

Waswo X Waswo: The American artist who is reviving the art of hand-painting photographs

Udaipur-based American artist Waswo X Waswo photographs people in small-town India, and then has a local artist hand-paint them to fantastical effect

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New Myths Second Incarnation, the First; by Waswo X. Waswo (with Rajesh Soni); hand-coloured black and white digital print; 2011 (Photo courtesy: Tasveer)

A feather seller walks by with a bicycle laden with peacock feathers. A turbaned man with ghungroos on his feet poses with a gun. A boy re-creates Hanuman's iconic posture carrying the Sanjeevani mountain. These are some of the images at Photowallah, the latest exhibition by Udaipur-based American artist Waswo X Waswo (63).

Waswo's images are made through an elaborate process where he gets ordinary people to pose for him. "It is like theatre, a co-operative performance. We term the people who pose for us as models," he says.

The roles they play are based on people he meets in the village of Varda, on the outskirts of Udaipur, where his studio is located. The painted backdrops depict foliage and mountains, and are inspired by the over-the-top scenery found in erstwhile photo studios. Waswo shoots black and white digital images, which are then hand-painted by local artist Rajesh Soni (34) using watercolours.

Read: What is like being an African in India?



Bike Boys, Waswo X. Waswo, hand-coloured black and white digital print, 2015 (Photo courtesy: Tasveer)

While Waswo was always a “black and white purist”, he says his meeting with Soni changed his mind. Incidentally, Soni’s grandfather and father used to hand-paint photos for the royal family of Udaipur. “In a way, we are giving new life to an ancient art,” says Soni.

The exhibition features three prominent series of works by Waswo — Gauri Dancers, A Studio in Rajasthan, and New Myths. Gauri Dancers features images of male performers from Mewar (belonging to the Bhil tribe) who go from village to village performing tales from epics. A Studio in Rajasthan

features staged scenes shot at the Varda studio; while *New Myths* features people dressed as deities.



Feathers for Sale; Waswo X. Waswo (with Rajesh Soni); Hand-coloured black and white digital print; 2008
(Photo courtesy: Tasveer)

Behind the scenes

Waswo (who chooses not to explain his unique name) used to be a photographer in Milwaukee, USA. Curious about India, he visited Delhi and Udaipur in 1993. “I knew nothing about Delhi. I was naïve, I hadn’t even properly read my *Lonely Planet*,” he says. In Delhi, he was accosted by a rickshaw driver, who took him to a travel agent. “The agent sold me a 10-day travel package to Udaipur. I loved the city. It has a special place in my heart,” he adds.

Waswo consequently made several trips to India before settling there in 2003. Today, he shuttles between his apartment in Bangkok, his studio in Varda, and his home in Udaipur. “People call me an American artist but I think of myself as an Indian artist,” he says.



Photographer Waswo X Waswo (left) and artist Rajesh Soni at Tarq Gallery in Colaba (Aalok Soni/HT photo)

Present perfect

While critics have accused Waswo of propagating stereotypes about India, he remains unfazed. “These are contemporary photos. I am not living in the past; I am living in the present, in Udaipur, which is a different place. This is real life,” he says.

He also clarifies that the works are not ethnographic representations of a community (as prevalent in the colonial era),

but rather a staged fantasy. “I look at old photos and the people look sad, like specimens. I try to have some life in my photos, some character and personality,” he says.

Waswo’s work may be focused on India, but it has helped him gain recognition around the world. His photographs have been exhibited in Amsterdam and Paris, among other cities. “India has been good to me. After I came here, I became known nationally and internationally,” he says.

Photowallah is ongoing till April 8. It is organised by Tasveer in conjunction with Tarq gallery and is part of the Focus 2017 photography festival.

At Tarq, Dhanraj Mahal, Apollo Bunder

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