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Memories of a bygone era

Ornella D'Souza meets commercial photographer Karan Kapoor, who debuts with his first photography exhibition in Mumbai

Ornella D'Souza



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At 54, Karan Kapoor, the second child of actors Shashi Kapoor and the late Jennifer Kendal, is the spitting image of his father — the same dashing looks and boyish charm, though minus the acting flourish with forgettable roles in Loha and Sultanat. But, unlike most of the Kapoor clan, acting was never his first love. Photography was. And so this Kapoor is back in the limelight with a debut five-city exhibition in India.

Evocatively titled Time and Tide, the exhibition, on at Tarq gallery in collaboration with Tasveer, features 45 black-and-white, silver gelatin prints of aged Anglo-Indians in Calcutta and Bombay in the 1980s and the Catholic community and landscape of Goa in the untouched-by-commercialisation 90s.

Earthy in varying tones of grey, these images are quite contrary to the slick, glossy images the London-based commercial photographer shoots on assignments with ad agencies and lifestyle brands. Abhishek Poddar of Tasveer chanced upon Kapoor's photographs and roped in creative director Nathaniel Gaskell to curate and make this exhibition possible.

"This generation and their homes are no more," says Kapoor while discussing his subjects. He shot the Anglo-Indian series during his visits to Calcutta to visit his Anglo-Indian girlfriend when he was 18. Curiosity about his own Anglo-Indian roots led him to the occupants of the Tollygunge old age home who became his friends, their comfort-level visible in the candid frames. "They spoke differently, knew what things were like before independence. It's sad. Most of their kids had migrated and put them in the home," he recalls, pointing to an endearing photograph of a Mr Carpenter playing the banjo and his wife attempting a dance. In Mumbai, Kapoor found more intriguing subjects at the Cheshire Home in Andheri — an old man, for instance, Stanley Peters who'd wear his wedding suit everyday after his wife passed away. Did their stories of loneliness and depression ever rub on him? "No. It was pure fascination. But as Anglo-Indians, they felt out of place in India." Did he feel like an outsider? "No. Bombay always felt home," he quips.

The Goa series unveils an unknown side to the filmi Kapoors. Shashi and his wife Jennifer Kendal fell in love with Goa on their very first visit to Baga in 1970. It became their vacation spot every Christmas and New year. They'd rent the same bungalow, called 'The Love house', every year. It had a heart on its roof done by previous tenants who were hippies.

Kapoor and his siblings Kunal and Sanjna would attend mass, burn the 'old man', steal coconuts, put someone's bed out to the field or motorcycle on a tree... "Then run before the cops came." On January first, spicy clams and chickpeas curry and Portuguese songs filled the air. "Once Dad had too much beer and had to be carried home."

His friends, the locals, feature in his photographs — their Portuguese-styled homes, lives as brass musicians, semi-clad fishermen or solemn priests, ceremonies such as blessing the corn, confession, weddings, and



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three kings feast. "That's Shabin, my neighbour in Goa, quite the gunda (gangster), now dead"; "That's Dona Rosa, Mario Miranda's neighbour from Loutolim, whose fish-curry was to die for. I spent a lot of time at his place."

His parallel life in 70s Bombay was similarly devoid of media glare at Malabar Hill. "Mum used to take us to Breach Candy on the number 63 bus. After school, we'd swim, ride horses, play rugby. Mum enrolled us for guitar and piano lessons, none of us had any talent.... oh, Kunal could play the piano well," he chuckles. From dad Shashi, he's imbibed punctuality, complete work commitments and appreciate the arts and treat the help right. And quirks like the chamcha room. "It was a guest room where we'd send all visitors, my friends or film industry people. It was the only air-conditioned room at home," he laughs. Kapoor's last vacation in Goa was 2006. Sophisticated fishing gear and barrage of hotels put him off.

Despite learning filmmaking as Govind Nihalani's apprentice, sporadic acting and modelling as posterboy for the Bombay Dyeing ad, Kapoor always returned to photojournalism. He spent hours holed up in English photographer Adrainne Stevens' dark room at Breach Candy, developing prints." Kapoor took to commercial photography in London on starting a family in the late 90s.

Again he's back to black-and-white narratives. More such montages expected? "I do have some ideas," he affirms.

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Published Date: Sep 25, 2016

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