

MAGAZINE

Anatomy of stillness



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Mumbai, 2005: the endangered neighbourhood of Khotachiwadi. Photo: Clare Arni

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A photographer searches for 25 years to capture the idea of stillness in the chaos of the world around us

Stillness can happen in time, like a breath before the plunge, when you are suddenly aware or nervous of the activity to follow. A girl waits her turn to perform in a circus, peering out, trying not to be noticed, still, and wholly with her thoughts (4). Stillness can be complex, a quietness that doesn't betray the slow, natural processes that are taking place, such as the ripening of bananas amidst the bustle of a marketplace (7). Serenity often comes from water, from the slow lapping on the shore, in an early morning in Benares, where the leisurely wave of brightly coloured saris, drying in the wind evokes a stillness so precious, it seems stolen out of the hustle of the ghats (5). Stillness is something that is sought by human beings, as a positive quality of respite, such as this Andal devotee whose daily rituals include the enjoyment of the solitude of an inner temple courtyard (1). The stillness of the home is the most omnipresent and the most hard to anatomise. An empty house has a stillness all of its own that stands in contrast to the usual household bustle (2). A still image, painted on a textured wall, is a reminder of the human activities that take place here, and their current absence draws further our attention to the stillness that lies alongside all the hurried motions of lives being lived (6). Our ability to achieve this stillness amidst a crowd of life is astonishing. In the Kumbh Mela, the largest crowd on earth, the largest heaving mass of humanity in history, sadhus prepare their afternoon meal in complete silence. The perfect austerity of their clothes and the quiet dignity of their manner becomes the centre of a stillness that completely absorbs the watcher, banishing the chaos of the Mela to far beyond the back of the mind. Their movements are minimal and as rhythmic as a dance as though they husband every motion, and make their very movements a part of a spiritual silence (3). This devotion of a life to stillness is a reminder of its power and the place it holds in our art, culture and lives, and offers us an opportunity to reflect upon ourselves, our need and ability to project stillness and our strange desire to be lost in the immemorial stillness of the world.

Clare Arni is a photographer based in Bengaluru. Her work encompasses architecture, social documentary and cultural heritage