

What Already Is: On Satpreet Kahlon's
an imagined place (here and now)

By Vivian L. Huang
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Brooklyn-based artist Satpreet Kahlon's immersive exhibition *an imagined place (here and now)*, virtuosically installed in the 10,000-square-foot main space of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art this spring, transports visitors to the asteroid PN7, a quasi-moon that had been following the Earth for a half-century before it was noticed recently by humans. Visitors walk under, around, and behind enormous and delicate towers of styrofoam, the stark white structures softened with brown markings reminding of a human hand's touch. Plastic and glass beads adorn edges and pockets in the styrofoam, cobbled over with plaster so the structure appears to be crumbling at the same time as its tall precarity suggests an impossible gravity.

The installation casts PN7 as a devout curator of light, touched by the same sun as the Earth. Overhead lights and video projectors choreograph attention in the space, refusing visual or narrative cohesion. Instead, collage, texture, and layers of found audio and video materials provide solidity. Fragments of family photographs, printed on cardboard, repeat a visual motif of hands: folded in a lap, balled up, supporting a baby. Images of an infant with the face withheld, embedded into the styrofoam's underbelly, syncopate the scene, conjuring questions without providing answers. The exhibition's images and sounds provoke in their cumulative meaning, yet the artist's intentions remain concealed in what scholar Kiran Lam-Saili describes as Kahlon's art of "obscuration."¹

When I learned of the cosmic muse for Kahlon's exhibition prior to my visit, I expected to feel my heart strings tugged by its themes of unrequited longing, quiet devotion, and delayed recognition. I thought I would feel the warm pangs of what might have been. What greeted me, instead, in *an imagined place (here and now)* was a sense of vastness both chilling and freeing. The exhibition opened me to the enormity of an untouchable scale: of the lifespan of consumer waste including styrofoam and plastic, of the spatial magnitude

from audio samples of magnetic fields and solar flares, of the distance between my own experience and the intimacy of the family photographs scaled up and fragmented on the styrofoam walls. Kahlon gives visitors so much to take in, enough to know that so much more eludes us. Is this what romance feels like on a cosmic scale?

Whose company has been here all along, felt but unseen? PN7 reminds me of romantics, including captive and migrant people, who look to the moon and marvel that a loved one's gaze might be on the other side of it. This geometry of attention, made possible by our sun's light, takes form in Kahlon's stunning use of video projection. The exhibition's game of hide-and-seek dazzles in Kahlon's use of archival footage projected from ground level onto two hidden styrofoam altars of circular mirrors, beads, and jewelry. The altars reflect the found footage onto separate corners of the exhibition in refracted beams of light that might well be interrupted by a visitor's wandering body, suddenly interpellated into an iridescent history. Circular glimpses of a swing set. Partial pans through dense foliage. Close-ups of a giraffe's skin. A fascination with the distance between her eyes and her hands.

In popular culture, outer space is often figured as the destiny of a human-centered future, replete with imperialist imaginaries of scientific conquest, resource extraction, and white nationalist settlement. Kahlon's environment of PN7 conveys an alternative futurist sensibility, one where innovation comes not from the ceaseless pursuit of the new or escape from the past. Instead, Kahlon offers a technology committed to what already is. This commitment is clear in Kahlon's list of salvaged materials including styrofoam, scrap wood, old Christmas trees, fish net, mirrors, video footage, and tile pieces. In Kahlon's hands, this leftover stuff of purchasing power and affirmed beauty, of childhood delights and tiny trinkets, is less an index of an embittered past to mourn and more the basis for connection to what a provisional "we" comes from and what we have to work with. Kahlon's utopia does not forsake what has been, for better or for worse. Instead, the installation attends to the romance of the capacious present, the parenthetical "here and

1 Kiran Lam-Saili, "A Sense of the Body: Obscuration and Refraction in the Work of Satpreet Kahlon" (Conference paper, American Studies Association, San Juan, PR, Nov 22, 2025).

now,” where visitors are not only invited but needed in the space.

Two regions in the middle of the exhibition are formally distinct and together enhance the interplay between ephemeral presence and dense materiality. One area in the installation’s center provides visual solidity as well as tactile respite. My hands were as glad as my feet for the two glaciers with layers of plastered styrofoam visible from the side and bobbed detailing from beads and blue pigment. The sculptures accepted my weight and felt like dense candied popcorn, responsive to bounce and waxen under my touch. These seats provided rest and a perch for witness.

In the second, so lean as to require squinting in the dimmer moments, are two series composed of scrap wood and fish net salvaged from the Duwamish River, near where Kahlon formerly resided. In contrast to the thick sculptures, these toothpick-like towers looked like they might not survive a sneeze, much less a gentle graze. Visitors familiar with Kahlon’s work will recognize the textured elegance of the stapled scrap wood, with bending lines that present a physics experiment.² In a later conversation with the artist, I described these sculptures as a post-apocalyptic series of bridges and docks. Kahlon replied, “We live in a post-apocalyptic future right now. Most Indigenous people have lived through an apocalypse.”³

Kahlon’s invocation of Indigenous temporality recalls scholar Gayatri Gopinath’s framing of indigeneity and diaspora as “co-constitutive categories” in her writing on the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora.⁴ Given the violences of settler colonialism, Gopinath positions “the nation-state itself as ‘diaspora space’: a zone constituted by ongoing histories of settler colonial violence, war, and occupation, and shot

through with the migrant trajectories, socialities, and affiliations that these histories engender.”⁵ Kahlon’s imagined place of PN7 views life on Earth as a marvel, and not least of all the wonder of endurance through and despite ongoing histories of violence at scales personal and geopolitical. There is tragedy in this spacescape, and there is also something hopeful. Kahlon’s salvage aesthetics coalesce an Indigenous, migrant, and working-class ethos of survival and resourcefulness, one where economic and environmental sustainability are inseparable, exceed the logics of capitalist nation-building, and make beauty possible.⁶

To see, momentarily, the Earth’s trash repurposed from the perspective of a loving voyeur in PN7 is to glimpse a value system of material consequence that does not hierarchize the new over the old or reproduce a linear story of past harm and future salvation. Instead, Kahlon’s exhibition asks: what if nothing is disposable? What if what we already have is of the highest value, the highest urgency? What if what we need is already here – not the romantic idealism of what could be but isn’t, but, rather, the romance of what could be and already is?

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2 The author thanks PICA Artistic Director and Curator of Visual Art Kristan Kennedy for providing background in conversation.

3 Satpreet Kahlon, telephone interview with the author, May 11, 2026.

4 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 13.

5 Gopinath, 13.

6 See Thea Quiray Tagle’s essay “Salvage Acts: Asian/American Artists and the Uncovering of Slow Violence in the San Francisco Bay Area,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18, no. 5 (2019): 1112-1127.