

DATURA

SHAHID DATAWLA



TEXT BY MATTHIEU FOSS

Produced by

TARQ

F35/36 Dhanraj Mahal,
CSM Marg, Apollo Bunder,
Colaba, Mumbai 400001.
www.tarq.in

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INTRODUCTION

We are delighted to present *Datura*—Shahid Datawala’s second solo exhibition at TARQ. Following his last exhibition, *Remains of the Day* presented in 2017, this exhibition continues to highlight Datawala’s preoccupations with light, nature and the everyday. Featuring images taken over the last several months in Mumbai and Paris, the magical imagery in Datawala’s photographs is reminiscent of pioneers in the field of natural photography such as Karl Blossfeldt – but also ties in seamlessly with older series from the artist’s practice, including *Shadowboxing*, *Liberty* and *I once was alive*.

The works begin to look at flowers and plants not only as objects, but almost as separate characters in a story. Datawala’s use of light and shade in the entirely black and white series is a testament to his skill as a photographer, and to his sheer vision in capturing breath-taking beauty all around him. This series is an extension of Datawala’s already robust practice. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue essay penned by Datawala’s long-time collaborator and friend, Matthieu Foss.

Hena Kapadia
Gallery Director, TARQ



QUEST FOR THE INFINITE DETAIL

Matthieu Foss, Paris 2018

Nearly 15 years ago, Shahid Datawala's focus was on people and architecture. His first exhibition as a photographer, poetically named *A Walk with Pillars*, depicted a backdrop consisting of the New Delhi Connaught Place pillars, photographed repeatedly, with tiny human silhouettes unknowingly acting out scenes, as if they were directed on a grandiose stage. Furthering this study, Datawala went on to explore the structures of heritage cinema architecture, and waited with much patience until people would enter his frame and create a situation.

His decisive moment would occur when both, the buildings and the people, would interact, becoming actors in a scene that only he knew was taking place, often leading to an anecdotal narrative.

While composing these images, the attention to detail was always present. The eye would first notice the scene, then linger and travel across the image, from one intended architectural detail to another, like connecting dots, all counterbalanced within the frame. This quest for detail has been an ongoing thread in Datawala's work.

In the same way that, over the years, he celebrated the beauty of decrepit buildings in cities or found-objects on beaches, finding poetry and emotion in the way light and shadow give life to curves, edges and surfaces, he then literally went up close, on a quest for the minuscule and found just as much dramatic expression.

In *Datura*, we enter the realm of miniature in nature. In some images, the focus is not on the plant itself but on such a small detail that we forget the larger body and join Datawala in his fascination for nature's mysterious designs and architecture.

