



## Repetition, transgression and fashion in David Sequeira's *untitled, India* by Grace McQuilten

1. Deleuze, G. (1994).  
*Difference and repetition*.  
Columbia University Press.

*In every respect, repetition is a transgression.*  
(Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1968)<sup>1</sup>

In a way, David Sequeira's *untitled, India*, 2022, is a love-letter to India that rips open complex histories and explores, with both sensitivity and sharp observation, a multifaceted country, continent and culture; while simultaneously unHINGING Australia's tendency to oversimplify Indian culture in both the good (Bollywood, cricket) and the bad (racism, cultural supremacy). In this work, Sequeira's observations and explorations are made through a series of 56 bespoke kurtas – long, loose-fitting shirts worn in many parts of South Asia, including India – which is underpinned by radical repetition. 36 kurtas feature intense colour blocking and the remaining 20 feature black and white photography associated with Indian history.

Each colour blocked garment is composed of three panels of coloured cotton fabric, often in variations of the same tone, which like Sequeira's works across other media including painting and ceramics, together create a melodic resonance of colour and form. Whilst the form is repeated throughout the series each kurta is different. Repetition and difference go hand in hand – as French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) argues, in nature there is no repetition without difference – that is, repetition is an integral part of change, and is inherently disruptive. In Sequeira's work, repetition is a powerful formal means of disrupting social and cultural norms. The use of the kurta in *untitled, India* represents a cultural repetition, the introduction and replication of a personal cultural motif. The kurta is a popular casual clothing item for Indian men, which is usually composed of a single panel of fabric, often in subdued tones. This repetition is radicalised through the use of bold, bright blocks of colour transposed to the fashion runway, perfectly in-step with global fashion trends while simultaneously transforming heteronormative assumptions of the norms (and arguably, limitations) of contemporary men's fashion: to put it simply, the kurta to a Western gaze, is a dress-like form – highly unusual in men's fashion.

There is also a repetition of pattern, colour and form that represents an expansion from Sequeira's painting practice into textile form that unsettles the Eurocentric tendency to separate visual art and material culture, fine art and craft. That is to say, an emphatic declaration that fashion is art; and that art is brought to life when embodied, entangled in human form and as an expression of tactile, textural material production. We see a repeating of, and highlighting of the contemporary importance of, decentred and decolonised cultural knowledges from across the globe, including India, where histories of art, craft and fashion have long been understood as integrated and integral forms of cultural expression.<sup>2</sup> These radical acts of visual and formal repetition are therefore both extraordinarily contemporary and yet also in tune with deeply lived cultural knowledge and experience – what we might resist reducing to the notion of the 'traditional'. They challenge and resist social norms, including cultural fashion norms and gender norms in fashion and pop culture, on the one hand, and the cultural norms of the contemporary art world, on the other. But perhaps most significantly, Sequeira's acts of repetition are deployed to challenge simplistic and reductive perceptions of Indian life and culture in the Australian popular imagination.

2. UNESCO 2013 cited in Collins, V. (2016). *Art and fashion*. *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 5(2-3), 165–185. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.5.2-3.165\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.5.2-3.165_1)

While formal observations of the play between colour, textile and form in *untitled, India*, start to reveal qualities of alterity and subversion, a more overt political critique is also at play in this series of textile artworks. This emerges visually in the 20 kurtas digitally printed with black and white photography on the front panel. These monochrome kurtas are interspersed throughout the series of 56, offering a visual break amid the otherwise explosions of colour, and forcing a conceptual break from the more celebratory and festive dimensions of the work. Each image depicts a cultural, political or social moment in Indian history, one that both centres historical knowledge while also complicating it, for example by pointing to the legacies of British colonisation; revealing contemporary gay, lesbian and trans cultures, and highlighting democratic protests.

Sequeira's selection spans from the historic to the contemporary. One key image features a portrait of Lord and Lady Curzon, the Viceroy and Vicereine of India from 1899-1905, the human instruments of England's colonial rule. The image features the couple outdoors in the city of Hyderabad, capital of the state of Telangana. Most strikingly, at their feet lies the body of a dead tiger, killed in a hunting expedition. The image speaks to the cruelty and ignorance of colonisation: tigers in India have since become endangered due to habitat loss and poaching. It therefore has a quality of premonition – alluding to future ecological disaster and the ongoing impacts of human violence. Another kurta features an image of a cremation fire, with a human figure adorned in full PPE (personal protection equipment) – the familiar garb of our twenty-first century pandemic era. This is an iconic image of COVID-19 as it impacted on many places in India, in this case Srinagar, Kashmir in May of 2021. The kurta displays a public burning; a sign of the devastation of the disease, where medical services were unable to keep up with the sheer volume of bodies falling to the virus.

By transforming these images into garment form, Sequeira also complicates the ethnographic gaze inherent to Western readings of documentary photography: these are not images of India/Indian people to be consumed. Instead, the images – all of which feature people – are literally embodied. The garment, even when not worn on the body, alludes to and speaks to the body. When worn, each image/person/body comes to life. In this way, the images/people in the photographs also come into relation with the wearer (and potential wearer). These aspects of relationality and embodiment come to the fore most powerfully in the runway performance that features in this exhibition. Set to music performed by Veena virtuoso and composer Hari Sivanesan, the runway gives movement and life to the kurtas with 56 male models of Indian descent on the catwalk. Again, celebration and festivity come into sharp dialogue with history – in this case, a confronting performance of complex Indian identity and culture- defiant, heartfelt and celebratory, that resists simple dynamics of consumption/pleasure.

The use of fashion to enact political and social critique in *untitled, India* draws on histories of performance art and also confronts an enduring anti-fashion bias in contemporary art that speaks to the limitations of eurocentrism. In contemporary art discourses and markets, hierarchies of value stubbornly persist (art over craft, visual over haptic, fine over applied) that reinforce the status quo; namely, consumers, audiences, patrons and cultural gatekeepers overwhelmingly of upper middle-class, Anglo-centric backgrounds. This investment in the idea of art as distinct from material culture also emphasises the superior monetary value

3 Noveck, J. (2016, May 08).  
Met curator Andrew Bolton quietly  
defends fashion as art.  
Chicago Tribune.

of art objects that infer social and cultural capital over, for example, the more consumable and reproducible objects and experiences of daily life. This bias is well known and was well articulated, for example by Andrew Bolton, Head Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, New York: "I think they see fashion as something that is deeply rooted in the commercial world, not in the art world," Bolton says. "And the popularity of fashion can also be annoying to some people; they don't like that it brings in such huge numbers. But the reason why it does is that it's a living art form we can all relate to"<sup>3</sup>

Sequeira's *untitled, India* is also a radical performance with a rebellious spirit, but it does not involve the cutting away of the art object or a rejection of fashion. Instead, it asserts the beauty and value of its central motif, the kurta. This assertion is repeated over and over, with slight but significant variations in bold colour blocks, and even more significant variations in the black and white images that segment, break and add a powerful and political counter-rhythm to the work's overall melody. Through the repetition of these cultural tropes, the kurta, the documentary photograph, and the fashion runway, Sequeira expands, enhances and excavates a more complex reading, one that makes us go back and look again.

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