



Where Three Dreams Cross

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Where Three Dreams Cross

Whitechapel Gallery, London, January 21–April 11, 2010
Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, June 12–August 22,
2010

Fully illustrated catalog, *Where Three Dreams Cross*, published
jointly by both galleries, 2010

Reviewed by Pratap Rughani

“Where Three Dreams Cross” is a big show, with a big ambition: to substantially recover “another story” of the photographic practices of South Asia. It’s a rich story that’s finely woven with diverse photographic approaches featuring work of photographers from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan through their own lenses, collectively describing a new imaging of the subcontinent. It’s a stunning show on many levels and also deserves plaudits for its generously illustrated catalog, including curators’ perspectives from Sunil Gupta, Kirsty Ogg, Radhika Singh, Hammad Nasar, Shahidul Alam, Iwona Blazwick, and Urs Stahel, plus significant essays from Geeta Kapur, Christopher Pinney, and Sabeena Gadihoke. Its first run sold out quickly and the catalog should soon be established as a significant reference.

There is much here for audiences to discover beyond the iconic images of the subcontinent that many may expect from the circulation, in the wider culture, of star European photographers’ work in South Asia—such as that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Avoiding clichés of suffering, the curation of this exhibition implies its own critique of the epic and timeless “sea of humanity” imagery of many European photographers in South Asia. Instead, working within subcontinental cultures, the particularity of individual vision emerges as photographers create work for their *subjects* rather than for the agendas of policy, photojournalism, anthropology, or outsiders’ collections directed by the norms of another continent. It includes such internationally known South Asian names as Raghubir Singh and Raghu Rai, but features many more who deserve to be known more widely.

The show’s strength flows from the assured photographic practice of the key curatorial team led conceptually by Sunil Gupta, a team who share clear ideas in their embrace of a new indigenous

(but not essentialist) emphasis and the space it can hold for international audiences. This is a welcome shift. Postcolonial perspectives observe that the visual story of the subcontinent in the West has overwhelmingly reduced South Asian subjects to bit-players in their own history.¹ In so doing, the official history of photography has missed important strands such as the more fluid approaches to sexuality on the subcontinent and self-imaging expressed in exhibits such as the eunuch's album from 1880, or Asim Hafeez's *Karachi Lady Boy* sequence, 2007.

The structure of "Where Three Dreams Cross" avoids the predictable (and safer) route of chronology to take us from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Instead, it offers a thematic curation of this diverse body of work under the following categories: The Portrait, The Performance, The Family, The Street, and The Body Politic. Of course these are difficult boundaries to police and there are moments when the slippage can leave visitors wondering quite where their journey in this show is going, but exhibition visitors I met were happy to give themselves up to this exploration and many emerged with the revelation of less familiar visions.

I came away enjoying a stronger sense of relatedness to private and public corners of the subcontinent, with real moments of recognition and connection. In many contexts, the imaging of the cultures of South Asia has too often opened a crevasse between the priorities of outside photographers and the way they frame their subjects. In the hands of many of this show's practitioners, cultural synergies are traveled more simply as viewer and subject share a cultural space. For example, a commonplace Western configuration of the public/private binary simply does not correspond in many South Asian contexts in ways it's assumed to do in the West.

Privacy and intimacy does not always mean having a private space, for example in Shahidul Alam's *Woman Cooking the Family Meal During Bangladesh Floods* (1988), the personal must

be claimed outdoors. In Tapu Javeri's *Mataam* (2002–8) there's a stronger attempt to meet the subjects' eyeline and no sense of "looking down" or judging the observed, which enables and justifies the camera's freer access to ritual.

Through the show, an architectural sense of space is configured. Sequences such as Deepak John Matthew's *Missing Interiors* (2008) identify new strands of what is rightly considered worth photographing, and as he focuses on much that's been ignored or overlooked. Often the visions feel like they are informed by deeply personal responses. Images of buildings seem not to speak of "architecture" as such, but of lived spaces, and even contest the notion of "home." Others offer new patterns and beauty in what might confound the outside eye, such as Dinesh Khanna's *Pillar, Mandvi, Gujarat* (1994) or his handling of color in *Mandir, Ayodhya* (1995), quietly sublimating even as it evokes the turmoil of that place and time.

Part of the strength of the show is its willingness to cross boundaries, including those that historically have divided documentarists and photojournalists from those working with photography as a fine art practice. The work itself suggests this, such as the hand-tinted *Wedding Portrait of an Indian Couple* (c. 1950s, unknown photographer and artist), combining practices that are not neatly separated.

This is a refreshing decision as it allows the show to embrace a broader picture of history and practice in image-making on the subcontinent, and reveals how practitioners and subjects see themselves. In so doing it also offers a place for reflection on curatorial conventions that traditionally observe the (increasingly porous) distinctions that demarcate an understandable but limited set of professional and academic boundaries between documentary, fine art, and photojournalistic work.

