwined with the British Empire.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024–2025, showing *Furnace Fruit*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. Two-channel film, duration 15 minutes. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

Metalworking industries emerged on Barrow Island in Cumbria in 1850 following the discovery there of iron hematite, and began to create and export steel for railway tracks across the world. Colonial engineering and the construction of railways were always extractive, taking raw materials from colonies to be sold elsewhere. Drawing these two ‘archives’ together, Panesar reflects not only on the global movement of people and power both during and after the fall of the empire, but also on the harsh impacts of such work. The interviewees discuss the toll of manual labour, intensified by the cold climate of North West England. The treacherous, polluted landscape reinforces this brutal legacy.



Fig. 6 From the series *Untitled (J.W. Singer & Sons Foundry)*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. Photogravure print on paper, 59 by 42 cm. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

Furnace Fruit is an exhibition of echoes, gestures, nods and prods; it is a reminder of the violence of empire, its legacies and the ways in which it continues to manifest in archives and in the present. Each work of art turns to another: they speak to, complicate and complement each other. Even the layout of the exhibition leads visitors to a dead end, forcing them to retrace their steps and re-enter this sticky web of dialogue in order to leave it.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2024–2025, showing *Ormsgill slag heaps, Barrow-in-Furness*, by Karanjit Panesar. 2024. Video, duration 12 minutes. (© Karanjit Panesar; photograph Rob Battersby).

Exhibition details

Karanjit Panesar: Furnace Fruit
Leeds Art Gallery
4th October 2024–15th June 2025

Footnotes

- 1** See D. Foliard: *The Violence of Colonial Photography*, Manchester 2022.
- 2** See E. Heath: 'Albums of empire: photography, collective memory, and the British Raj', *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 27 (2015), pp.74–103, esp. p.77, available at www.jstor.org/stable/24739833, accessed 5th March 2025.

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