

# Printmaking Today

Prints, Books And Multiples

## Moving Flatness Taiko Chandler

### PROFILES

Rachel Gracey RE  
Chila Kumari Singh Burman  
Susan Allix

### FEATURES

Cinthia Sifa Mulanga  
Tools of the Trade  
Green POWER

### REGULARS

Artist's Eye  
Printmaker's Diary  
In Conversation

# Print Punk Pop

**Chila Kumari Singh Burman** references high art and popular culture to create eye-catching works that are personal and political, writes **Nicole Polonsky**

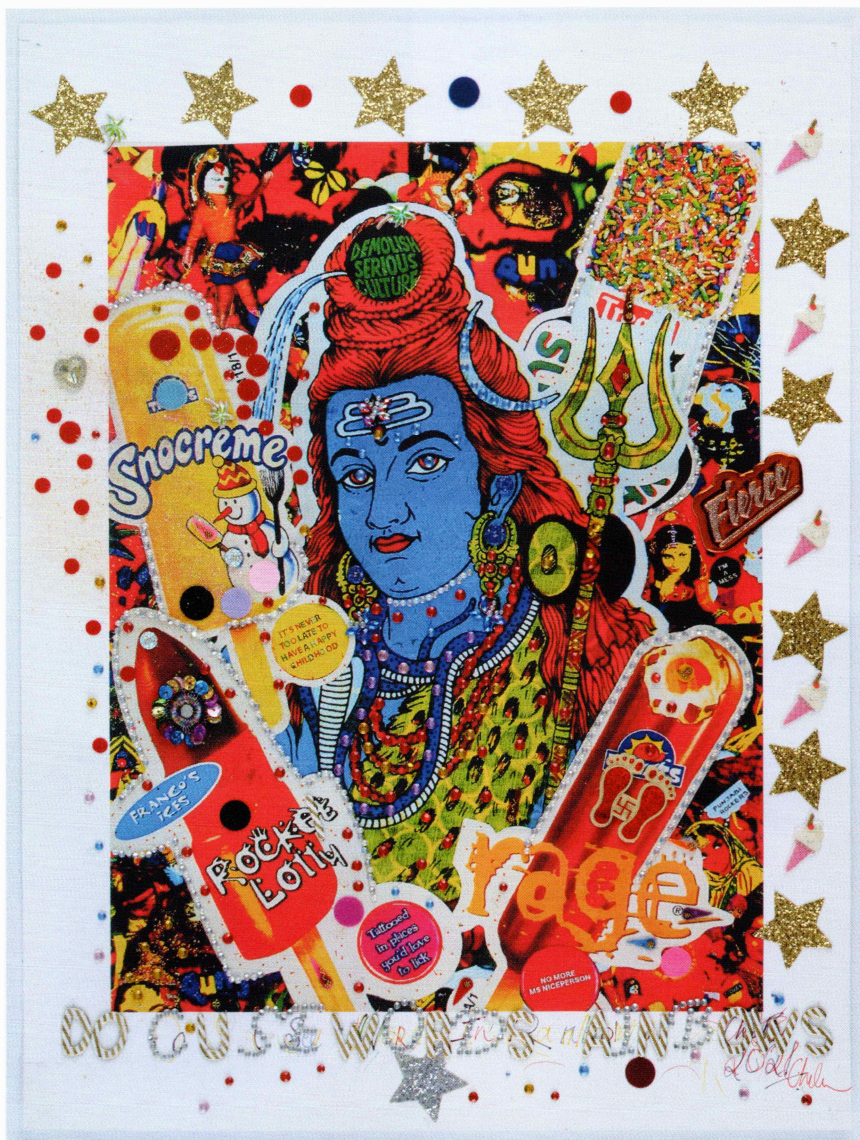
**A** threatening array of heads bears down on us in Chila Kumari Singh Burman's *Triptych No Nukes* (1982). The grainy black-and-white image, which was lifted from a Socialist Workers Party newspaper, is of riot police concealed behind helmets and gas masks. On close inspection we can make out a snippet of reverse text listing the effects of nuclear bombs: heat, blast and radiation.

Burman's triptych comprises three states of one etched plate, printed after successive submersions in the acid bath. An area of open bite creates a gaping wound; the heads are obliterated. Has the plate been subjected to the destructive forces it describes, or is the artist taking revenge on those riot police using tools (and chemicals) at her disposal? The image is overlaid with screenprinted type in alarm-raising scarlet: CAUTION RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL.

