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'Human' - the 10th edition of Prix Pictet at the V&A, London

Gauri Gill from India wins the prestigious prize this year, as the 2023 theme 'Human' brings together images from a shortlist of 12 thoughtful photographers from 11 countries.

by [Zahra Khan](#) | Published on : Oct 12, 2023



The Prix Pictet, established by the Pictet Group in 2008, centres around issues of **sustainability**, a befitting focus for the current international climate. A different theme is chosen each cycle, and this year's theme *Human* delved into the important relationship between people and the planet, and of humans to one another. Photographers around the world from various professional or creative backgrounds—artists, **photojournalists**, commercial photographers—are nominated and whittled down to a shortlist from which a winner is selected, who receives a monetary prize of CHF100,000 (\$110,400). The independent jury is helmed by David King, formerly a climate advisor to the **United Kingdom** government, and included Sally Mann, last year's prize winner. The presentation will travel to several museums including those in **Istanbul**, **Bangkok**, **Munich** and **Singapore**. It is accompanied by a catalogue published by Hatje Cantz.

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The resulting exhibition at the [Victoria and Albert Museum, London](#), is nuanced, reflective and sublime, but also gritty and diverse, representative of the human experience. The works on display powerfully capture this moment in time and the concerns that are pervading the consciousness of the photographers and their subjects. [Migration](#), marginalised communities, indigenous populations, [climate change](#), poverty, education, war, and mysticism are just a few of the themes layered and interwoven through the presented images. Overarching them are the shared experiences that create community, and determine, for many, what it means to be human.

The [photographs](#) on display and accompanying statements are only a fraction of the research, time, and energy that these projects have evidently demanded. Most projects have been years in the making, with photographers slowly developing trust and understanding with community members, in localities where they were outsiders, or photographing their own experiences at home.

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Jannat, Barmer, 1999—ongoing, Gauri Gill
Image: Courtesy of Gauri Gill and James Cohan, New York

[Gauri Gill's](#) winning project *Notes from the Desert* (1999-ongoing) comprises photographs of rural [Rajasthan](#). They are raw and poignant, printed in black and white. This engagement began when she initially photographed Rajasthani village schools for an unsuccessful news story in 1999. Her work spans periods of immersion within the locality and is representative of the relationships she has formed. Gill's photographs highlight immense grace within extreme poverty and dire circumstances faced by marginalised communities. In *Urma and Nimli, Lunkaransar* (1999-ongoing), one little girl hangs upside down from a tree, while her friend holds her close. Interrupted during play, both girls gaze directly at the camera, eyes clear and trusting, their clothes are threadbare and their faces have dust on them. The strength of Gill's work lies in her familiarity with her subjects—both with the communities and the localities—and the understanding and knowledge she developed of crop patterns, weather cycles, and effects of outbreaks of disease, among other challenges.



Untitled #1, 2015-20, Hoda Afshar
Image: Courtesy of Hoda Afshar and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

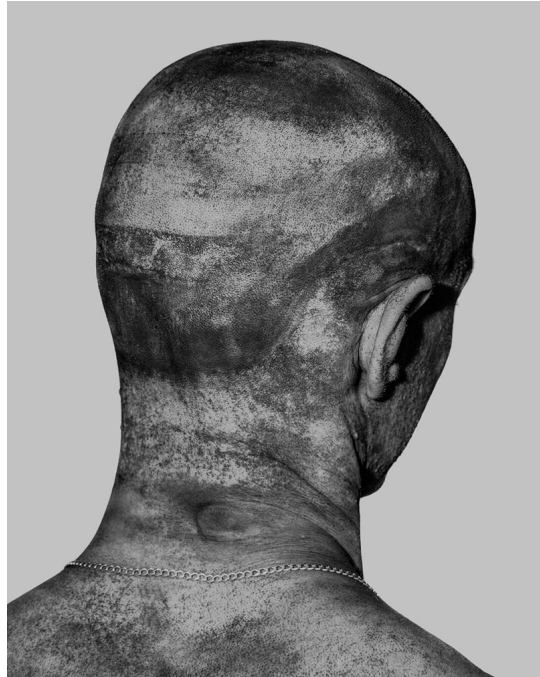
Also interested in investigating customs and localities to which she was a stranger is Hoda Afshar. Her series *Speak the Wind* (2015-20) explores the mystical legends and rituals on the Strait of Hormuz where there is an ancient belief that the winds can cause possession and illness. The belief originated in the Middle Ages when slaves from East Africa were captured and brought to the region by Arab traders. Interested in the movements of people and legends and capturing the invisible, Afshar's photographs present beliefs and knowledge that have been absorbed by the local culture and perhaps by the region itself. *Untitled #15* (2015-20) depicts a glittering river of orange-gold, shimmering in the heat and the wind.



