

What is it about Man Ray?

History, technique and some good old fun are reason enough to rendezvous with the legendary photographer's work at a never seen before in India show

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Almost a century has passed since Man Ray first shot the photographs on display at *Views of the Spirit*, currently showing at Tarq. Made between the 1920s and 1930s during his sojourn in Paris, these experimental monochromes still inspire awe. What is it about Man Ray, one wonders? Why is his work still exciting to the viewer all these years later? Why should one even bother viewing the exhibit in person, when there is always the option of easy online access to the same?

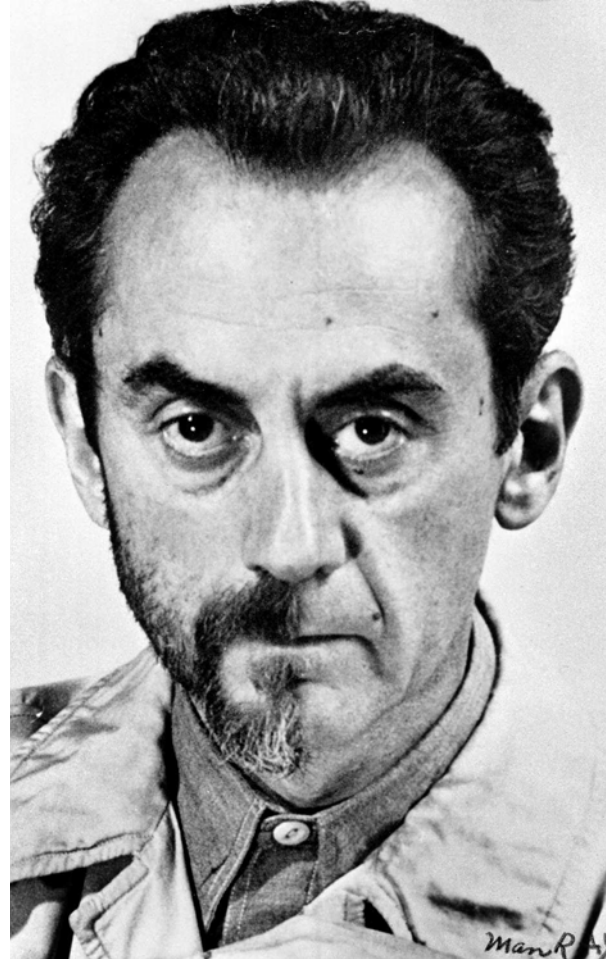
Madrid to Mumbai

The answer to these questions lies somewhere between the two-floor spread at the gallery, that spans a wide range of photographic oeuvre created by the artist, in his most prolific years. From the biggest artists of the time to his experiments with the medium in what became his patent path-breaking techniques of 'rayography' (a process of creating camera-less images by placing objects directly on photosensitive paper exposed to light) and 'solarisation' (where the film negative is over-exposed to create surreal images), the show presents his most noteworthy creations for an up-close and personal regard. A pre-avis or a personal note by Ray himself mentions how his work is not meant for a larger public viewing but instead a more intimate person to person exchange.

"The idea came really as a dream," says gallerist Diego Alonso of Mondo Galeria in an email interview with *The Hindu*. Alonso first put together the same show in Madrid in 2014 following a rather serendipitous chain of events. "...some months later [after the dream] I was in Paris meeting with the person who lead me to the Man Ray Trust right at the moment they were releasing the New Estate Prints that we are offering today," he adds. Travelling on to Lima, Peru and back again to Alicante and Ibiza in Spain, the India edition of the show was made possible by a joint collaboration between Alonso, curator Matthieu Foss and gallerist Hena Kapadia. While the Mumbai chapter boasts a greater number of prints and scheduled screenings of Ray's films, the Madrid one included work on loan from private collections in Spain and France as well as serigraphs, drawings and objects. This multi-disciplinary approach helped create a world that gives one a peek into Ray's vision.

Forging a new path

In the hope of cutting loose his Russian Jewish ties, Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitsky in 1890, turned consciously towards art, a far cry from his family's tailoring background. Interestingly though, elements of his past associations can be clearly seen throughout his work in his use of nails, flat irons, threads and needles. Ray's work is just as embedded in

