

ELUDING PRESENCE: PORTRAITURE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

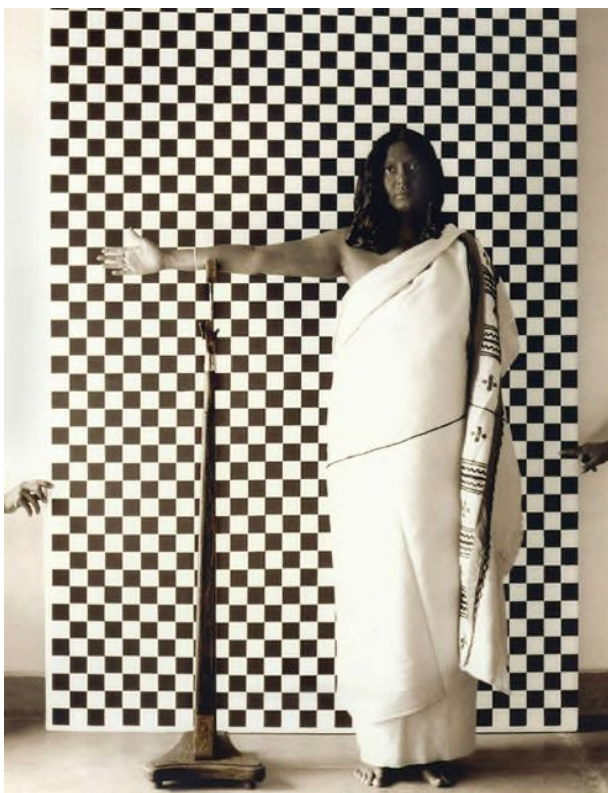
Portraits are about presence. Except, that is, when they are not.

In the simplest sense a photographic portrait indexes the existence and likeness of its subject. It functions as a material trace of a particular presence, a witness to its “having-been-there,” as Roland Barthes famously noted. In South Asia, photography was used early on by the colonial power as a tool for ethnographic study, to document, catalogue, and measure its colonial subjects and their exotic cultures. Understood as a faithful transcription of nature, the photograph made the native undeniably present and, hence, available to knowledge and able to be comprehended and controlled. Yet, from its advent in the Indian subcontinent the photographic apparatus was also understood as possessing magical properties, widely feared for its ability to extract the sitter’s spirit from their body and embed it into the image, the apparatus’ indexical capacity understood not as objective, scientific and veracious but as possibly demonic, a device that did not merely transcribe presence but also diminished it. Hovering between these two intertwined epistemologies of photography in the subcontinent, the portraits featured in this online exhibition use distinct strategies to elude the demands of presence. These photographs create an ambiguous space around their subjects, where they can breathe, allowing for that which is commonly invisible or absent to be brought to the fore.

PERFORMANCE

Pushpamala N.

In *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, Pushpamala N., in collaboration with British photographer Clare Arni, meticulously recreates a set of quintessential images of South Indian femininity, casting herself in the roles of various 'native types.' Drawing on a vast archive of popular visual culture, her source images range from the historical to the contemporary: a colonial anthropometric photograph; a widely disseminated oleograph of the goddess Lakshmi by Raja Ravi Varma; Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of young circus performers; and a magazine cover image of Tamil film starlet Jayalalitha, who later became an important politician. These retakes place brackets around their source images, foregrounding both the original representations, and their photographic recreations, as essentially performative gestures; the stereotypes they reference are emptied of all static essence and meaning and instead become discursive products, with specific but labile histories, nodes in a complex web of shifting social relations. However, using elaborately painted backdrops, props and costumes, Pushpamala's approach also evokes the vernacular practice of small town studio photography, wherein the photograph functions less as the indexical trace of a stable presence than as an occasion for playful and imaginative self-realization and transformation. And, finally, with her unique presence repeated but embedded in these dense webs of representational citations, these photographs hover ambiguously between success and failure as portraits of the artist as a South Indian woman.



Pushpamala N., 'Toda (after late 19th century British anthropometric photograph)'. From the photo-performance project *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, 2000-2004. Sepia toned silver gelatin print on fibre paper, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.



Pushpamala N., 'Lakshmi (after oleograph from Ravi Varma Press early 20th century)'. From the photo-performance project *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, 2000-2004. Type C-print on metallic paper, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.



Pushpamala N., 'Circus (after "Famous Circus" black and white photograph by Mary Ellen Mark)'. From the photo-performance project Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs, 2000-2004. Type C-print on metallic paper, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.



Pushpamala N., 'Cracking the Whip (after 1970s Tamil film still)'. From the photo-performance project Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs, 2000-2004. Type C-print on metallic paper, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.

