

THE CARAVAN

Beyond Photoshop

The exhibition works as a showcase for the genre of documentary photography, but the images need not be transformed into fine art

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01 August 2010



In Gill's work, the dry, dusty bleakness of Rajasthan comes across all the more stark through monochrome.

GAURI GILL

IN AN AGE WHEN PHOTOSHOP has become a commonly used verb, the idea of a photograph documenting reality is almost quaint. It seems photography now is all about manipulation, whether it's at the early stages of framing a photograph or later when it's adjusted, or photoshopped, on a computer. In the case of *Docu Tour*, curated by Bose Krishnamachari, presently on display at Gallery BMB in Mumbai, there's an additional layer of adjustment. According to the gallery handout, the exhibition "seeks to explore various formal strategies that are employed to transform the photo document into an artwork." This time, instead of the subject, it is the photograph itself that is being manipulated so that it belongs in a gallery. As documentation, these photographs belong in newspapers, catalogues and photo albums. Instead, they are in the white cube of the gallery, fashioned into art.

The four photographers who have contributed to *Docu Tour* have little in common. Although Vivek Vilasini and Gauri Gill's photographs are shot in black and white, Vilasini's are large-format photographs and the contrast is cranked up to make the darker tones more emphatic. Gill's, on the other hand, are smaller and look as though they've been bleached. Anup Mathew Thomas' two sets of photographs appear in *Docu Tour*, one a colour series based in Kerala and the other a collection of almost candid photographs of his family. Shankar Natarajan's work in the show is a large installation, made up of photographs he's taken since 2006.

Vilasini's three photographs are the first works the viewer sees upon entering the gallery. Their size makes them seem like windows looking out at the city. For those familiar with Vilasini's style, the gentle humour and ironic tone will be familiar. A headless figure clutches the Constitution in 'Unconstitutional.' 'Do Not Urinate Here' shows the familiar site of a wall with religious symbols painted upon it as deterrents to desperate bladders. But Islam's star and crescent moon, the Christian crucifix and the Hindu Om are in a crowd of stains and garbage, relegated to being part of the ugly clutter of modern India. In 'Gandhi Street,' a kitschy statue of the father of the nation stands in front of a building's gates. He looks like he is about to leave the building (like Elvis, perhaps) but is rooted to his spot because the statue has no feet. It's as though the cement has sucked him in so that all he can do is stand in an abandoned street, unable to escape this world that has turned him into a caricature of himself.