

ART

Reality reimagined

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Photographer Waswo X. Waswo's seemingly simple, posed portraits straddle a fine line between painting and photography

“Photography is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality” reads Alfred Steiglitz’s quote on Waswo X. Waswo’s website.

It is this reality, the “reality reimagined” as he puts it, that Waswo explores in his trademark studio portraits. Much like sketches from a travel journal that stem from personal experiences, these images are primarily digital photographs, later hand-painted by traditional artists to arrive at the final image. Memory dictates most of what gets re-created, but the end product is a layered mix of the multiple pasts and the many presents combined.

“The process helps the images hover between the traditional and the contemporary, much like rural India does today,” says Waswo. Harking back to colonial era pictorialism and to traditional Indian portrait studios in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as also to the recent past of his own travels and sojourns in Rajasthan, these images use subjects from the present to create something unique – one which is both contemporary and archaic at the same time.

Stereotypical or real?

Waswo’s latest book *Photowallah* published by Tasveer brings together portraits from three earlier bodies of work: *A Studio in Rajasthan*, *Gauri Dancers* and *New Myths*, and some new, never seen before images on display at Tarq art gallery. The show was part of the recently concluded Focus Photography Festival.

As fascinating as the images appear to be, one feels compelled to question the photographer’s gaze and what it connotes. “These photographs are strongly connected with the series of miniature paintings that I do with R. Vijay. In the paintings the photographer is pictured as a bungling but sympathetic outsider engaged with the milieu of Rajasthan. The paintings hold more social commentary, but you can’t fully understand the miniatures if they’re not seen in the context of the hand-painted photographs. These are the people that the man in the miniatures clicks along his travels,” says Waswo in an email interaction.

He does not eschew acknowledging the criticism that his work has received in the past for being stereotypical, neo-colonialist and Orientalist. From visiting India back in 1993 as traveler-explorer chancing upon Udaipur quite by accident to having lived and worked in both Udaipur since 2000 and now Varda village a few miles away; from first setting up a darkroom – a failed experiment and now a studio space, Waswo has come a

long way. He says, "This is hardly a survey of the "Peoples of India"; it is a personal story of my life in Udaipur and the people with whom I interact." There is, as he goes on to explain, great risk in indulging in nostalgia, "when the very word 'nostalgia' is thought of as negative in the world of contemporary art." Surely nostalgia in this context might not necessarily mean the same thing to an Indian as that to a Westerner who views India's past as an outsider. But empathy towards another's history will always remain just that – an effort to understand. There is equal pretence in assuming an identity which is not intrinsically your own. And that is what Waswo abstains from doing in spite of being closer to his reality – other than most who have never lived or worked in Rajasthan's towns and villages.

"Viewing image after image makes a grand narrative that raises commonplace people to the level of characters in an intricate novel," says Waswo of his subjects, most of whom are known to him. Keeping aside the larger context of historical perspectives, what stirs the artist in him are the smaller details like expressions, reactions and body language, absorbed in passing, recalled and recreated in detail during the shoot. Working with a dying art form, hand painting, with locals and with the local environment, his oeuvre in that sense is really by the people, for the people. "Throughout my career I've been interested in the notion of slowing people down. I want the viewer to get our hyper-speed world out of their heads, the noise of politics and society, and just look; look deeply and without prejudice. I want the viewer to take the time to quietly absorb the beauty of people. The process that we use helps this."

Sometimes it is also important to appreciate art for art's sake, to work backwards from the end through the means where the destination cannot be deciphered without putting oneself through the journey.

Photowallah is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba in association with Tasveer until April 8

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