

Aminder Virdee: The multidimensional world of a disabled artist



Aminder Virdee has been self-isolating for over 700 days.

She is a British-South Asian neurodivergent artist with muscular dystrophy.

As a high-risk disabled person of colour, Aminder is in both categories with the highest number of deaths from coronavirus.

“When you're both intersections, it's really scary,” she says.

“Before we went into lockdown I was on the bus- that was the last time I’ve used a bus- and someone in front of me was comforting a friend of hers, and she was saying something like ‘Don't worry, it's only killing the sick and the elderly’.

“That part of the pandemic, and the hierarchy, has been horrendous. You feel that your life is disposable.”

Aminder first began her artistic streak when she was about two years old.

She recalls: “I became interested in art through being at hospital and having therapists work with me and find new ways to adapt materials and equipment.

“So I could make pieces of art as I was recovering from operations and things like that. It was just being creative, and I guess a coping mechanism - something I probably didn't realise at the time.”

Since before the pandemic, Aminder has used her art as a form of social commentary, amplifying a range of issues including disability, race, and gender.

“Disabled people have a lot of medical trauma,” she says.

One of the pieces Aminder is currently working on focuses on intimacy.

“My new piece of work is about touch and having enforced intimacy as a disabled person which refers to the times that you need someone else to help care for you, but you don't really know them well, because they're a stranger. Basically, they're a carer and you're expected to allow them to see your naked body.

“It's very exposing, and it's the same when you're in hospital, especially when you have rare conditions. You're often asked to wear a gown or something like that but 10 years ago they would ask you to change right there and then in the room. Medicine is also usually male orientated.”

The Korean-American disability justice activist Mia Mingus coined the term ‘forced intimacy’, on the common daily experience of disabled people having their privacy breached and others feeling entitled to their personal and psychological space.

On the alternative side, Aminder plans to cover the lack of intimacy she has been able to experience with the people in her life since the pandemic.

“It's been really difficult for mental health. I'm a very social person, and I find it very difficult not being able to see my best mates or have a hug. Just simple things like that. You don't realise how important touch is until you haven't had a hug in months.

“So there's that forced intimacy and then there's also a lack of intimacy between you and your best friends, where you usually have that social connection and there's only so much conversation you can have online, especially when it spans 2 years.”

The intersection of identity is integral to Aminder's personal life, and therefore her art.

She says: “I guess I process the sexism and ableism I've had in the medical institution by finding ways to subvert those experiences through my art.”



(‘Kaleidoskeleton Ti: The Desi Cyborg #1- 2020)

“I want them to stare”

Aminder often uses personal items such as medicine packages and x-rays in her artwork, such as her Kaleidoskeleton Ti: The Desi Cyborg series. She says she has wondered about the ethics of this self-exposure.

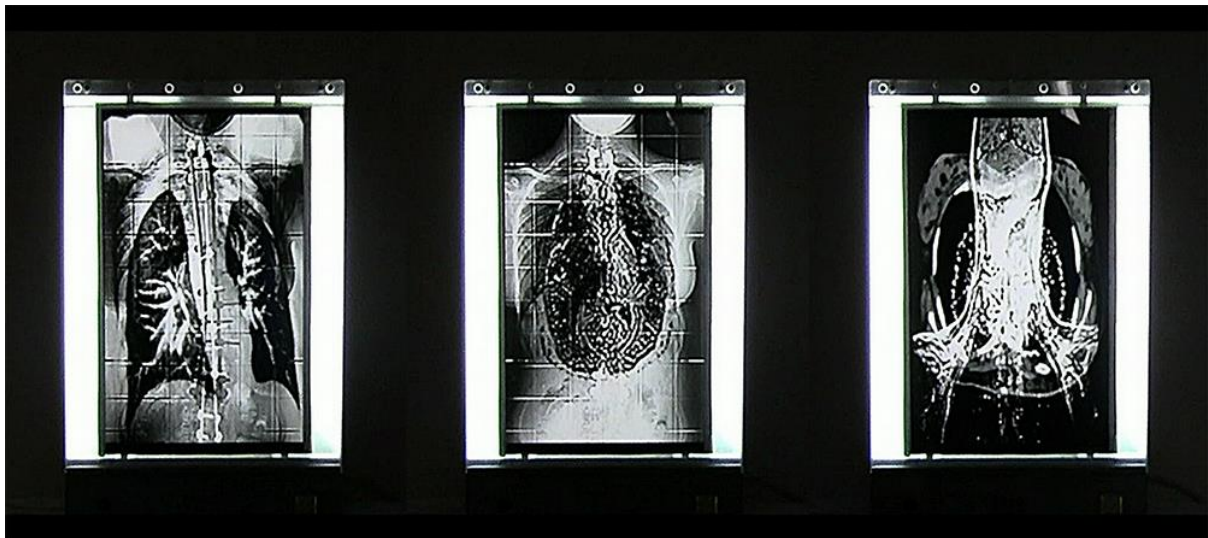
“I used to do a lot of performance work, and I stopped because I felt that I was almost putting myself in a position to be stared at.

