

Just Imagine

Two photographers interpret the meaning of beauty in the natural world



(Clockwise from above left) Gilles Bensimon; Swapan Nayak; Bensimon's meditative black-and-white photo; Nayak's blossoms of colour

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A SHOW by Tasveer, as part of its 10th anniversary celebrations, juxtaposes two starkly different approaches to photographing elements of nature. Works by Swapan Nayak and Gilles Bensimon at Tarq in Colaba explore beauty in myriad ways in an exhibition titled "Gardens of the Mind". While Bensimon presents exquisite, vibrant photographs of flowers, Nayak's black-and-white photographs taken in the east and Northeast of India, almost appear meditative.

Curator Nathaniel Gaskell says, "These artists bring influences from their backgrounds into their media. If Swapan Nayak brings some of the grit, resounding silence and starkness of his photojournalistic idiom into *Radha: A Love in Eternity*, Bensimon's *Watercolours* reflect a fashion magazine aesthetic, with their glossy shine and colours that pop." Despite the differences in visual language, what links the two sets together, as gallerist Hena Kapadia, says is "their stillness and their unique ability to capture a special quality in nature."

This stillness can be seen in Nayak's *Radha: A love in Eternity* series, which is inspired by his reading of the *Vaishnava Padabali*, a seven-century-old Bengali text that narrates the love story of Radha and Krishna. Through meticulous composition, the former photojournalist freezes moments in nature and imbues them with meaning and mood from the text. In *Sambhog 4*, the tangled branches and vines in a forest seem to represent the communion of the divine lovers, while in the leafy shadows cast in *Man 6*, we can see Radha's longing and desire, as she waits for Krishna. Nayak says, "I got an understanding of 'purity' through Radha's devotion to Krishna. In Vaishnava literature, Radha represents the embodied or human soul, while Krishna is the universal or supreme spirit. It is believed that it is in the nature of the human soul to form a union with the the supreme spirit."

The primary mood of the photographs Bensimon's *Watercolour* series is, on the other hand, an almost exuberant celebration of the ephemeral beauty of nature. The French photographer, who is former art director of *Elle* magazine and who has



photographed some of the most famous celebrities of our times, such as Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell and Gisele Bundchen, took to photographing beauty of a different sort since 2011. In a series of images, he photographed freshly-cut flowers which he submerged in water to create stunning blossoms of colour. They are, in his words, "briefly reborn". He says, "It is as if I am bringing them back to life; the water helps me capture the essence of their living beauty one last time before they wilt and fade." As light refracts through the water, it creates photographs that are almost abstract in their representation of flowers. The shapes dilate and merge, while the colours become brighter and catch stray spangles of light.

Besides their meditations on the nature of beauty, both Nayak's and Bensimon's photographs offer superb instructions on how to use photography to re-imagine something as extensively photographed as the natural world. At a time when, thanks to smartphones, anything and everything is the camera's subject, the photographs in "Gardens of the Mind" show how technical skill can combine with artistic imagination to create works that are uncommon and exquisite.

Gardens of the Mind is at Tarq, Colaba, till March 17