Hamlet Devastated, 2022, Federico Rios Escobar
Image: Courtesy of Federico Rios Escobar

Other projects were extremely physically and emotionally taxing like that of Federico Rios Escobar who traversed Latin America to Central America, as his subjects crossed from country to country, through miles of jungle, hoping desperately to cross into the United

States. *Paths of Desperate Hope* (2022), a particularly moving body of work, shows exhausted people amongst thick foliage, craggy rocks, and rushing water—the beauty and danger of nature—on their journey towards what they hope is a better future.



Miner, 2017, Michał Łuczak
Image: Courtesy of Michał Łuczak

Several photographers focus on personal and difficult experiences at home. Michał Łuczak's submission *Extraction* (2016-23), shows the effects of coal mining upon the landscape and the people living in his hometown in **Poland**. Gera Artemova's *War Diary* (2022) captures her experience of living through the Russian invasion of **Ukraine**. The works of both photographers are subtle. Artemova's photographs, in particular, are delicate as she captures moments, gestures of familial life, nature, and fragments of the very real and horrifying backdrop of war.



(L) *Fragment of a Fresco from Saint Sophia Cathedral (11th Century)*, Kyiv (R) *Hand of My Son Mykhail, Vyhraiv Village, Cherkasy Oblast*, 2022, Gera Artemova
Image: Courtesy of Gera Artemova

Interlaced throughout the exhibition are the concerns of **community building** and establishing a legacy of transformation for generations to come. This is beautifully explored in the work of Siân Davey and Vasantha Yoganathan. During **COVID**, Davey cultivated a garden of wildflowers and indigenous plants. She and her family invited neighbours to enjoy the garden, creating a space for gathering, healing, and celebration. Her resulting body of work, *The Garden*, portrays that sense of celebration. Yoganathan's

project, *Mystery Street* (2022) was created during the summer of 2022 in New Orleans, a city devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and it explores childhood and the ability of children to play, through gestures, repetitions and friendships. The vivid photographs present simple, uncomplicated moments of young people on the cusp of life. Photographs of long summer afternoons of freedom are nostalgically familiar.



Untitled, 2022, Vasantha Yoganathan
Image: Courtesy of Vasantha Yoganathan

The 12 shortlisted artists have recorded the pulse of a world in flux—struggling with the overwhelming results of climate change, disease, economic disasters, wars, and relentless greed. And yet, they relate moments of brightness, like the fireflies referenced in the photographs of Yael Martínez. On their journey through Latin America, Federico Rios Escobar said, “Amid the horrors, we witnessed countless acts of kindness,” and that is what this exhibition celebrates: the gestures of empathy that build community and what it is to be human.



Abuelo Estrella, 2021, Yael Martínez
Image: Courtesy of Yael Martínez, Magnum Photos and Patricia Conde Galería, Mexico City

Other shortlisted photographers include Alessandro Cinque, Ragnar Axelsson, Richard Renaldi, and Vanessa Winship.



Before mining arrived in Ayaviri, Puno region, local people sold their cheese and milk all over Peru. Due to water pollution and drought, cows' milk declined in quantity and quality, and the produce is increasingly difficult to sell, 2017, Alessandro Cinque

Image: Courtesy of Alessandro Cinque

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Zahra is a curator of contemporary South Asian art. She is the Creative Director of Foundation Art Divvy. She led and curated the inaugural official Pavilion of Pakistan at the Venice Biennale 2019, Manora Field Notes. Zahra is a graduate of UPenn and received a Master's from SOAS, London.

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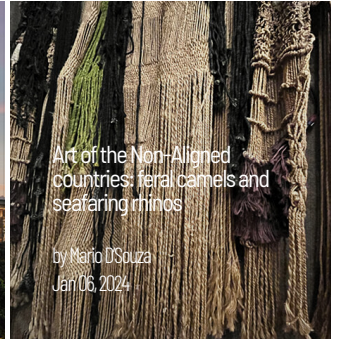
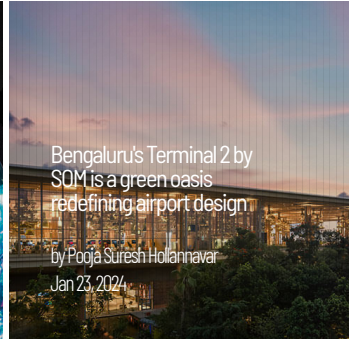
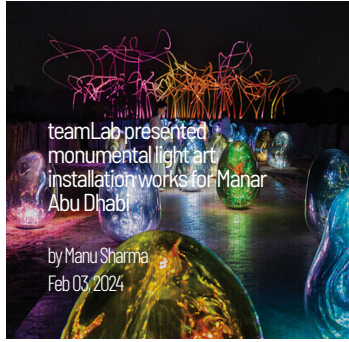
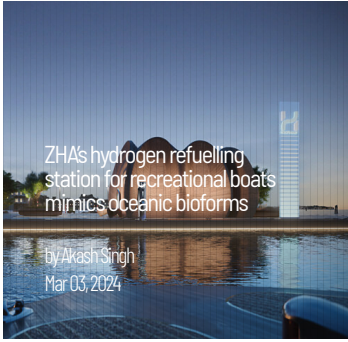
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