

ARTFORUM



Nep Sidhu, *Medicine for A Nightmare*, 2019, cotton, wool, jute, zari, hair, steel, 18 1/3 x 9'.

Nep Sidhu /MERCER UNION

1286 Bloor Street West

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In “Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded),” Nep Sidhu's dazzling and gutsy show at Toronto’s Mercer Union, the artist (who identifies as Sikh) stares into the epistemological void created by Operation Blue Star. This 1984 military attack against India’s minority Sikh population was purportedly aimed at punishing a separatist Sikh leader, Jarnail Singh

Bhindranwale, who had occupied the Golden Temple, the religion's most important holy site. The campaign and the subsequent waves of violence resulted in a death toll of at least five hundred (according to official Indian estimates)—or, more likely, thousands (according to independent sources).

Reckoning with Operation Blue Star's atrocities of erasure, including secret cremations and the destruction of a Sikh reference library, Sidhu offers new monuments, making use of materials (soil, jute, hair, cotton, zari), techniques (metallurgy, weaving, and embroidery), and a Sikh script that all predate the foundation of the current Indian nation-state, thereby speaking to a longer history of India. Such an effort is, as the title suggests, medicinal, particularly so for Sikhs, who comprise less than two percent of India's population; their narratives have been undercut by the state.

The titular tapestry (*Medicine for a Nightmare*, 2019), which measures more than eighteen by nine feet, is, like the show itself, epic, mournful, and exuberant. An explosive golden print frames part of a Sikh temple while a garland of jute and human hair hangs from the tapestry's base, footnoting the divine significance of hair in the religion and indexing forcible hair removal, a tactic used to harass and torture adherents. Another work, *Formed in the Divine, Divine of Form*, 2019, takes the task of exhuming history quite literally: A 2,800-pound Brutalist concrete sculpture is sprinkled with mud sourced near the Golden Temple, where Sikhs were massacred during Operation Blue Star; many had attempted escape by jumping into the waters surrounding the structure.

— *Lauren Du Graf*