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PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOUTH ASIA

# THE REST OF THE PICTURE

*As photographers pushed their medium out of the conventions of studio portraiture and into the realm of fine art, the subjects of their images began to shift into abstraction.*

*By HG Masters*

1.

**HOMAI VYARAWALLA,**  
*Rehana Mogul and Mani Turner, 1937,*  
 silver gelatin print. Courtesy the artist  
 and Sabeena Gadiloke.

2.

**PABLO BARTHOLOMEW,**  
*Zarine in a Hotel Room, New Delhi, 1975,*  
 digital print on archival paper,  
 40.6 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist.

3.

**SWARANJIT SINGH,**  
*Prem on her Honeymoon, Simla, 1948,* vintage  
 silver gelatin print. Courtesy the Estate of  
 Swaranjit Singh, Fotomedia.

4.

**NONY SINGH,**  
*My Sister Guddi, Posing as Scarlett O'Hara  
 from Gone With the Wind, Srinagar, 1962,*  
 silver gelatin print. Courtesy the artist.



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**Homai Vyarawalla's 1937 photograph of her classmates at the JJ School of Art in Bombay shows a young woman named Rehana Mogul, dressed in white and sculpting a male figure from clay, as another student, Mani Turner, measures the standing model. Then a painting student at the JJ School, Vyarawalla (born in 1913) snapped this picture shortly before embarking on a 35-year-long career as India's first female photojournalist. A subtly unorthodox composition, the primary focal point is Mogul on the left. In the center of the image are the two male figures of the sculpture and the model, who is slightly out of focus. By positioning Mogul on the far left, Vyarawalla gives the whole photograph a dynamic tension by upsetting viewers' expectations of finding the subject in the exact center.**

Vyarawalla's image is among the hundreds in "Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh," on view at London's Whitechapel Gallery from January to April. The exhibition brings together images taken by artists, amateurs, commercial studios, researchers and NGOs, grouping the works into five thematic categories without articulating any hierarchy or distinction between various genres of photography. Though photography struggled to gain acceptance as a fine-art medium in South Asia (as elsewhere in the world), not all the work in "Where Three Dreams Cross" is fine art, nor does it claim to be. But differences between photographs exist, ones that are often simply explained by where and how an image is displayed—whether it is reproduced in a newspaper or printed in a limited edition that is sold in a commercial gallery—without consideration of the operations at work within an image itself.

One recent exponent of the view that there are no distinctions between art and non-art photography is American documentary filmmaker Errol Morris who, writing on the Opinionator blog for the *New York Times* in January, argued, "The same photograph can be propaganda, journalism, art or any combination of the three" depending on its context, and that "the intentions of the photographer cannot be recovered from a photograph." Morris' relativist position fails to see differences between photography as art and photography's more practical uses in commerce and journalism, and ignores the medium's flexibility and diversity.

#### THE PORTRAIT TRADITION

The commercial photograph, whether taken by a portrait-studio photographer or a photojournalist, strives to make its subject plain. Generally positioned front and center in the frame and in focus, the subject is distinct from the background, which is often muted or out of focus. "Where Three Dreams Cross" features several of Vyarawalla's later pictures, depicting India's leaders and foreign dignitaries, among them an image of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, embracing his daughter Indira Gandhi at the Palam Airport in Delhi, with the two squarely occupying the center and majority of the frame. Though notable for their intimacy and artful composition, Vyarawalla's later works are largely the achievement of a professional photojournalist, with her subjects clearly identified and directly portrayed.

This approach to framing is practical as well as intuitive, as illustrated in the works of several talented amateur photographers

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PUSHPAMALA N.,

*Shringara*, from the series "Navarasa Suite,"  
2000-03, sepia toned black-and-white  
photograph, 51 x 66 cm.



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PUSHPAMALA N.,

*Phantom Lady or Kismet*, 1996-98,  
from a series of silver gelatin prints,  
50.8 x 40.6 cm.

