Three dreams or three nations?

A recent exhibition on South Asian photography entitled ‘Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh’ highlights indigenous or native photographers as a marker of what India was before the two partitions. This is to suggest that there is a history of image-making that stands outside the ambit of European practitioners. The exhibition featured over 400 photographs, a survey of images encompassing early photographers and the works from the 19th century, the social realism of the mid-20th century, the movements of photography from the studio to the streets and, eventually, the playful and dynamic recourse with image-making in the present.

Photography in Asia

Photography in Asia represents the coming of an age, digital, virtual and otherwise. The history of it is a part of a European history, one that sadly does not find its way into the exhibition. In trying to juxtapose the vintage elements of photography in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, do the images actually stand representative of the mid-20th century, the movements of photography from the studio to the streets and, eventually, the playful and dynamic recourse with image-making in the present.

The exhibition

Photography in Asia is distinct in its historical precedents, revealing the roots. It is a curatorial project that traces the characteristics of contemporary photography through its historical precedents, revealing the roots of the contemporary practitioners in creating their personal links with the arts. The catalogue itself marks this intent, with evocative images that counter the reasons for the separation of identity today, seeking to highlight modes of practice that may tie the three nations together by virtue of the contradictions they share. One could not help feeling that the exhibition suffers to some extent from trying to understand the notion of ‘who produces and for whom and why?’ Though the curators seek to highlight modes of practice that may tie the three nations together by virtue of the contradictions they share, one cannot but feel that the exhibition suffers to some extent from trying to understand the notion of ‘who produces and for whom and why?’

The effect of photography on contemporary exhibition practice, such as that under discussion here, highlights the framework, mainly of the post-colonial (and even post-modern) as the point of engagement with the public. However, in the attempt at shaping the discourses on representation in visual culture today, the discussion peters away, marginally addressing the scope of differences in the exhibition. This is perhaps also because the chief curator (and photographer), Sunil Gupta makes a conscious attempt to avoid what he terms as ‘conceptual art’ from entering the realm of the exhibition. Gupta (born 1953) earned an MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art, London in 1983. As photographer, curator and activist, he has worked extensively to represent Indian photography at the local level, as well as at international exhibitions. He has been on a kind of intended play associated with the notion of heritage, the inherent contradictions that arise from the local to the global, often signaled in the mediations of the South Asian Diaspora, placed in a transnational landscape of cultural production. However, one can’t help feeling that the exhibition suffers to some extent from trying to understand the notion of ‘who produces and for whom and why?’

Over 70 photographers including Raghu Rai, Pushpamala N., Rashid Rana, Dayanita Singh, Raghubir Singh, Umrao Singh Nasar, Shahidul Alam, Urs Stahel and Iwona Blazwick – as well as Christopher Pinney, Geeta Kapur and Sabeena Gadihoke. Here contemporary practitioners from all countries, respond to the global, often signaled in the mediations of the South Asian Diaspora, placed in a transnational landscape of cultural production. However, one can’t help feeling that the exhibition suffers to some extent from trying to understand the notion of ‘who produces and for whom and why?’

Exhibitions are part of a collective enterprise, a space where artists and their work often speak for themselves. Given that India has a vast contact with photographers who began working in the last 100 years, any engagement with it in the current scenario entails work that assumes to undo, abet and evolve from what was done in the past. The bearing of such an exhibition, therefore, highlights three distinct modes of operation and the fraught relationships between past and present: the imperial, nationalist and the post-colonial. These represent continuities, ruptures and contradictions that have given the modern aesthetic in South Asia nourishment in the last 100 years.