REPETITION

Vivek Vilasini

In a short text from 1928 titled “Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot”, Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko rejected the growing desire among artists to memorialize Lenin in a single iconic image, preferring instead the unstable composite portrait of the revolutionary leader that would emerge from a collection of snapshots. Vivek Vilasini’s *Vernacular Chants II* (2007), a critique of Gandhi as icon in postcolonial India, espouses a similar ethos. A 3 by 3 array of straightforward frontal photographs of the head and shoulders of commemorative statues of Gandhi from across India, Vilasini’s piece challenges the lure of the icon at the level of both apparatus *and* image. Though typologically similar, the individual statues vary greatly in materials, style and sophistication. By foregrounding photography’s inherent reproducibility and highlighting difference through repetition, Vilasini’s composite privileges the copy over the original, shattering the idealized, iconic Gandhi and distributing his saintly aura across the many similar but distinct representations. And by privileging vernacular interpretations over State-sanctioned heroic representations Vilasini’s portrait rejects the latter as an appropriate mode for memorializing Gandhi. What emerges in the place of an icon is instead a sociological portrait of India, each statue reflecting the political allegiances, economic means and vernacular aesthetics of the community that sponsored it.



Vivek Vilasini, 'Vernacular Chants II', 2007. Composite photograph, 37.5 x 33 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Anup Mathew Thomas

Part of a photographic series exploring lesser known episodes from Kerala's rich cultural history, Anup Mathew Thomas' *Ambassadors* (2007) is ostensibly a portrait of Vellapally Natesan, the General Secretary of a local social organization dedicated to upholding the teachings of anti-caste social reformer Shree Narayana Guru. Thomas has a longstanding interest in the intersection of portraiture and power. *Cabinet* (2007) is a slide show of nineteen head and shoulder portraits of cabinet ministers from Kerala's then ruling Left Democratic Front government, while *Metropolitan* (2006) comprises a series of fourteen large format photographs of Episcopalian bishops dressed in colorful vestments outside their respective residences. In both of these series the basic composition is repeated, constructing a consistent frame that seems to visualize the unique iconography of power, be it political or religious. Thomas's portrait of Natesan also repeats, but within a single frame and to very different effect. Taken at Natesan's residence shortly after celebrations for his 70th birthday, Thomas's photograph shows the community leader alongside a life-size wax doppelganger specially fabricated for the recent festivities. A double portrait, its composition resembles the famous Hans Holbein painting it shares its title with. The uncanny doubling has a double effect: on the one hand, the idea that sacred and political power literally resides in this man's body is reinforced by the doubled likeness, while on the other, by diffusing or confusing presence, the doubling introduces uncertainty into the exact locus of power.



Anup Mathew Thomas, 'Ambassadors', 2007. Archival ink-jet print on Hahnemuhle photo rag paper, 53.5 x 36.2 inches. Courtesy the artist and GALLERY SKE, Bangalore.

RESISTANCE

Gauri Gill

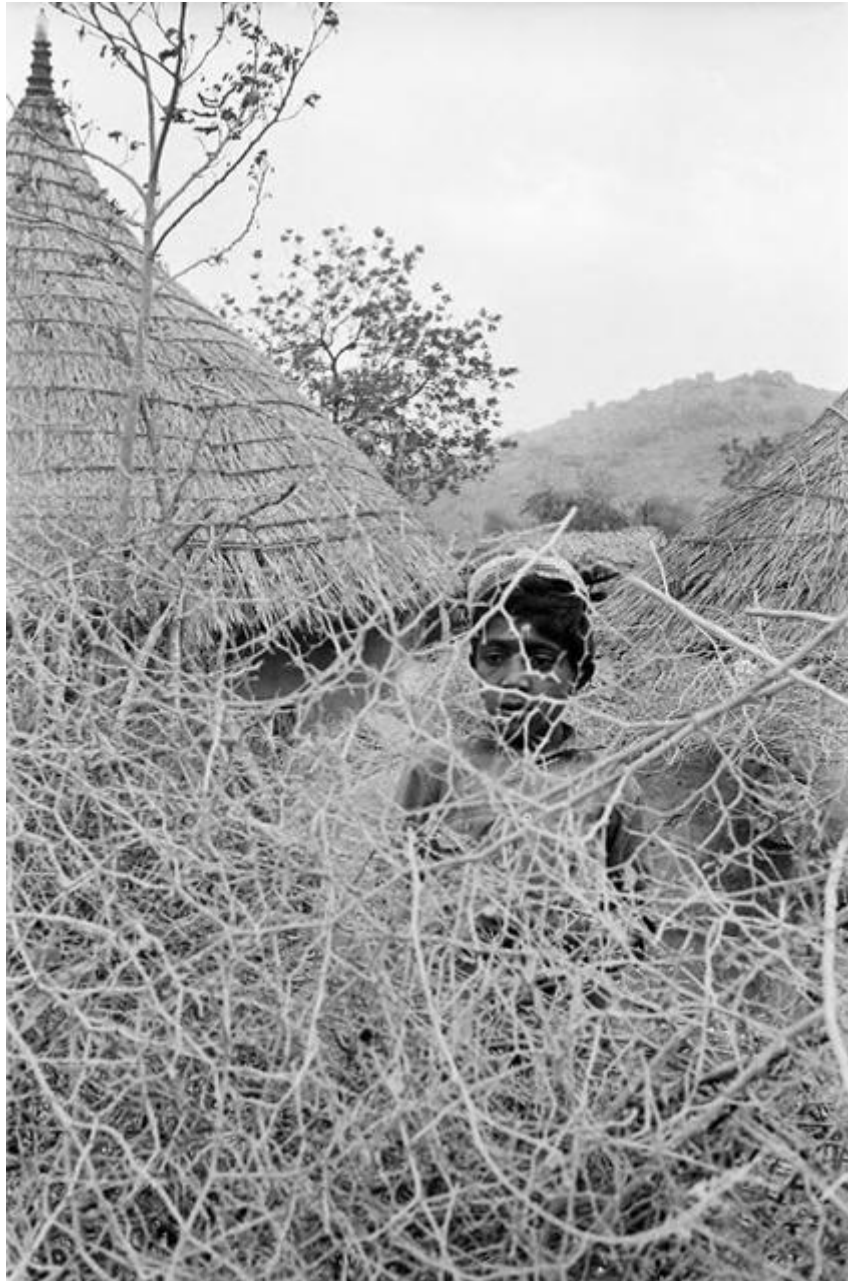
Taken during repeated visits made over a decade to desolate parts of Western Rajasthan, the photographs in Gauri Gill's *Notes from the Desert* portray members of various rural communities who inhabit these arid borderlands of India. Nomads and migrants, minorities and peasants, all struggling to sustain themselves and their families, the people pictured are not only territorially marginalized but lead precarious lives, their existences largely spectral, invisible to the majority of Indian society. Shot in dusty black and white, which enhances the stark but beautiful landscape, Gill balances portraiture and performance; some images are spontaneous compositions while others are posed, carefully constructed in close collaboration with their subjects. Gill consciously subverts the easy availability of the subaltern subject to the objectifying gaze of the viewer through disruptive acts of camouflage and veiling. Her strategy challenges their marginal status by asserting presence through acts of portraiture while simultaneously acknowledging the fragility of this assertion. Perched high above in a tree, Ismat is barely visible, her body blending into the tree's foliage, while Ghulam Rasool's face all but disappears behind a cloud of thorny branches. In *Jogiyon Ka Dera*, a young boy with arms outstretched, wears a plastic bag on his head, possibly a makeshift mask for a game of make believe, that renders him disconcertingly phantasmal. And in *Urma and Nimli*, one of the two sitters hangs upside down from a tree branch, her head cradled tenderly by the other; this simple gesture of inversion refuses to give the gaze the anchor it desires.