*Triptych* belongs to the artist's *Riot Series*, produced at a time of widespread social unrest and anti-nuclear protests. It is an early example of Burman's synthesis of print with political activism (some of her works from this period are signed with an anarchist circle-A symbol). The *Riot Series* revels in the punk aesthetic of the day – popularised through album covers and gig ephemera – of appropriation and collage. In this and subsequent works, the artist helps herself to an eclectic range of source material and reconfigures it using juxtaposition and layering. This visual language of bricolage was to find exultant expression in her Tate Britain Winter Commission nearly four decades later.

Burman was born in Bootle, Merseyside, to Punjabi parents who settled in the UK in the 1950s. After a BA in Fine Art Printmaking at Leeds Polytechnic, she embarked on a postgraduate degree at London's Slade School of Fine Art. There she found a sympathetic creative culture promoted by master printer Stanley Jones, who facilitated her exploration of using different print processes in combination with each other. Her *Riot Series* was achieved during this period. It went on to be included in the influential exhibition *The Thin Black Line* (ICA, 1985). Curated by Lubaina Himid, the show asserted the right to visibility and representation for women artists of African and South Asian heritage.

Ideas of self-representation are a recurring theme for Burman. An early series of body prints was made by inking up her own torso and impressing it on blank sheets of paper. Unlike Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* paintings, these uncompromising, feminist pieces celebrate the conviction that the embodied artist and the empowered model can be one and the same. Viewers



**Left** *No More Ms Nice Person* (2021) Laser copy with embellishments, 594 x 420 mm. Courtesy the artist

**Below** *28 Positions in 34 Years*  
(1992) Laser copy and mixed  
media, 1190 x 1575 mm.  
Courtesy the artist



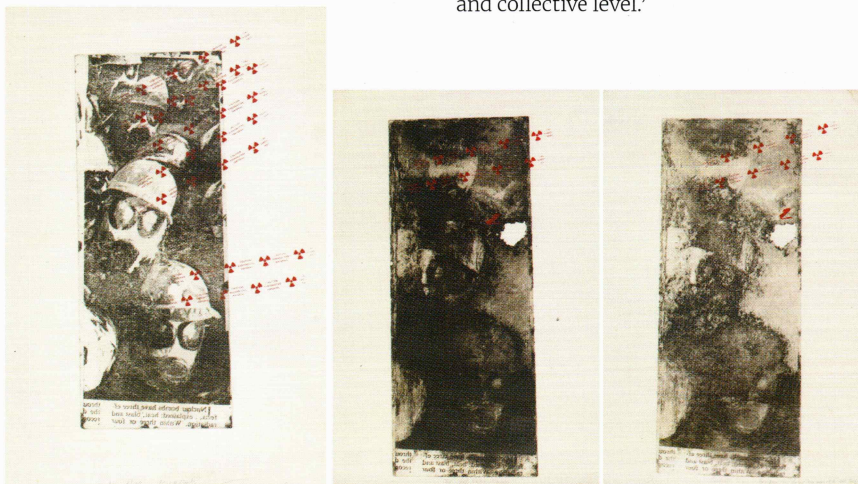
hoping, though, for a single defining image of the artist will be disappointed. A case in point is *Aphrodisiacs Being Socially Constructed* (1988), acquired by the National Portrait Gallery for its project *Reframing Narratives: Women in Portraiture*. Chief curator, Alison Smith, describes the work as foregrounding

‘the adoption of multiple identities and the defiant return of the gaze. The artist lies supine as if undergoing some kind of physical examination. She appears to float as if in a dream; two warrior figures or avatars rise above her unconscious self possibly symbolising protection.’ For Smith, ‘the result is a highly complex portrait that resonates on both a personal and collective level.’

Identity and its construction are explored further in *28 Positions in 34 Years* (1992). This shows Burman assuming different guises, posing as pop idol Boy George, a Rasta girl, a 60s model – among others – all within the same picture frame. The playful parade of possibility and subverted stereotypes is but one example of what Burman calls ‘auto-portraits’. They feature photos of the artist that have been collaged before being laser copied and overworked with mixed media. Through duplication, cutting, assemblage and surface embellishments, the fashioning of the self is made manifest.

Laser copies came to supplant screenprint, etching, aquatint and drypoint. To some extent this was out of necessity – after graduating, Burman was faced with the paucity of affordable traditional printmaking

**Left** *Triptych No Nukes* (1982) Etching, aquatint and screenprint, 1055 x 745 mm; 915 x 605 mm; 915 x 605 mm. Courtesy the artist



