

The photographer as a gatherer



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Indu Antony's installation of a series of kites.

Four women photographers at Serendipity recast the past in unpredictable ways

The latest edition of Serendipity (December 15-22), the multidisciplinary arts festival held in Panjim, invited two new **photography** curators. Their debut arrayed a series of exhibitions that gravitated around the theme of turning “to the personal” in South Asian photography in the case of Ravi Aggarwal, and “new uses for passing images” in the case of Rahaab Allana.

Some of the most compelling works on display included exhibitions by four women photographers: Sukanya Ghosh, Chinar Shah, Avani Tanya and Indu Antony – each with her unique syntax and sensibility – that pointed to the idea of the practitioner as collector.

Chinar Shah dug through the last remains of Ahmedabad’s Sabarmati river before its disappearance due to urban development. ‘The River’ is a collection of solarised objects found in the riverbed and presented in the form of photograms. Their directness somehow counters the risk of sentimentality posed by any attempt to eulogise an extinct river. The resulting images, with their resemblance to radiographs, read almost like a data analysis: the water bottles and the traces of packaging may be seen as a political statement on the dying river.



Chinar Shah's 'The River'.

It is fitting that a project on the commodification of a river was displayed at a venue located just above the magnificent Mandovi river. For here, too, the river's commercial activities are visible, particularly at night, when the casino boats light up, their colourful neon glow interrupted occasionally by the passing of ore-transporting barges.

Objects in isolation

Avani Tanya found in the streets of Bengaluru the perfect site for the hunter-gatherer exercise she attempts in 'The Snapped Rope and Other Stories from the New Bangalore'. The exhibition was an idiosyncratic collection of objects or their photographic representations, both instances of the photographer's desire to seize them and, in doing so, perhaps make sense of the city. Tanya presents the objects as isolated, itemised, with a detachment that recalls the museum aesthetic while questioning its authority.

A piece of fake grass, a collected sample of air, a piece of ancient rock, a demon mask, the knife used in a crime are some of the apparently banal objects that make up this cabinet of curiosities. But on closer reflection and a careful reading of the explanatory texts – which are fun and betray the photographer's predilections – we realise that they paint

quite an encompassing picture of modern-day Bengaluru, its fears, contradictions and aspirations.

Boxes of memories

Sukanya Ghosh's collages and little boxes are also the result of a compulsion to collect, one that not only focuses on photographs but also on found objects such as threads, pieces of machinery, frames, old dictionaries, etc., made unrecognisable at times through their rearrangement. Interestingly, the series had its origins in the artist's grandmother's cupboard – although her intent is not to “fetishise nostalgia” but perhaps to reinvent memories, highlighting precisely how unstable they can be.

Avani Tanya's 'The Snapped Rope'.



Untitled, from the series 'Isometries'
22x30", mixed media on paper, 2018

Untitled, from the series 'Isometries' by Sukanya Ghosh.

The geometrical shapes that constantly intersperse the work could indeed be seen as a reminder of the relative position of objects (and memories?) or the non-static nature of recollections. These “augmented memories,” as Ghosh likes to call them, suit Rahaab Allana's intent to find future – and perhaps unpredictable – uses for past images.

The attempt to capture memory was also the subject of Malayalam artist Indu Antony's exhibition. 'Vincent Uncle' analyses with the precision of a scalpel a childhood memory, perhaps traumatic, that has remained dormant until recently.

Antony's Catholic mum would often encourage her to pray to ensure bad thoughts never entered her mind. 'Vincent Uncle' is a reverse prayer of sorts, where Antony reclaims the “impurities” of her mind and her desire to come to terms with them: in the centre of the room is a lungi embroidered with the words “please, do not erase the impurities from my mind”. She appears determined to deconstruct the multi-layered and multisensorial aspects of the recollection: there are a series of kites with the words “hold here” woven with the artist's hair into the cloth; peeping holes too low or too high that force the viewer to experience discomfort in order to witness them and even a collection of vials containing the uncle's smell.

Child's-eye view

The central work is a typology of men's hairy legs, which we can see because the lungis are raised. Despite the pleasure of the repetition, one can feel that there is something frightening at stake. The photographs seem to have been taken from the height of a child, the artist inviting us to



A photograph from the 'Vincent Uncle' series.

share the point of view of the child she was then, when she was trying hard to not allow what she was witnessing to make its way into her mind.

Photography critic David Company has described how the accumulation implicit in both photography and collecting can be seen as a transformative process. The work of these four women photographer-artists is not immune to some of the implied givens in every collection: the acceptance of chance as a building element of the repertory, the fetishising of objects and, perhaps most relevantly, the extent to which the collection exposes the collector.

The writer is the founding director of GoaPhoto and JaipurPhoto, and the author of essays on photography.