

Tehelka

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THE AH-HA NUDGE

In a rare interview, Dayanita Singh speaks to Jane Rankin-Reid about the isolation she prizes

What are your inspirations?

In India, it's writing more than art. The books I've read this year have really shifted something in me and this definitely helped crystallise 'Go Away Closer', both the exhibition and the book.

It is a very emotional theme; can you explain your approach?

I began looking at a number of images from 2005-06 and saw this go-away-closer-like imagery and thought, "Oh my god, I've seen this before". Work from a major creative shift in 2000 also shared this common thread.

Are you comfortable hearing artistic references applied to your work?

Yes; for me, influences start from the time you're born. Until recently, Guru Dutt's imagery in his films was a strong inspiration, especially the lighting he used. But lately it's been these marvellous stories.

You're known as India's most important contemporary photographer. What makes your work so different?

I've been incredibly lucky in the people I've met in my life, friends but also professional gallery owners, great publishers and writers. My strength comes from them, rather than peers here, whether in photography or fine art. Through these deep connections, I've learned to trust my own voice rather than editors or galleries. So this book is a sort of open letter to myself and beloved friends. We all do what we do for ourselves and the people we love. Along the way, if there's a larger appreciation, that's great. But if not, you can't start making work for appreciation, or in India's case, for the market, or what some gallerist tells you will sell.

'I want to experiment with whether people can read pictures or not'

Are you working in isolation here?

Absolutely! To my great advantage, I'm isolated from the photography and art worlds here but with amazing support from elsewhere. In India, until recently, if you weren't working for newspapers, you were working for photo agencies abroad or with international papers. That's wonderful but it forces a certain way of seeing the world. I wanted to be true to myself, to find my own voice. It took time to gather that confidence.

Your exacting standards are unique in contemporary Indian photography. What is this rigour based on?



Visions of silence: From Singh's 'Go Away Closer'

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Most Indian photographers don't seem terribly concerned about proper archiving, what the edition size is, or what the gallery is saying in terms of the numbers of editions, or if an artist is represented by a reputed gallery or is just free floating. Most of all, no one here seems to recognise the differences between a magazine picture, an exhibition and a book. But photographs don't necessarily work in all three formats. In 'Go Away Closer', I've tried to make two very separate things, so the book is not a catalogue for the show, it's a little letter of some kind and the show is something else. It's sometimes a struggle for people here to understand that standards are worth fighting for.

Why no titles or dates in your work?

I'm tired of people looking to photography for information. The moment I tell you it's Hampi, you start thinking of your last trip there and where you stayed. Instead, I want people to engage with the images directly.

So, you want viewers to actually look at your work?

It's nice not knowing exactly where or what an image is from. I want to experiment with whether people can read pictures or not. So far I've had an incredible response, not from art or photo people but from writers, musicians and lay audiences. They've recognised the craft, they're asking, why haven't we seen prints like these here before? There's almost no silver gelatine printing in India. I do all my exhibition printing in New York for quality and because there's no silver gelatine paper here. But more than that, once you start making editions and selling, you must be very careful about archival controls. If one print goes off, word gets around and your reputation just sinks.

The one thing you don't have to explain to your creative soul mates is your professional standards.

Yes, it's not as though your friends tell you do this or that. Often it's just a little nudge and you think, ah-ah! I didn't think of that. There may be no other dialogue but I still tap into connections of shared inspirations, like an sms message saying: "What would it be like to photograph Delhi in the fog?" In spite of great distances, the inspiration of dialogue is still there and that's very precious to me and my work.

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