

More than a thousand words

Four artists use photography as a medium to explore the hidden, relive the past, unearth new meanings and give documentation a new definition

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THE HISTORY of photographs assigns several theories to the field of photography, one of its main aspects being documentation. Docu Tour, curated by Bose Krishnamachari, explores photography as a medium of documentation. Recording life, events, society, politics, change, and history, four artists — Anup Mathew Thomas, Gauri Gill, Shankar Natarajan and Vivek Vilasini — exhibit various aspects of the art of documentation.

Shankar Natarajan initially began his career as a professional photographer, creating archives of Indian Contemporary Art for various art galleries and institutions. Photographs, portrays what Natarajan ended up documenting — constantly changing exhibition spaces, galleries and the sudden increase in creation of Indian art over the past five years as compared to the 90's. This series emphasises this vastness through the expanse of “selected works” displayed in the exhibition. The viewer cannot escape the impact of the abundant images of art within art that confronts them in the form of thousands of images displayed in a simplistic collage-like manner. The standard format of the photographs in Photographs “equalises everyone, without one artist being privileged” in this display and thereby making Natarajan the primary artist of the creation.

Recording events and preserving memory, the process of documentation through photographs conserves changing spaces, political scenarios, architecture and landscapes. Anup Mathew Thomas’ photographic documentation on his father, Wellbasically this is about Thomas Jacob, is again a compilation of hundreds of images (five hundred) but to create a dialogue and break the monotony, a double channel digital slideshow runs facing each other. This work for the artist as a documentation of time with family and “a shift away from a conclusive method of only two to three images” to record memory. Four prints in the exhibition, a part of his series View from Conolly’s plot extend Anup Mathew Thomas’ documentation from family to the exploration of Kerala's changing landscape in a historical, political and socio-cultural context.

The house, close to Chertala town in Kerala, is visible from the main road leading to the highway. It was split in two after a division of property using a concrete cutter.

Society functions on documenting various aspects of our lives through photographic memory. Gauri Gill’s photographs in Docu Tour are drawn from a series — Notes from the Desert — covering eleven years of visiting friends in rural Rajasthan. Breaking the stereotypical association of colour with Rajasthan, Gill’s photographs in black and white document the unjust and unequal society within communities and the spaces we live in. Gill describes her series as “various portraits of friends, with varying degrees of performance, from the most spontaneous to the more elaborate. I am interested in both self representation and intimacy, or the relationship between me and the people in the pictures. The picture of Ismat is posed in a sense, because she was very aware that I was taking the picture, but it is also about the environment she is in naturally, the specific facts of why she is in the tree at that moment — to collect fodder for her goats, and her relationship and shared history with me that allowed that picture to happen.”

Vivek Vilasini’s photographs in their large format have deep historical and political undertones. Exploring the realm of public spheres the artist opens up areas for viewers to reinvent the meaning of these images and spaces. Documenting documentation, the statues one

sees in Vilasini's works overlook their potential to reflect their initial message and intention. Gandhi Street illustrates a statue of Gandhi where his feet have been cemented under to accommodate a pavement for the public. The artist narrates that, "once something is in a public sphere, it is as though a collective unconscious has created it". As an artist, he operates as a witness to what has been created in a public space, and by displaying it in another public space (the gallery), the image is re-contextualised and framed for further discussion by the viewers.

Docu Tour's issues range from families, friends and culture, to social, political and historical influences in our lives. Exploring the hidden, reliving the past, projecting events and unearthing new meanings, the participating artists' capture time in their intended frames. Bound together with photography as a medium, the exhibition tours the contrasting aspects in the field of documentation.

(Docu Tour, curated by Bose Krishnamachari at Gallery BMB in Mumbai is on view till 14th August)



NOTES FROM THE DESERT: Gauri Gill



GANDHI STREET: Vivek Vilasini



PHOTOGRAPHS (2006-2010): Shankar Natarajan



AMBASSADORS: Anup Mathew Thomas



INSTALLATION VIEW: Vivek Vilasini

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