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Russna Kaur, DREAM MACHINE (*try walking on a path of splinters with no shoes*)  
By Renée van der Avoird

"I follow that pattern about for hours. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you."  
– Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Russna Kaur's father plays the lottery every day. He has been playing since the late 1980s, when he immigrated to Canada from India. He keeps every single ticket, organises them chronologically, and stores them in suitcases and duffle bags for posterity. Kaur, fascinated by this ritual, employs her father's saved lottery tickets as an extension of her painting practice in her exhibition DREAM MACHINE (*try walking on a path of splinters with no shoes*) at W Projects.

Kaur is known for pushing the pictorial frame beyond its limits, sometimes extending her surfaces to include immersive wall paintings, other times composing works out of multiple panels that can be rearranged according to their site. Here, the lottery tickets similarly challenge our expectations of what painting can be. They also raise the question of how abstract paintings reveal—inadvertently or not—the personal experiences and family histories embedded within them.

Kaur and her father have had long discussions about his lottery ticket collection. For him, playing the lottery is an action that embodies hope, optimism, and positivity. He has vowed to play every day for the rest of his life, and believes that his ever-growing collection of tickets symbolises dedication, devotion, and consistency—qualities that extend to every aspect of his life. The lottery didn't exist in rural Punjab, where he grew up. The ritual therefore became about rooting himself in a new place in order to feel a sense of belonging and purpose.

DREAM MACHINE, the first part of the exhibition's title, is pulled directly from the lottery tickets—a Lotto 6/49 sweepstake that promoted the idea of dreams coming true. The second part, *try walking on a path of splinters with no shoes*, is an expression Kaur's father uses to describe the necessity of being prepared for life's challenges by thinking ahead and also, by having faith. In essence, the title embodies two contradictory philosophies.

Even though the odds of winning are low, Kaur's father continues his lottery tradition without questioning the logic of it. His steadfastness reminds Kaur of *The Lottery* (1948), a short story by Shirley Jackson in which a rural community engages in an annual tradition that supposedly ensures a plentiful harvest for the year ahead. "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon", the old saying goes. Names are drawn and the person who selects the winning ticket ultimately is sacrificed in the name of favourable crops. A story about mob mentality and blind tradition, *The Lottery* touches on our tendency towards obedience and following tradition—even if irrational—in the name of superstition.



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Arriving in Brampton, Ontario as a young man in 1987, Kaur's father was the only one from his family to immigrate to Canada. He felt pressure to succeed financially, and as a husband and father. However, the blatant racism he faced made life more difficult and more alienating than anticipated. The lottery offered him an opportunity to succeed without prejudice: he was on equal footing with everyone else. A blind tradition of his own, playing the lottery (and one day winning) might enable him to prove to those who have doubted or discriminated against him that he can indeed reach success at the highest level, and that everything he endured was worth it. And when he wins, he will have in his possession every single ticket it took to reach that goal.

As she affixes the thousands of lottery tickets to the gallery walls, Kaur recalls another short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A young woman is imprisoned in a mansion by her husband, a physician, who recommends bed-rest as a cure for her "temporary nervous depression". Forbidden to read, write or work, the narrator becomes fixated on the "sprawling, flamboyant patterns" of the wallpaper in the room she is locked in, its shades of "smouldering" sulphur yellow, "strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight". The woman eventually enters a state of psychosis, and begins to see visions in wallpaper that lead to the story's abrupt and troubling end.

