

AUT GRAPH

Exhibition Audio Guide Transcript Charan Singh: Your Tongue in My Mouth

1. Curator Bindi Vora introduces the exhibition

Welcome to *Your Tongue in My Mouth*, an exhibition of works by artist Charan Singh – my name is Bindi Vora and I'm the senior curator here at Autograph.

Earlier this year, we commissioned the artist to create 22 new portraits, shown here for the first time. Together, these works bring forward histories that have often been pushed aside or rewritten through colonialism. Among them are the long-established Hijra and Kothi communities of South Asia – communities with their own traditions, social ties and ways of understanding gender and identity, many of which predate British colonial rule.

The backdrops in these works were created by Charan and are inspired by nineteenth-century studio portraiture, as well as the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, which combined European aesthetics with Indian iconography. Rather than serving simply as decoration, the backdrops draw attention to the ways photography has shaped how history is constructed and represented. Charan draws on the visual authority of historical portraiture while also questioning it, asking: whose bodies are permitted within the historical canon?

In the second audio point for this gallery, you will hear from Charan himself, talking about the process of making and staging the works on display.

2. Charan discusses the making of the works

Hi my name is Charan Singh. The series of work on display in this room comes from the desire to become visible, and the making of the work was centred around joy and collaboration. We experimented through poses, clothing and gesture as a form of self-expression. It was important to leave some room so that each person could decide how they wished to be seen – and, equally, to consider what they did not want to reveal. That freedom to experiment, to play and to enjoy the process together became an important part of the work, particularly given the histories of violence and erasure which many members of the community have experienced.

Making the work also reinforced a strong sense of community. I wanted to capture the relationships, kinship and care between the people in the room. Across the works on display, you might notice a hand resting on a shoulder, one person braiding another's hair, or bodies naturally leaning in towards each other. These may seem like small gestures, but they carry poignancy. They speak to the ways people have cared for, protected and sustained one another.

So often, queer lives shaped by social and economic precarity are represented primarily through violence and hardship. As necessary as those accounts may be, they can leave little room for the fullness of people's lives. I wanted these gestures

of care to show how people can also be sources of love, strength and endurance for one another.

Cinema and music are also important to this series. Each portrait takes its title from a character in a Bollywood song, many of which hold particular significance within Hijra and Kothi communities in India and its diasporas. For me, these songs have long offered space for queer desire and longing. The final audio point in this room links to a playlist of songs from cinema referenced in the works.