“That's something I experience every day when I walk out my front door, which I felt very uncomfortable with. I didn't know if the audience was watching my work or watching me as a person.

“The visible identities that I have, have been weaponised against me.

“I have thought about ways to subvert my own image, the way that people see me. And so, putting x-ray images and personal items into my work is a way that I control what others can see.

“It's ensuring that the subject remains the objects that I provide, and not me. But I also want people to know that I want them to stare.”



(‘Keep This Leaflet: You May Need To Read It Again’: 2014)

As a woman of colour, Aminder has faced ostracisation within day-to-day life, and the disabled and disability artists’ communities.

She says: “Disability rights-based activism is predominantly white-led and predominantly male-led. Whenever I or a friend brings up the topic of race, they want to swiftly move on to the next subject.

"In art spaces I was never seen as a leader, I would always be a mentee, even though I had more experience. It took a little while to realise there was a race issue in the disability community.

"So, I'd like to see an increase in opportunities for Black and Brown disabled people."

Aminder has multiple health conditions aside from her muscular dystrophy, some of which are progressive.

"As my body changes, I lose movements of capacity in some way, and there is grief in that," she says. "I guess it's similar when people go from able-bodied to disabled.

"Grief has always been thought to me as death, but I haven't previously considered it as maybe losing a part of yourself, or something, someone that you used to be. And that can be a very gradual process which is very emotionally taxing, and I think a lot of people have the privilege of not having to consider that or experience that until much later in life, or in the traditional way as in losing abilities as you age.

"But the disabled friends and artists I have know that we're almost not allowed to grieve. We have to always appear as if we're overcoming something, and we despise that stereotype because it's a type of, I guess, *inspiration porn*.

"We should be allowed to both want to be successful and further ourselves, but also be able to grieve when something does change in our life. Like suddenly needing a personal assistant and having that loss of independence."

Aminder tries to deal with and manage these feelings through her work- both in terms of style, and how she goes about creating her pieces.

She says: "In my work a lot of the time it's usually the experiences that I've gone through which I found confusing, or traumatic or difficult in some. I guess I try to make sense of them through the process of artmaking, which I never understood until I realised I was neurodivergent, that the kind of images and sounds and things about bringing them all together, it might not make sense to another person, but to me it makes perfect sense.

"All the research areas I've looked into and the life experiences have kind of slid in together, and it also leads me to look into different areas. I like experimenting a lot. I don't like sticking to one art form as I find it really limiting.

"And because every day I've lived in a world that wasn't built for me, I already have a few barriers in society, and I don't want to have barriers within my own artwork. So I make sure that I have access to any kind of art form that I feel I can participate in, and it could be something simple, as if I couldn't get out of bed one day I might make some work from my bed."

With art being such a physical craft, adaptability is often needed for Aminder to continue her work.

"I don't really even think about it, and once something changes in my body that happens again. I instantly just adapt, and I think disabled people are incredibly skilled and talented to find adaptations and creative ways around things so quickly."

Aminder has been fascinated by art since childhood, and her creative vision is incredibly personal to her, with her talents being undoubted.

She says: "I was in school around the nineties, and there was a lot of racism and ableism. Most of my tutors would laugh when I said I was interested in art and say that someone like me wouldn't be able to do it for this reason and that reason. So I'm glad I didn't listen and I just kind of pursued it."

Aminder intends to work on more projects in the upcoming months, including an exhibition.

"I think in a way, even though there is a lot stacked up against me, art is something I'm lucky to have, because I love doing it," she adds.

"Creating art is when I'm happiest: I find joy in the end product as well, but it's the process that I enjoy the most. I get lost in it."

You can find Aminder on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/amindervirdee/?hl=en> , and through her website: <https://www.aminder-virdee.com/>