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PUSHPAMALA N.,

*The Native Types - Yogini (After 16th-century  
Deccani Painting)*, 2004, C-print on  
metallic paper, 50.8 x 61 cm.



included in "Where Three Dreams Cross." Swaranjit Singh (1921-2001) ran a successful engineering firm in Delhi and is known for his elegant photographs of his wife. *Prem on Her Honeymoon, Simla* (1948) shows the young woman posed in the center of the frame surrounded by a garland of leaves, her head tilted slightly to one side with her eyes averted above the photographer's lens. *Prem - Harding Avenue Delhi* (1949) is a more traditional portrait against a dark background, with the subject in formal attire and a somber expression. Both are classical compositions, emphasizing the subject over the rest of its surroundings.

Another talented amateur, Nony Singh (born in 1936) took many notable portraits of her family and friends, and her works were rediscovered and reprinted in recent years by her daughter, Dayanita Singh, herself a renowned contemporary photographer. In one, the artist's sister sits against a wooden fence with a determined expression, posing as Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone With the Wind*. Another of Nony Singh's pictures is of Dayanita, taken in 1980, just before she is about to set off to study at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. It shows the young woman posed against a white wall, partially covered by the shadow of the photographer, with another dark shadow covering the top right corner of the frame like a dark doorway. Compared with Nony Singh's shadowless portrait of her sister, the picture of Dayanita contains two shadows that divert attention from the subject to the photographer herself—and with evocative, almost ominous connotations. These additional elements make the portrait less about Dayanita and more about the relationship between the photographer and the subject, infusing the image with a suggestion of the photographer's own subjectivity.

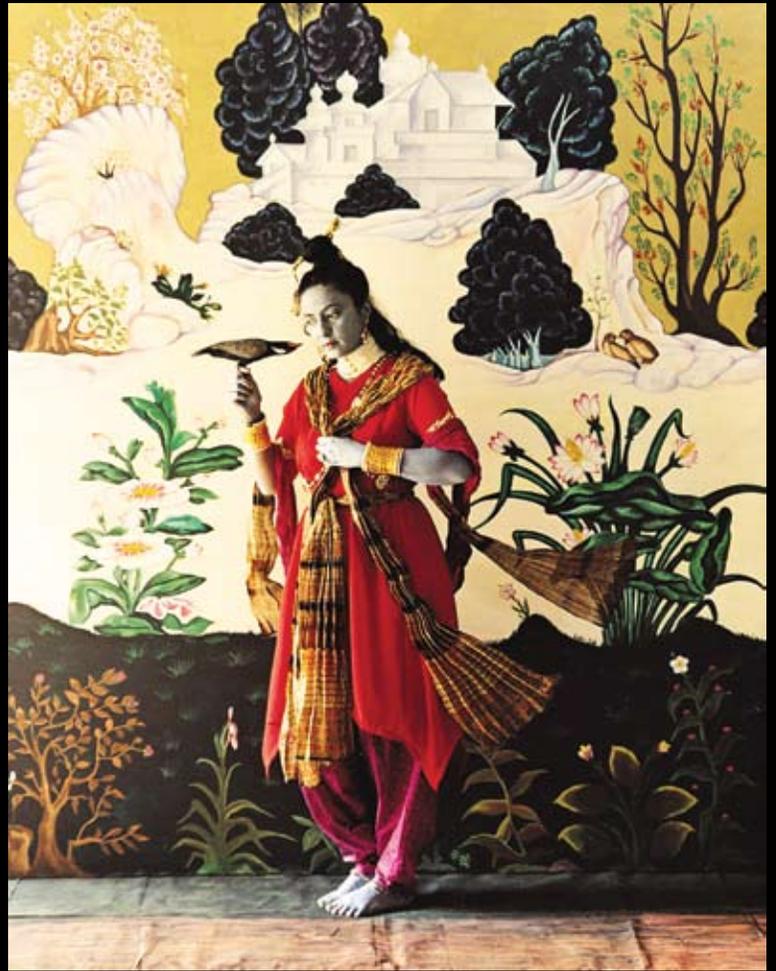
Even though photography's powers of representation had sparked an existential crisis in painting and sculpture almost immediately after its invention in the mid-19th century, it took more than a century for the public to acknowledge the medium's potential as fine art. It was not until the 1970s that photoessayists and journalists began to receive the sort of critical attention formerly reserved for fine artists. India's pioneering photographer in this area is Pablo Bartholomew (born in 1955), who works in the documentary tradition—in 1975 he received a World Press Photo award at age 19 for images of heroin addicts in India and again in 1984 for images of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy—but whose larger project was to craft a portrait of his generation. In the 1970s, after being expelled from high school at age 15, he took pictures of his upper-middle-class friends and girlfriends living a restless urban life, doing drugs, getting drunk, hooking up or just hanging out. The images often present a lone subject—many are portraits such as *Zarine in a Hotel Room* (1975)—but as the sitters betray their intimacy and comfort with the photographer, they are components of Bartholomew's greater, and decisively personal, project to document the world around him as he saw it.