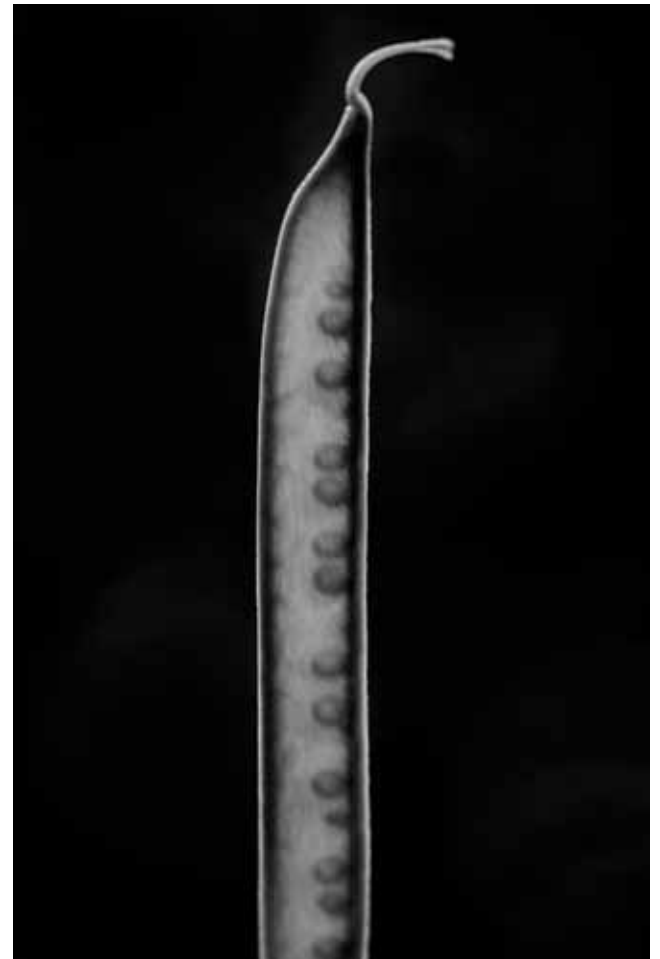
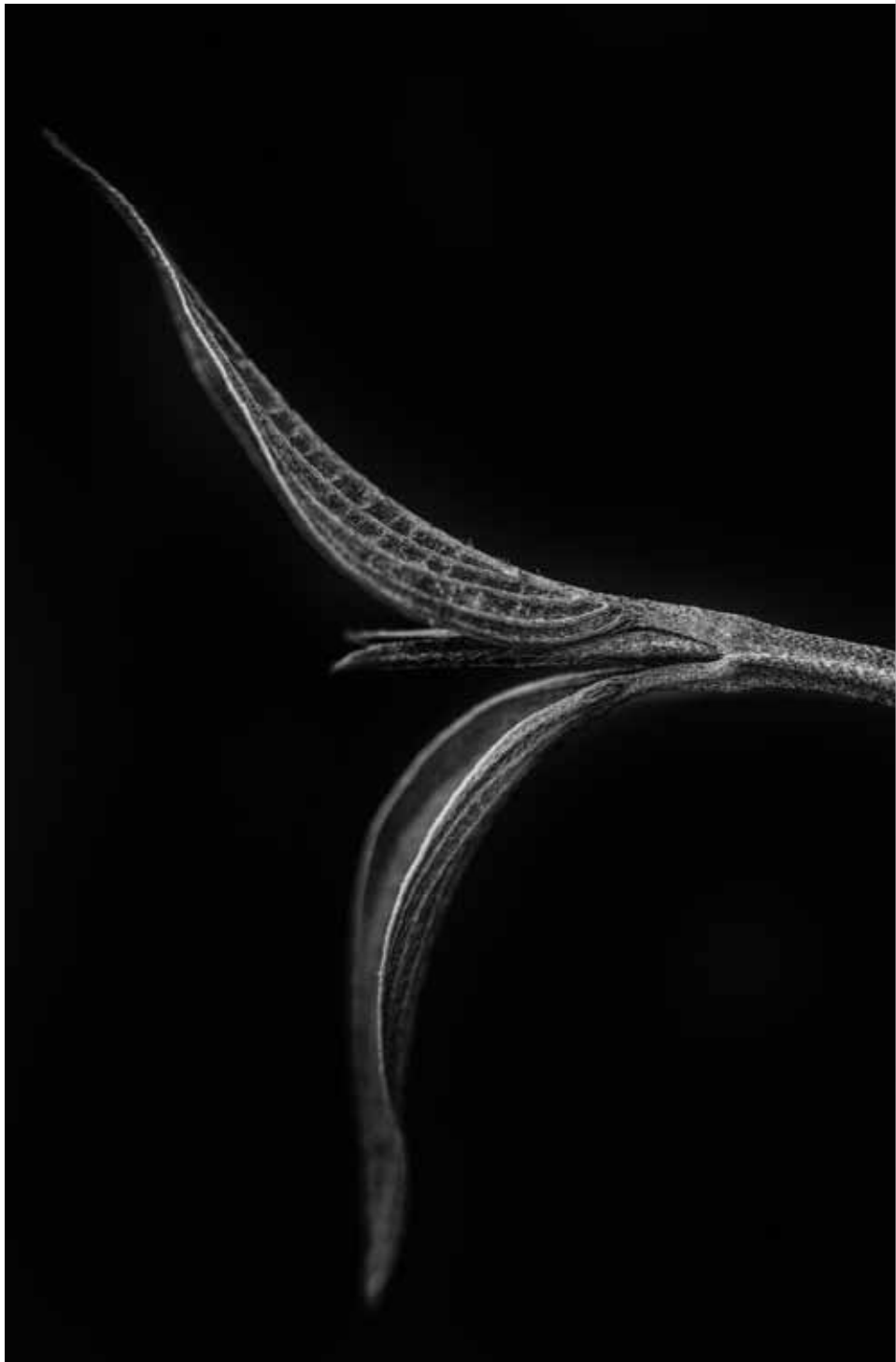
The macro lens enables us to observe the following: otherwise unseen delicate textures composed like organised veins that merge to erect tiny monuments, or snake-like filaments that

wrap themselves around stems, twisted into unusual impossible knots, or like concentric tiles, petals seen from behind, converging around the pillar that is their support.

We are gently reminded how, through the ages, architecture has so often been inspired by - and sometimes directly imitated - nature, Gothic arches, twisting Manuelian pillars, Guimard Métropolitain entrances, ornate Rajasthani jalis. These structural elements give praise to nature's fabulous gifts. *Datura* turns the tables around and finds the architecture within natural creations, suggesting an infinite loop: architecture imitating nature, nature imitating architecture, and so on.