There is a fresh closeness in domestic space, for example in the scenes of daily life in Anay Mann's *Series About Neetika* (2005), where the family shares a room while finding their own

singularity in their separate activities. This sense of relatedness in photographic practice becomes literal in Nony Singh's work, enabling audiences to open new doors with captions that share domestic environments, such as "My cousin Gogi, who was very fond of dogs and has had many dog bites" (1958) or "My sister Guddi, posing as Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone With the Wind*" (1962).

Freer of (sometime internalized) constraints, the subaltern and contemporary photographer offers another view. Here is another subcontinent relatively unknown outside. Instead of marveling at cows on the road, T. S. Nagarajan offers the cow seen from *within* the home, framed by an open door while being fed, achieving intimacy in the handling of light and figures framed by shadow, rather than being beguiled by the shock of the strange.

There remains space for what appears "exotic" even to South Asian eyes, including Saibal Das's *Sreerampore* series (2001), featuring circus tigers and contortionists. Bijoy Chowdhury's *The Living God Krishna* (2004) has naturalism in the open, frank gaze of the subject who returns the viewer's gaze with his own question of what we see in the "other."

Some jewels, exploring reflexive elements of photographic practice and the process of production, pretty much span the whole history of the medium, from S. B. Syed's *Young Girl Tinting a Photograph* (silver gelatin, hand-tinted, c. 1850s) to Fawzan Husain's archival prints from 2005, *Mr. Prime Minister* (Dev Anand) or *Yun To Kya Hota I*, which feature portraits of film stars on set or location. This combines with Vivan Sundaram's *Amrita Dreaming 2* (2002), extending the lineage of conceptually rich reflexive work.

The fact that much of the featured work feels new and under-discussed emphasizes how far curatorial practices and exhibition spaces have yet to go to catch up with this hidden history and the explosion of new photographic practices on the subcontinent. The Whitechapel Gallery and Fotomuseum Winterthur have made

important investments in responding to this need by supporting this show. While recognizing the importance of this support, it would be good to see more galleries making the blindingly obvious step of researching, archiving, commissioning, and curating work from significant practitioners of (in this case) the subcontinent to enable a broader mix of audiences, to see themselves reflected as *authors* as well as subjects of the photographic gaze. If this sounds more like policy than art and potentially dull, well it could be, if it were not for the fact that postcolonial insight in this show is married to a rich and underexplored photographic tradition. Get the chemistry right and a whole geography of new shows could lie ahead.

Step out of the Whitechapel Gallery into London's "Banglatown" and the question is more likely to be: How is it that we've had to wait since 1850 for a show like this? The question is equally important for South Asian art institutions to consider, especially at a time when the art market both domestically and internationally remains strong and South Asian economies defy the economic downturn, and there are global audiences hungry to see such work in its own terms.

The show's title, "Where Three Dreams Cross," comes not (as I'd assumed) from the diverging dreams of Independence that threw up borders between Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, but from T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*:

This is the time of tension between dying
and birth

The place of solitude where three dreams
cross

Written in 1930, a generation before Partition, Eliot exhorts us to make an effort of hope and to reconnect. In its own way, "Where Three Dreams Cross" attempts its own reconnection—between continents and time—to South Asia's photographic vivid present and past. In so doing,

the show makes a significant contribution to the huge project of recovering and recognizing the work of South Asian practitioners as authors, rather than blank surfaces inscribed as subjects of Western/modernist/commercial gazes, by turns colonial, consumerist, and orientalist in impulse.

"Where Three Dreams Cross" reaps the riches of emerging from this cultural critique and is well placed to address some of the gaping holes in the stories and traditions of subcontinental photographic aesthetics and practices. With this aspiration comes a kind of Catch-22. How does any survey show maintain its openness to others disputing its "new canon" even as it attempts to create it? The recovery of any selection of images implies the coming of a new narrative and in the process of so doing it's hard to avoid the burden of proposing a new orthodoxy.² This will invite objections, as Sunil Gupta anticipates in his introduction to the photographers selected for the catalog: "There is still a sense that they have to represent where they came from; inevitably this position will in turn be challenged from within by a new generation in the twenty-first century who will have the opportunity to create an indigenous critical position that the current generation do not."³

If there are gaps and quirks in the selection, it seems churlish to carp. More useful would be

to see this show as part of a process that will help unfold the truly global photographic story, one whose current and historical internationalism has even now still to be recovered, supported, and recognized. As such it is an exemplar of what needs to happen for the photographic establishment to catch up with the pluralism of photographic life on the ground.

Notes

- 1 This has been powerfully argued for a generation, since E. W. Said's *Orientalism*. Notable is Salman Rushdie's intervention during a fashion for Indian stories in the UK: "The Raj Revival," *The Observer*, April 1984.
- 2 This conundrum was signaled in the Whitechapel Gallery's recorded symposium on the show, with key contributors and critics acknowledging this inherent tension, including Iftikhar Dadi, Kobena Mercer, Hammad Nasar, and Irit Rogoff.
- 3 *Where Three Dreams Cross*, Whitechapel Gallery and Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2010, p. 12.

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