Printed on thin sheets of beige, yellow and pale orange paper, the lottery tickets are installed in an expansive grid that occupies the main gallery space at W Projects. The array becomes a wallpaper onto which Kaur installs new paintings. Barcodes and triangular Lotto 6/49 logos line up seamlessly in some instances, and verge apart in others, creating an uneven pattern that echoes the mutating designs of Gilman's yellow wallpaper. For Kaur, who often uses literary sources and her own writing as starting points, the gradient colour, snaking lines, and rough textures of Gilman's wallpaper offer intriguing formal links to her own paintings, and have inspired several of the works in this show. Moreover, the story—an early feminist text about women's mental and physical health in a patriarchal society—resonates with Kaur's own family dynamics and loved ones' recent struggles with mental health.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the woman's fixation on the wallpaper is a gradual unravelling of her sanity. Her bizarre and increasingly confusing statements signal that she is struggling but trying her best to cope with her condition. As Kaur installed the tickets on the walls at W Projects, she thought about how repetitive actions can instil a mindlessness not unlike the boredom that drives *The Yellow Wallpaper* protagonist to insanity. On a personal level, for Kaur this exhibition relates to both her mother and father, two separate lines that were arranged and tied together, merged to form a continuous line that slowly began to crack and split, ultimately becoming two lines, once again, heading in different directions. "Putting up the lottery tickets is a process," Kaur shares. "It's like both my parents are present in the room, in very different ways. And then my paintings are layered on top. So it's a lot about family history, personal experiences living in a Punjabi household, processing ways in which we have gone through, and are currently going through life."

In addition to the wallpaper, Kaur's paintings are also infused with personal narratives. Rendered with acrylic paint and oil pastel, they vary richly in their surfaces, palettes and modes of execution. Certain paintings have spray-painted underlayers, some have very dense compositions of lines, while others are more sparse. Various depths and sizes of panels fill the gallery. Works like *A sudden hush are flat; while others like Airy, yet belonging*



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to the unblinking eye are richly textured, with sand and sawdust mixed into the paint. *Hinder*, a pointless pattern includes text, although it is not intended to be read: the letters are more of an investigation into the formal qualities of line than a source of narrative. The large work that anchors the exhibition, *If I wished, such fancies - lazy voices in the crowd soften to slanted waves*, is composed of three panels. A muted pink, yellow and blue sunset-like background is layered with irregular sections of black and gradient denim blue, and two strong, sinuous multicoloured lines that elegantly traverse all three panels.

This type of meandering line—a key element of all of Kaur’s work to date—brings cohesion to the exhibition. As she builds her compositions, the artist considers line’s ability to direct or distract a viewer’s gaze. She thinks about transitions from one line to the next: intersections, interruptions, dead ends. She employs lines that are seamless, dotted, implied, segmented. She looks at lines as markers of relationships in her life: some weaken while others get stronger. Certain lines are more dominant while others gradually fade into the background. Complex networks of lines may represent complicated relationships. The paintings take on a sense of psychogeography: labyrinthine maps of lived experience, tied together by family, friends and community across time and space. Her move from Brampton to Vancouver was a source of tension in many ways, a massive shift in relationships and priorities, the kind of life change that becomes embodied in her mark marking. In her writing, Kaur reflects that line, like relationships, can be unpredictable and fallible. “Is any line truly straight?” She inquires. “Any slight movement, hesitation, exhale, or miscalculation shatters the idea that the line knows where it’s going, making it vulnerable.”<sup>1</sup>

Kaur’s abstract paintings are filled with stories—both mythologized, such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Lottery* and profoundly personal, like the tale of her father’s lottery tickets. The stories, while not literally told, are embedded in her strategies: layered brushstrokes, brilliant collisions of colour, surprising extensions of the picture plane, and most prominently, dynamic lines. Painting is her method for piecing together the stories and fragments of experience that culminate in making a self. More than ever, in *DREAM MACHINE (try walking on a path of splinters with no shoes)* Kaur plays with the balance between revealing and concealing, asking: how much of your story do you share? How are these stories embedded in the objects around you? And what forms do the stories take as they emerge?

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<sup>1</sup> Kaur, Russna. *thoughts on line*. Essay to accompany solo exhibition *it is not easy to find a dark place when the sky seems four times greater*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon 2022. Curated by Tara Hogue. <https://remaimodern.org/whats-on/exhibitions-all/russna-kaur-rbc-emerging-artist-series/>. Accessed September 15, 2023.