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Five distinct sections in the exhibition highlight distinct themes that draw the attention of the visitor towards classifications and subjects. These include, the portrait, family, body politic and performance and the street, each highlighting thematic passages. Over 70 photographers including Raghu Rai, Pushpama N., Rashid Rana, Dayanita Singh, Pushpamala N., Gauri Gill, Strobe Chahal Rashid Talalder, Ayeshah Vellani and Munem Waheed are presented in the show, with works drawn from important collections of historic photography, including the Alkazi Collection of Photography (Delhi), The Abhishek Poddar Collection (Bangalore), The Udapaur City Palace Museum Archive (Central India), Whitestar (Pakistan) and the Drik Archive (Dhaka). These are joined by many previously unseen images from private family archives, galleries, individuals and works by leading contemporary artists.
150 years of photography in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

There seems to have been an act of scrambling the images, perhaps a rightful solution in this case. Material is drawn from disparate collections and the thematics identified are often from older productions or exhibitions. The method devised to deal with this problem is to let the images speak for themselves. This is an important curatorial stance, but needed to be sussed out in more tangible and descriptive ways, allowing the unread viewer to take stock of the movements and international conditioning in photography in Asia. The impressionistic overview veers through the tracts of self-representation, portraiture, documentation and artistic recreation, where artists from the three countries try to contend with their own realities and, in doing so, they yearn to be understood.

From a wholistic point of view, exhibitions such as these are an interesting route into Art History. Here the social economic and, at times, political forces that shape artistic production and distribution come together, exerting varying degrees of pressure on artists, critics, curators, collectors and dealers alike. Therefore, while encountering the exhibition, it becomes important to forge your own link with the works. How, then, does Muhammad Arif Ali – with his 2008 works of political rallies – compare with the sweeping panoramic images of Praful Patel in Mumbai in the 1950s? This leads us to compelling historical figures such as Homai Vyarawalla and Kulwant Roy, mirrored on a facing wall with architectural images by Lala Deen Dayal and by Bharat Sikka’s gigantic views of contemporary Delhi.

Rooms of wonder yield the dynamic images of Vikas Roy, Ram Rahman and Abdul Kalam Aziz, leading further onto Muhammad Ali Salim, and even views by up-and-coming photographer from India, Shahid Datawalla. Further connections may be drawn between Syed Muhammad Adil and Tanveer Sharaad, while the historical images of Fotos go well with Homai Vyarawalla and Whitemarx images from Pakistan. Therefore in exhibitions such as this, it is important to identify why the juxtaposition of the old and the emerging, have led artists to confront the future of their own productions with varying degrees of emulation, rejection and creative departure.

Apart from talks by the three main curators, a compelling symposium was organised over two days in the Fotomuseum, Winterthur. The speakers included curators such as Pramod Kumar KG, who spoke on the life of portraiture in India, based on his extensive work in the Udaipur Archives. Ashaya Tankha and SUNAYANEDEE NARAN revealed their experiences of ethnography and the archive and the representation of women in studio photography, respectively. Practitioners such as Dayanta Singh and Sas Ahlu spoke of their personal inspirations and experiences that led to the generation of their work. Sabena Goshnikor highlighted her interest in photography during and after the national movement in India, concentrating on press and magazine photography. One of the most intriguing talks was by independent practitioner and writer, Awek Sen, on his personal journey through the images and themes that underlay the exhibition and the complexity between the meaning and resonance of images and words.

In all, the exhibition presented more than pure aesthetic delight, creating horizons of contestation between themes and images. In a world where the art market seems to be sky rocketing – and artists are becoming ever more demanding of galleries and curators are vying to represent them – photography in Asia still seems to demand much greater academic input and real substantive criticism that would allow it to represent more than regional identity. Such an interaction would necessarily explain and exploit a landscape that has a powerful modern visual paradigm in order to highlight a sense of cultural difference in the 21st Century, a sense of heterogeneity in what is ‘seen’ and experienced. This is the world of global capitalism, citizenship, neo-imperialism, minorities, exile, secularism: and these are the boundaries that need to be transgressed for a more humanist understanding of the contemporary world.

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Note
1. The exhibition ‘Where three dreams cross: 150 Years of Photography in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh was on display at the Whitechapel Gallery, East London, in January 2010 and at the Fotomuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland, from June until August 2010.