REality in dreams

NANDINI NAIR

With her new exhibition, Blue Book, currently on in New Delhi, well known photographer Dayanita Singh muses on her move from black and white to colour.

With “Blue Book”, Indian viewers get to see Dayanita Singh’s photographs in colour for the first time. Known for her evocative black and white frames, this well known Delhi-based photographer’s work has won praise and awards from London to New York. She works with Frith Street Gallery, London, and publishes only with the prestigious Steidl. Recently, she was awarded the Prince Claus Award for 2008 by the Government of The Netherlands, for “introducing a new aesthetic into Indian photography”.

With “Blue Book”, mounted at Nature Morte, New Delhi, Dayanita explores a new language, moving away from portraits and objects in black and white to industrial landscapes in colour. Her images are born from reality but distilled in a dream. Usually reserved at interviews, Dayanita takes considerable time and effort to answer questions about the current exhibition.

Having mastered the art of photographing people and objects, what drew you to capturing industries?

The challenge was to see if one could take a subject as sterile as industry and make it
evoke an emotion. The combination of the two unfamiliars gave me the blue book with a new language.

The works have no information — like captions — precisely because I think the “where and when” of photography gets in the way of your experience of the image. And I was not making a documentation of Indian industry.

The industrial landscape was a completely unfamiliar but I was mesmerised by it. It is breathtaking when you stand on top of a 54-metre tower and look down at the world. The sheer expanse of land, as far as the eye can see and in the middle of it this manufacturing plant was like nothing I had seen before.

**Through the use of blue, are you talking about India’s economic growth?**

No. India or industry was far from my mind and I do not let my work get preoccupied with social concerns. This much I learned very early on in my career. I made the choice to be a photographer and not an activist. I do not believe photography can change social situations. And as a well-meaning photographer I have actually harmed a social situation while trying to help. It’s another skill to be an activist and a full time one. And not every image in the show is from India!

**As your first colour exhibition in India, can you describe the change from black and white to blue?**

As a photographer, especially living largely in India, it’s impossible not to think about colour. But I always thought there was nothing more for me to do with colour and stayed with black and white. Great masters like Raghubir Singh, Raghu Rai, Mahendra Sinh developed their own strong languages for colour. Besides I was always concerned about the notion of how photography can transform the mundane, the expected, and create something evocative. How would I find this language in colour?

While I was at the first factory, the sun had set. I was predictably shooting in black and white but I had some colour film with me. I tried it and found a blue cast on my contact sheets. I was using daylight film and after sunset the colour temperature changes and for a few minutes the film gets this exaggerated blue tone. I was very drawn to it, to its references, to its melancholy, to its coldness and once again to absence. And the fact that it was a limitation of daylight film was important to me. I knew this was the first step to getting away from colour as it is seen in photography. I continued and two years later have the blue book.

**Would you divide your work into a pre-Goa period (with people) and a post-Goa period (without people)? What brought about the change?**

Absolutely. Until the full moon of August in 1999, photography to me meant people. But in Goa, spending time with a writer friend, I began to photograph little details, more as little notes for him, things he would have liked to see but could not: A chair, a crockery
cabinet, a display of family photographs and empty rooms. All this while, for myself, I still made portraits of the living inhabitants.

Once when I was photographing Mrs. Braganza, she left the room to answer her phone. I was irritated at the disturbance but as I looked though the viewfinder I sensed the room was busier than when she was there. That is when I started to photograph these empty rooms peopled by unseen generations. Some that you saw in “Privacy” (Steidl 2003) but in two years, I made a small limited edition book of “Chairs” (Steidl 2005)

You use objects to tell about the "resident spirits" of the place. Do you feel that objects are more authentic than people?

I don’t think it is about authenticity or the pose, but I do feel objects that have been used for a few decades take on a personality. A chair, especially if it has sat in the same place, seems to embody the grandfather who always sat in it. Beds even more so. In Benares, one sees many beds of religious people turned into shrines.

Your projects in hand?

My next book is Dream Villa, a book of posters. It is a landscape that exists in my head. A world where nothing is as it seems to be. It appears only at night and is lit by existing artificial lights. The moon is just a backdrop. We will show this work in January 2010. The work has no geography, it appears in London, Florence and Calcutta. Once again, it is like a score in my head and I could find it on my next trip to Sussex.

The exhibition runs till

March 7 in New Delhi.

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