In his 1933 essay titled *In Praise of Shadows*, Junichirô Tanizaki states, "We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty."

This could have been written especially for *Datura*, where Datawala uses his craft to bring out beauty from nature that would otherwise go unnoticed. Shadow and light are playfully engaged, their duality serving a unique purpose where the intricacies of mini-architectural wonders are made available for us to see.



A particular image in the show exemplifies this... a seed pod seen in transparency, as the light traverses its frail protective skin, very much like a Japanese shōji screen, exposing the texture of the handmade paper it is made of, as light brings it to life.

Although these images reveal extraordinary forms, patterns and textures, this body of work isn't about exposing rare or exotic plants and flowers, but more about bringing out exquisite designs from

humble flora found in public gardens, on road sides and private balconies and terraces. These are urban nature subjects. In fact, Shahid is known to sometimes excuse himself from a conversation with friends, to be seen venturing toward what appears to be a banal flowerbed, and leaning in closely with his camera to capture the detail that caught his eye.

Karl Blossfeldt, who pioneered in nature photography, had a more surgical approach where his subjects were stretched on a white surface, nearly dissected, carefully propped and photographed, completely isolated from their environment. Here, we're also seeing isolated subjects, but they generally emerge from the shadows, bathed in natural light and captured within their immediate surroundings.

This difference in technique is only one of the extreme differences between Blossfeldt's approach and Datawala's. Both artists are magnifying the beauty of nature for their audience, but where one is compiling a vast and rigorous botanist catalogue, the other is very much removed from the scientific aspect of his subject.

Datawala's interest lies in form, structure, balance and highlighting the fragile architecture found in nature. He also ventures toward abstraction and pure geometry by associating volumes and shapes

like pieces of a puzzle that don't always match. And further still, sensual metaphors come into play, because indeed, nature is a treasure trove of complex erotic imagery, for those willing to look close enough.

When Shahid embarks on a new project, it is always a solitary journey. Days spent shooting, so much that he attains a meditative state and forgets the commotion of the city that surrounds him. The quest for the tiny detail, or punctum, the characteristic that makes the image work and suddenly come together with enough balance between tension and emotion, however small - is his mission to find.

Datura in particular became, in his own words, a spiritual experience, for having observed nature so closely and intimately.

Notes:

In Praise of Shadows - Junichirô Tanizaki, 1933





















ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shahid Datawala (b. 1974) has photographed extensively for various publications. His solo exhibitions include, *Remains of the Day*, TARQ, Mumbai, 2017, *I once was alive*, Gallery 7, Mumbai, 2015, *Where the city rests*, Matthieu Foss Gallery, Mumbai, 2010, *Shadow Boxing*, Tasveer in Bangalore, Calcutta and New Delhi, 2008-2009, *Dress Circle*, Tasveer in Bangalore, Calcutta, Mumbai, New Delhi, 2007-2008, *A Walk with Pillars*, Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, 2001.

Datawala has also participated in a number of the group shows including, *Post Visual World*, curated by Gitanjali Dang, Priyashri Art gallery, Mumbai 2008, *Caturday is Cleaning Day*, curated by Gitanjali Dang, The Loft, 2009, *India: Public Places, Private Spaces* curated by Gayatri Sinha and Paul Sternberger, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota, 2008 and The Newark Museum, New Jersey, 2007, *Click*, curated by Radhika Singh and Sunil Gupta, Vadhera Art Gallery, New Delhi and Grosvenor, London, 2008, *By George* curated by Gitanjali Dang, Alliance Française, New Delhi, 2010, *Where Three Dreams Cross*, curated by Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, White Chapel Gallery, London, 2010

Datawala was also the chief designer for Pallate - a furniture design store in Mumbai, for 7 years. He was awarded the Edida Furniture Category Award in 2009 and the Edida Designer of the Year by Elle Décor in 2010. He also designs clothes and is a jewellery maker.

Datawala lives and works in Mumbai.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originating from France, where he was part of the founding team of photography fair Paris Photo, Matthieu worked with several French galleries, handling their photography department.

Since moving to Mumbai in 2005, he played an active part in India's art world by setting a high standard for its budding photography market.

In 2006, he started what would become Matthieu Foss Gallery, Mumbai's first private photography gallery, and has collaborated with numerous institutions, working towards opening the Indian art market to photography and raising appreciation for photography as an art form.

Matthieu co-founded FOCUS Photography Festival, Mumbai's biennial international festival in 2013 and has been the director for all three editions.

Now recently relocated to Paris, Matthieu continues to work on strengthening Indo-French cultural relations through meaningful and sustainable art projects.

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Photography by Shahid Datawala

Designed by Anugraha
studioanugraha.com

TARQ

info@tarq.in | www.tarq.in