

Art of here and now

2 min read . Updated: 02 Jul 2010, 09:57 PM IST

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Documentary photography" sounds like a redundant term—if we consider that basically all photography is documentary in nature. After all, we paint to create something that is beautiful and pleasing to the eye, whereas we take a photograph primarily to “capture” or record something—a person, a building, a waterfall. The question of how to make the picture pretty only comes later.

But then photography is also an art form. And much of photography does concern itself with beauty and style.

What distinguishes “documentary photography” is its primary focus on recording objects and events. That includes photojournalism, and also images that are documentary but then go beyond it in some manner—they could be a powerful set of photos that make a larger point or they could evoke a certain mood or feeling.



“The four photographers are more like four artists,” says Krishnamachari. “They are all very passionate (about their work).” What brings them together, according to him, is that they are all “conceptually sound”.

Gill spent over a decade shooting photographs of people in the parched and sandy Barmer district of Rajasthan and mounted a show in March in New Delhi, titled Notes from the Desert, capturing different facets of their lives—daily routines, as well as special events such as births and marriages. Just 11 of those images feature in the BMB show. Gill sees the project as a “document” because the photos have been shot “in particular places, in particular time and with particular people”. Her subjects—young and old—have posed for some of these black and white images, while others are candid shots of groups and individuals. All of them feel completely artless though, as if shot by a technically competent photographer, but one who is not an “artist”. But the breadth and scope of her decade-long endeavour points to an original vision, one which seeks to make rural people visible to the more privileged urbanites, while also charting a personal journey that, in her words, is “contradictory, fragmented and not neat capsules of anything”.

Krishnamachari says he selected the photographers for their simple and natural approach to a project. This holds as true for Vilasini as it does for Gill. The three photos by him that are on display in the show are marked by simplicity and a piercing eye. There is a hybrid sign on a public wall that combines Hindu, Muslim and Christian symbols in a mordant display of secularism in the service of public hygiene—the sign is meant to deter those tempted to urinate against the wall; there is a forlorn plaster-of-Paris Gandhi on an empty street, his legs terminating in stumps instead of feet; and there is an Ambedkar statue, recognizable by the attire and the pose, with the whole upper half missing, as if neatly sliced off by a big knife.

While Gill’s images make themselves felt gradually, evoking very different lives and rhythms, Vilasini’s photos grab immediately—each a sharp, funny and depressing comment on the here and now.

“I frame the works,” Vilasini says, by which he means that he has captured sights he chanced upon and then framed and hung them, so to speak. “If I were to create this—the Gandhi statue, for instance—they would beat me up.” What, according to Krishnamachari, distinguishes the photos in the show from photojournalism is the photographers’ interest in the history behind each work. The context in Gill and Vilasini’s works, whether remote or immediate, points to both insight and empathy.

Docu Tour will be on display at Gallery BMB, Queens Mansion, GT Marg, Fort, Mumbai, from 5 July-7 August. For details log on to www.gallerybmb.com