## PROFILE



facilities and as a result pivoted her practice towards more accessible digital processes. The works that emerged, with their panoply of visual references, show a confident disregard for conventional distinctions between high art and popular culture. This arguably reached its apotheosis in Burman's Tate Britain Winter Commission 2020, *Remembering a Brave New World*, which saw the gallery's façade festooned in neon and print. Likened by the artist to a 'secular Hindu temple', its maximalist pictorial language offered a feast of autobiographical references, from childhood visits to Blackpool Illuminations to growing up in an immersive home environment in which walls were covered with pictures of deities, gurus and stars of popular Hindi cinema. Other motifs reflected after-school activities helping her father dispense cornets of soft whip from his ice-cream van and the decorative leaping tiger on the vehicle's roof. Launched at the start of Diwali and continuing through the winter months of lockdown, *Brave New World* was life affirming and accessible. It resonated perfectly with the times, subsequently winning a Dezeen award for installation design of the year. There was a serious

**Right** *Remembering a Brave New World*, Tate Britain Winter Commission 2020, installation. Courtesy the artist and Tate. Photo: Joe Humphrys

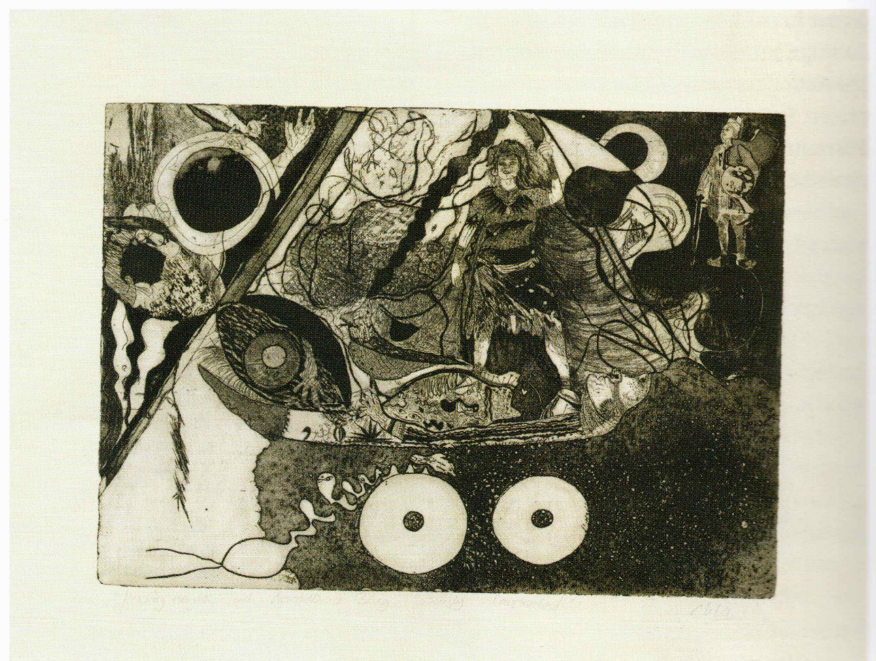
message too: a neon ice-cream van on the gallery steps spelled out 'We are here coz you were there', a succinct justification for formerly colonised peoples' right to settle in the UK, and of an artist of colour's right to assert her creative will over a symbol of the British establishment – albeit at the invitation of that institution. High up on Tate Britain's façade was an abstracted depiction of Burman that paraphrased an earlier photograph. In it she performs a martial-arts jump kick while dressed in a sari. Conveying physical prowess and challenging preconceived notions of South Asian womanhood, it was an exultant recapitulation of *The Thin Black Line's* ambitions.

*Brave New World* was followed by more neon light commissions, at Liverpool Town Hall and Blackpool's Grundy Art Gallery. With a monograph (Lynda Nead's indispensable – though inexplicably out-of-print – work of scholarship, *Beyond Two Cultures*), an honorary doctorate, an MBE, and works in public collections internationally, what's next for Dr Burman? Visiting her studio in east London, I am greeted by the artist herself, bursting with warmth, humour and compelling anecdotes. Works-in-progress,

archive pieces and scale models jostle for space alongside bookshelves heaving with reference material. This year she contributed to the BBC's *Art That Made Us*; was named London ambassador for India Art Fair; and the Science Museum awaits her creative intervention.

'Printmaking is where it all began', Burman tells me. Façades of buildings provide scaled-up surfaces for her mark making, while her elegantly turned neon fabrications echo intaglio lines characteristic of her earlier practice. A recent suite of photogravures revisits her collages, re-presenting them in expertly achieved gradations of tone. In one we see a layered portrait in which Burman's features are superimposed over a gallery of smaller portrait heads familiar from *28 Positions*. The artist meets our gaze poised and self-possessed.

'I know exactly what I'm doing here', Burman says of her decision to return to hands-on processes. It's a confidence built on decades of graft and purposeful invention. Chila Kumari Singh Burman, in all her storied complexity, has achieved visibility and representation on her own terms.



*Aphrodisiacs Being Socially Constructed* (1988) Etching and aquatint, 560 x 710 mm © Chila Kumari Singh Burman. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery