Dayananda Singh at Gropius Bau: Transcending the Bodily Boundaries of Photographic Experience

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Posted on 27 Mar 2020
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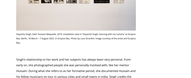
VIEW PROFILE

In the largest institutional retrospective to date of Mumbai based artist Dayanita Singh's oeuvre, Berlin's Gropius Bau presents the Indian photographer's unique practice of transcending the bodily and photographic limits of her two-dimensional medium to create new ways of experiencing the photographic image.

Text C. A. Samir Mal Jadia
Images Courtesy of the artist and Gropius Bau.

Dayanita Singh never desired to be a photographer. Having been the subject of her mother's photographic obsession as a child, in an anecdotal account, she reveals how she decided to become one. As a student of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, she rights: "I did not want to capture a portrait of the person who would become her husband." Her mother had arranged a photo session for her daughter's wedding and will have the same. Angry and disappointed, she visited the house on the end and confronted him, only to find out he was quite open to be photographed any time. That encounter with the photographer would set the ball from the physical and the social concerns women faced in India – marriage, child rearing, and lifestyles – and the photographic medium. Photography allowed Singh the freedom to turn these frames to seek introspection.

Over a decades-long career, Singh has given a third dimension to her photographic practice, creating mobile "museum" work that speaks and narrates possibilities, transcending the boundaries of photography, and bringing the viewer into contact with people in an open archive. There is a great attention and gentle beauty in such installations, portable exhibitions in their own right, in which Singh brings to the collective gaze images of places, objects, and people that now exist beyond the frame. For Singh, photography is just a medium, a raw material she can "twist and turn" as she desires, as she constantly "reassembling the potentials photography is pregnant with".



Dayanita Singh, Land as Land, 1994, installation view in Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany. © Dayanita Singh. Courtesy Dayanita Singh and Gropius Bau and Exhibition Photo: Jens Ziehe.

The New Delhi based Dayanita Singh's inaugural institutional retrospective to date, "Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera" at Gropius Bau in Berlin, looks at the artist's "genre-defying approach" to photography that has pushed the boundaries of the medium towards multiple dimensions. The unique vision has ongoing span the 1992 Hasselblad Award as the first laureate from South Asia winning the SEK 2,000,000 prize. The exhibition demonstrates the major phases of Singh's career, from her earliest works and key series, to her latest project specially realised for the Gropius Bau show.

Singh's photography "begins and ends with family experience", not only of her own family's connection to the camera, her subjects and the relationship between their bodies and the lens, but also of the family of photographs, the photographic archive, and how these spatial presentations, her constructed architectural environments, bespoke archival structures and artist books can be moved, adapted and re-arranged in different configurations. They make a part of her personal experience through a dialectic, an approach in editing, which constantly re-combines experiences, memories, and images in time and space.

Dayanita Singh, Sidel, Gurgaon, Haryana, 2011, installation view in Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany. © Dayanita Singh. Courtesy Dayanita Singh and Gropius Bau and Exhibition Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Singh's relationship to her work and her subjects has always been very personal. From her first photographic encounter with her mother, photography has been a family enterprise. As she says she refers to her formative years as the documentation that her mother and her fellow musicians are bear in various cities and small towns in India. Singh credits the musician with how she learnt to be an artist, while she closely observed her mother's rigorous practice and deeper discuss on the instrument. The result was the first book, Sher Aasaara: A Photo Essay (1992), published by Sean Sheehan's Photo Gallery. In 2015, Gallerie publishing House Berlin published a facsimile of Sheehan's of the Handmade Aasaara, a limited edition of 1000 copies, which sold out in a few weeks. Sheehan's 1992 companion, the facsimile, the Sher Aasaara Reader and a Facebook Sher Aasaara page.

Dayanita Singh, Sher Aasaara Reader, 2015, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Dayanita Singh, Sher Aasaara, 1992, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Her series on Alexia Ahmed also evolved out of an intimate relationship with her subject. Singh met Ahmed, a musician, in Paris both in 1989. Being accompanied for the concert Ahmed, dressed based a third gender community, later becoming an outcast and going to live in a brothel in Kolkata, Singh's work with Ahmed, which lasted for 20 years, developed deep friendship and trust, which came through in detailed photo-based portraits, biographical, autobiographical, and fictional photo-books, and the first work that resulted from their intimacy, Alexia Mahogany (2007) is the most recent piece, comprising 25 photo-montages of manually cut images of Ahmed and pasted onto prints of other events, such as Pinaya (1992–2003), Alexia on Chowringhee (1992) and the Alexia (2008–2011).

From the very beginning of her career, Singh saw photography merely as a raw material to build something with. Her artists sound is transcendental the indivisibility of a photographic prints to find an expanded expression in formats that transect books, installations, and performances. Her photographic practice, which has been in constant and ongoing adjustment, transcendental in form and content, which has been in constant ongoing series accretion-like books that utilise her artistic sensibilities. Such books is a photographic journal of Singh's travels in 2010 to Kyoto, Sengoku, Mumbai, Ahmadabad, Varanasi, and Pathanmadhapuram, and has as a subject a person who accompanied her on her travels, Sadhu Ram, a Rajasthani Bhopa, a musician who sings and plays the ancient Indian lyre, Ravana Hatta. Ravana Hatta is presented in the form of Bard Cabinet Museum (2008/2011), with each accordion-look hung on the wall in track frames.

Dayanita Singh, Sadhu Ram, 2011, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Dayanita Singh, Alexia Mahogany, 2007, installation view in Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany. © Dayanita Singh. Courtesy Dayanita Singh and Gropius Bau and Exhibition Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Gropius Bau follows an evolutionary trajectory of Singh's classic, marking important breakthroughs in her career. A major one happened with Go Away Closer (2007), a small book comprising 30 small frontal, square photographs, accompanied by frontal portrait of the artist. It was with this project – and particularly with the famous shot of a girl in a bed with her dog – that Singh's work became more "open" and "free" in her own words. In the same way, Singh deliberate and decisive the combination, her creative editing process, which would transform her works and offer new perspectives and ways of engaging with her images.

For Singh, the book is "central to photography", as she once elaborated with Sean. "This will is there now, it may not be in the future, we don't know. But the book is critical, because it is a tactile, very private experience. Exhibitions come and go, but the book stays forever."

Dayanita Singh, Go Away Closer, 2007, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Dayanita Singh, Go Away Closer, 2011, installation view in Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany. © Dayanita Singh. Courtesy Dayanita Singh and Gropius Bau and Exhibition Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Singh's bookbinding has progressed from her first Sonali handmade exquisite to Concertina Portraits, Sudan Museum and Museum Museum. Many of these books have been created in collaboration with Gottingen based Steidl Verlag – its deep Zines (2007), Sir-Lanka (2008), Museum of Flower (2010) and Museum Museum (2012), among others.

Her recent books are as dense as exhibitions, a portable museum and an original artwork. Museum Museum includes Singh's nine museums in one collection of nine individual books museums, each contained in a handmade box with a unique cover, which can be unfolded and installed as and when desired. Meanwhile, Sulttan Museum (2015) contains 15 handmade boxes, each with a unique cover, and a dedicated shelf, which can be unfolded. The large, elaborate Museum of Museum, closer in structure of the archive of objects, each with a different form and back cover. This format allows the work to reveal anywhere, and the entire Museum of Museum to be displayed and unfolded on the wall, in a variety of ways.

Dayanita Singh, Museum of Museum, 2012, installation view in Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany. © Dayanita Singh. Courtesy Dayanita Singh and Gropius Bau and Exhibition Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Dayanita Singh, Museum of Museum, 2012, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Dayanita Singh, Museum of Museum, 2012, © and image courtesy of the artist.

With Sir Mawson (2012) and its images of architecture, Singh sampled the series of works that could be seen as a direct dissection of the book format, but it was the Museum of Chance (2013) that marked the turning point. The museums are portable book sculptures that contain photographs, which can be hung on the walls and displayed in a variety of ways, such as a grand scale set up, the classical and traditional way. The handmade architecture Museum of Chance has 150 images shot across three decades, showing bodies dancing, moving, in intimacy, as well as poses, physical objects, or sculptures, and architecture and memories that can be re-arranged and revisited.

The photographs are almost entirely shot in black-and-white in an attempt to create something "timeless" that with colors would be impossible to achieve. Working in black-and-white, everything is viewed in a distant context, and the colours just take over." and explains, "There is one warm towards the end of the exhibition that displays a beautifully aged, sepiatone wood frame, covering hundreds of years of photographs arranged in a kingdom of kings. With Bed Drama and Bedroom Gallery, these packages are mysterious, secretive in their contents, wrapped in gifts of time.

The archive holds a special significance for Singh, as of her works tactily. During the 1980s, she would visit her family photographer in Ahmadabad, and would see the archive of analogue contact sheets in the process of editing her work and finding gem for her early photographs from the 1980s. In the latest project Left Bed (2015), Singh has collected images from this early period, some made even before she called herself an artist. Made few large contact sheets hanging on the wall, twelve wooden panels contain 1000 photographs, and the viewer can walk through the exhibition space and see how we can catch a glimpse of each of what is to come in Singh's work over the next decades. Of her curator, including her original, collected images of human connections and unfamiliar places.

Dayanita Singh, Left Bed, 2015, © and image courtesy of the artist.

Dayanita Singh: Dancing with my Camera
10 March – 7 August 2012
Gropius Bau, Berlin

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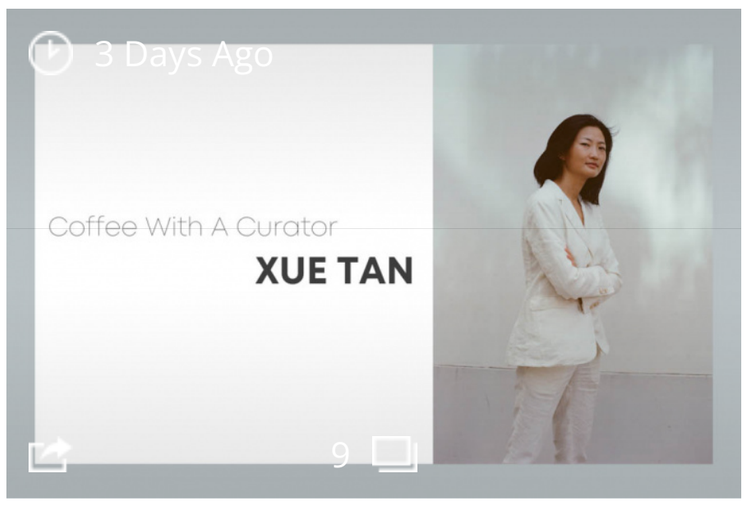

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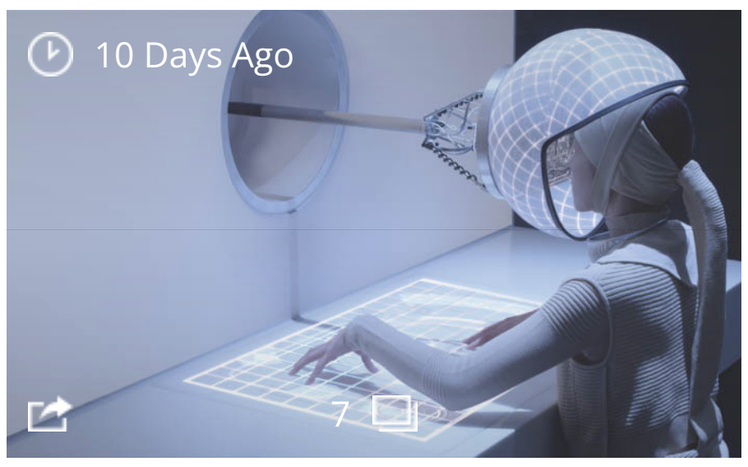

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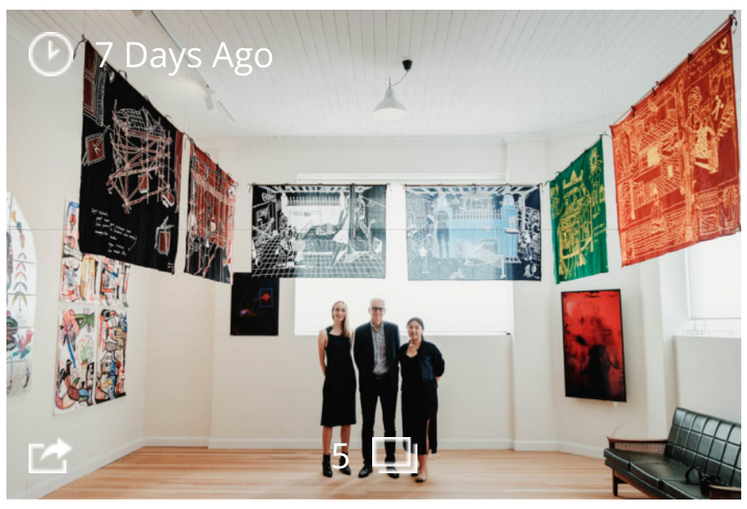

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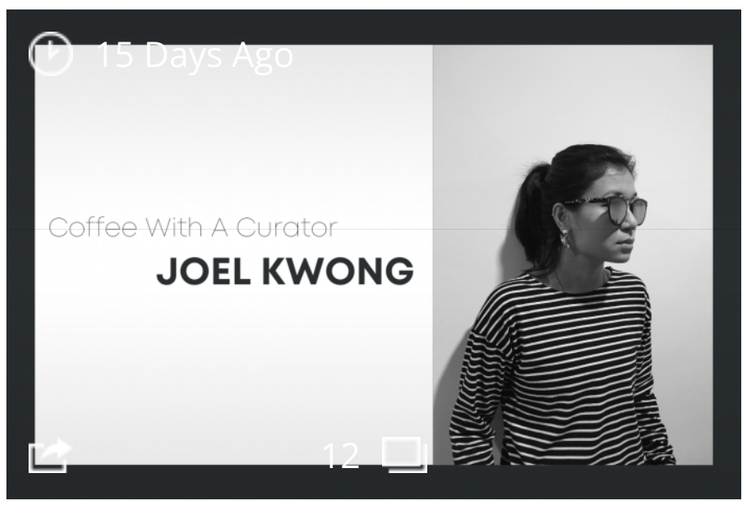

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