Gauri Gill, 'Ismat, Barmer', from the series *Notes from the Desert*, 1999-2010. Silver gelatin photograph, size variable. Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.



Gauri Gill, 'Urma and Nimli, Lunkaransar, from the series Notes from the Desert, 1999-2010. Silver gelatin photograph, size variable. Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.



Gauri Gill, 'Ghulam Rasool, Barmer', from the series *Notes from the Desert*, 1999-2010. Silver gelatin photograph, size variable. Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.



Gauri Gill, 'Jogiyon Ka Dera, Lunkaransar', from the series *Notes from the Desert*, 1999-2010. Silver gelatin photograph, size variable. Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi.

Bani Abidi

Bani Abidi's *Karachi* (2009) is a love letter of sorts to the cosmopolitan multi-religious city where she grew up. This series of imagined portraits of members of Pakistan's religious minorities—Hindu, Christian and Zoroastrian—is shot on the city's empty by lanes in the fading light of day's end, during the holy month of Ramadan, when the metropolis' Muslim masses have retreated indoors to break their fast. Lit by the soft golden glow of street lamps, each is shown performing a simple domestic act—ironing, reading a newspaper, sorting clothes, plaiting hair—in the middle of the street. Presented as light boxes, their backlit luminosity exaggerating the peculiar and unearthly crepuscular light, these tableaux recast these figures as vespertine creatures, only emerging into view during the luminous limbo of twilight to briefly claim their place in a public space that is increasingly violent and hostile to religious difference. However, facing away from us, and hard to resolve in the failing light, they remain inaccessible, their presence withheld. Pakistan's inability to guarantee equal rights for all its citizens, regardless of religion, arguably a failure of political vision, is presented as an insurmountable problem of perception.



Bani Abidi, 'Pari Wania, 7:42 pm, 22 August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi'. From 'Karachi – Series 1', 2009. Duratrans lightbox, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and Green Cardamom, London.



Bani Abidi, 'Jerry Fernandez, 7:45 pm, 21 August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi'. From 'Karachi – Series 1', 2009. Duratrans lightbox, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and Green Cardamom, London.



Bani Abidi, 'Ashish Sharma, 7:44 pm, 23 August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi'. From 'Karachi – Series 1', 2009. Duratrans lightbox, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and Green Cardamom, London.

Murtaza Vali is Brooklyn-based critic, art historian and curator. He is a contributing editor for Ibraaz.org and ArtAsiaPacific, also publishes regularly in Artforum.com, ArtReview, Art India and Bidoun, and recently co-edited Manual for Treason, a multilingual publication commissioned by Sharjah Biennial X (2011).

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