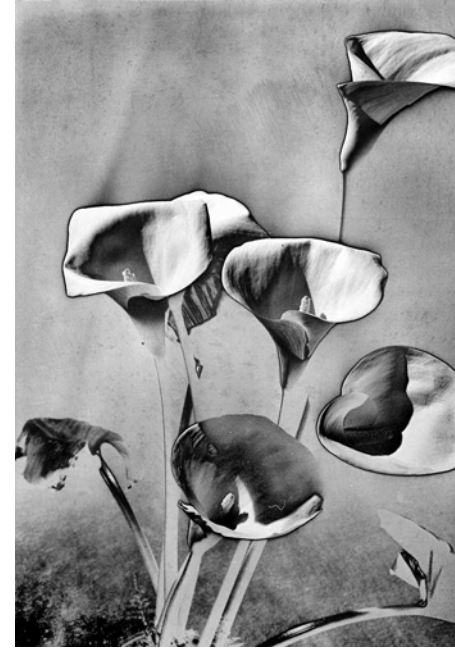


True reflections: Self-Portrait, 1943. ■ ALL IMAGES MAN RAY TRUST - ADAGP / COURTESY MONDO GALERIA | TARQ

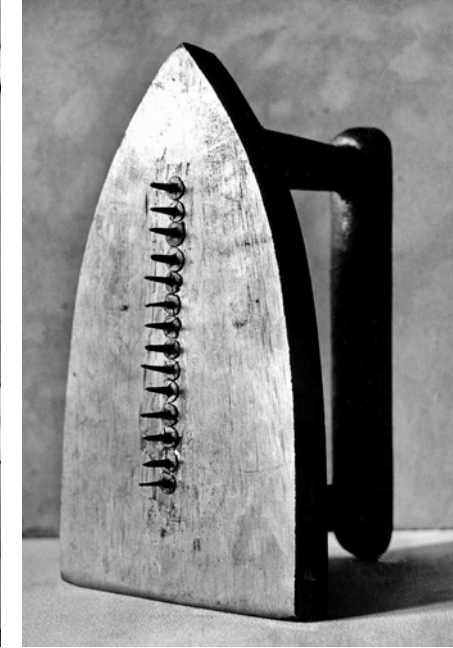
the socio-political climate of the time. Poised between the two World Wars that generated disillusionment, the need to break away from the old moulds of society, the genuine search for new meanings or an expression of the lack of it, Ray's images in this show reflect it all. Cru-

cial art movements of the time rode the same waves of experimenting with new perspectives and ingenuity. Surrealist writer Andre Breton who called Ray a 'pre-surrealist' was referring to the latter's dream-like, surreal aesthetic that comes through much earlier than when the

Les Arums, c. 1930.



The Gift, 1921.



Glass Tears, 1932.

movement formally took shape in 1924. His solarised prints of portraits, flowers, all emit a deep sense of ethereality.

Ray's love of the human form, especially the female form, is apparent in his persistent use of the body as a shape/s spliced with another

that together breed new ground. Oval against oval or a violin shaped back, Ray's imagery dabbles between the sensuous and the sexual. It is no wonder that he excelled in fashion photography for some of the biggest design houses and publications in Paris. His

constant need to challenge convention, be it that of society or pure visual makes his images a treat to the eye and mind even a century later.

Forever relevant

"In Man Ray's work, a visitor can observe readymade references to painting, writing, sculpture and theatre, as well as historically meaningful elements of fashion. What is surprising is that even after having been familiar with his visual language all these years, I still find it refreshing and intriguing," reflects Foss on his own enduring fondness for the artist's work. "Because of his unique experimental quality and his playful approach while creating conceptual works as well as portraits, Man Ray's work never ceases to raise questions. His approach is so playful and his aesthetics so pure that his images aren't intimidating", says Foss, putting to rest any inhibitions a first-

time viewer might have to Ray's work.

At first glance, one might feel a little thrown with the seemingly ambiguous content and process involved in making the images. But that calls for a thorough viewing and perhaps a bit of pre-reading too. Work like 'Reflexions' (1929), 'Baiser' (1922) or the 'Untitled' rayograph (1930) of the couple's faces and the Eiffel tower in the background all demand some back and forth prancing, both physical and visual to know what's going on within the frame. The moment the eye makes sense of the frame is almost as magical as seeing an image emerge from a blank in the darkroom.

Beneath this Dadaist approach of making seriousness fun and vice versa, there remains an unquestionable value binding Ray's work. "I think his work is exemplary in its modernity, and since Man Ray's vast body of work changed the course of photography in the 20th century, taking the genre from a documentary tool to an art form that brought alive the space between the real and fantastical, it fits in wonderfully with contemporary art," elaborates Kapadia mentioning that the works at the gallery which are "on sale at a reasonable price point," also means a great opportunity for new collectors.

Where recent photographic work often turns to archives to both look at the abundance of what has been done as also to preserve the past, a return to Ray's work is a fresh breath of air in that it both questions and reflects an eternal present.

Views of the Spirit ongoing at Tarq, Colaba till July 1