

I have immense love for Hinduism, its rituals and stories: artist Waswo X Waswo

American artist Waswo X Waswo talks about his upcoming exhibition. He says the West's idea of India has changed.

ART AND CULTURE Updated: Mar 09, 2017 07:50 IST



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Hindustan Times



Waswo often collaborates with other artists such as Rajesh Soni and Rakesh Vijayvargiya, aka R Vijay, who hand-colour and recreate his photographs as paintings.(HT Photo)

Born in Milwaukee, USA and based in Udaipur, Rajasthan —
photographer Waswo X Waswo's sepia-toned pictures have

garnered much acclaim over the past decade. He often collaborates with other artists such as Rajesh Soni and Rakesh Vijayvargiya, aka R Vijay, who hand-colour and recreate his photographs as paintings. The end result is artwork that is contemporary, but still incorporates an element of nostalgia. At his upcoming show, Photowallah, viewers will be presented with a wide selection of Waswo's photos that were produced at his studio in Udaipur. The exhibition will include prints from three series — A Studio in Rajasthan, Gauri Dancers, and New Myths. Excerpts from an interview:



A lot of your art is centered around Hindu deities...

I wouldn't say a lot, but yes, a few [of my works] have [Hindu deities]. In the current Photowallah exhibition at Tarq, we have an image of Shine Shivan (an Indian artiste) performing as Kali. Shivan visited our studio in the village of Varda (Rajasthan), and he was keen on portraying Kali. In the past, we have also referenced both Krishna and Hanuman, but more in a symbolic way than a spiritual manner, with Krishna representing the playful and flirtatious side of masculinity, and Hanuman showing the aggressive and warlike side of masculinity. But no, I'm not at all spiritual in the 'new age' sense. I have immense love for Hinduism, its rituals, stories and imagery. I don't follow any particular teaching.



© Waswo X. Waswo, Feathers For Sale, 2008, black and white pigment print hand-coloured by Rajesh Soni. (Tasveer)

Many art critics have called you a ‘Gora Sahib’. How does it make you feel?

Some critics seem very prejudiced against me, as I am a white outsider who has gained entrance into the Indian art scene, and for them Indian art has a purely racial definition. Others are well-meaning, but still tend to approach me as a white bossman for whom Rajesh and Rakesh are mere workers. This is far from the truth. There is no contract between the three of us. We act as individuals that connect on an artistic level.

Where do you draw the visual references for your collaborative works?

Nearly all of the photographs and miniatures are fully conceptualised by me, but that isn't to say that Rajesh and Rakesh

do not have their inputs. They often guide me on cultural matters, and also give suggestions on aesthetics. Sometimes, after a shoot, Rajesh sits with me and we discuss which photograph would be the final one. He's got a good eye. When I am having difficulty deciding between two images that I like, it is Rajesh who often picks the final.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Waswo X Waswo: Photowallah will be presented at Tarq, Coloba, from March 9 to March 23. From 11am to 6pm.

Your work sometimes has been criticised for its unconventional style. Does that bother you?

Those critics don't understand the historical part of the posed portrait and the use of backdrops, nor do they understand how I'm playing with that history. This is the type of thing I like to talk about when I'm invited to speak. It's just a confusion of what photography is and can be. Too many people expect photography to be like a socio-documentary, so when it is not, they are just befuddled.

Your work mostly captures rural life. What about rural areas fascinates you?

I grew up in a rural area near Milwaukee in Wisconsin (USA). When I was young, I had chickens, cows and horses for neighbours. My mother was the daughter of a farmer. She and my dad operated a small family-owned grocery store. So, I come from humble rural roots. Part of my inspiration is also how photography developed in India historically. In the old days,

when photography was an exclusive domain of the rich, dignified portraiture was reserved for royalty and colonial overlords. I try to counter that. Everyone I photograph gets a copy of their portrait, and most of the time, they are delighted with the result. Our work becomes a kind of playful theatre, where the actors play the role of themselves.

What was your idea of India before you settled here and what do you think of the country now?

When I first came to India in 1993, some of the stereotypes [I'd heard] were somewhat true. Connaught Place in Delhi still had cows wandering around everywhere, and there were snake charmers on the pavement. There were hardly any cars. I remember Delhi was filled with Bajaj scooters and bicycles, and the occasional Ambassador taxi. Of course, all of this has changed dramatically, and it's become difficult to find the old India. However, there are still people who cling to the stereotypes, but I think most people in the West now have the idea that India is an advanced country that offers real competition to the West. Things and conceptions have changed on that side of the pond, too.