Several contemporary photographers have continued in this vein, with traditionally styled portraits forming a part of a larger portrayal of places or phenomenon. Delhi-based Gauri Gill has taken an activist and anthropological approach to her subjects, photographing impoverished young women in rural Rajasthan. Working with a local NGO that developed a girls' fair that along with typical attractions and vendors introduced young women to the electoral process, Gill set up a temporary photo studio and encouraged the young women to bring their

SCULPTOR TURNED PERFORMANCE ARTIST PUSHPAMALA N.  
EXPLORES THE COMPONENTS OF IMAGERY, WHILE REFERRING TO TROPES OF  
SOUTH ASIAN VISUAL CULTURE.



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own props and costumes. The resulting photographs, which comprise her 2003 “Balika Mela” series, are arresting for the peculiar ways in which the children chose to represent themselves, as in the inscrutable image of young sari-clad women wearing sunglasses, seated next to an ornamental stand and a bouquet of flowers, or the picture of a boy riding on a life-size paper peacock with his hands on its neck. Despite the formal similarities of the plain-cloth background in each picture, the awkwardness found in the photographs, coupled with a knowledge of Gill’s larger conceptual intention to allow the children to determine how they are to be depicted, separate these images from either candid shots or commissioned portraits.

#### PUSHPAMALA N. AND STAGED PORTRAITURE

As Gill’s “Balika Mela” pictures reveal, the routine practice of staging a portrait is easily taken for granted. Few artists have investigated this idea as thoroughly as Bengaluru-based Pushpamala N. (born in 1956), a sculptor turned performance artist, who since the mid-1990s has documented performances featuring herself in myriad roles. Her first foray into this genre was the black-and-white series “Phantom Lady or Kismet: A Photromance” (1996–98), which takes its style from B-grade film noirs, with Pushpamala playing a character resembling 1930s Bollywood diva Fearless Nadia, who typically wore a black mask or a black fedora with a white feather. Working with a production team, including photographer Meenal Agarwal (who actually took the images), the artist dressed as the masked figure is alternately seen reclining on

a dark staircase with a gun in hand, descending the staircase next to an ornate white marble column, and spying on her twin sister (also played by Pushpamala) who is fixing her hair at her dressing table. As the entire mise-en-scène in these works is contrived, layered with references to cinema and popular culture, there is no privileging of the subject over the setting, no part of the image that can be considered mere background.

In two subsequent series, “Bombay Photo Studio” (2000–03) and “The Native Types” (2000–04), Pushpamala continued to explore the components of imagery, while referring to tropes of South Asian visual culture. Each of the works in “Bombay Photo Studio” resembles old-fashioned sepia-toned studio portraiture, with soft lighting and a few props. However, all of the images contain clues to their creation. *Portrait of a Hindoo Woman*, which features a seated figure with her back to the camera, shows the shadow and parts of a standing lamp and electric cord in the foreground. The second part of the “Bombay Photo Studio” project, the “Navarasa Suite” is made up of nine images that similarly show Pushpamala posed as different characters in settings that contain obvious clues to the images’ staging. *Bhibhasta* depicts a woman in a black dress and pearls, with the shadow of a standing light in the right-hand part of the frame. In *Shringara*, Pushpamala leans against an ornate column with a dreamy, far-off look and a single spotlight on her nose and mouth. In the lower-left corner of the photograph is another spotlight and what appears to be a sink, elements of the set behind her. In *Shanta*, a woman poses with a sitar in a setting that contains an incongruous electrical cord in the upper-left corner. In Pushpamala’s contrived scenarios, these supposed instances

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POTENTIAL FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AS A JOURNALISTIC TOOL OR ART MEDIUM,  
OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN.



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of carelessness activate the inert spaces of a traditional portrait by calling attention to their artifice.

The labor and physical components that go into creating an image is the subject of “The Native Types” (2000–04), a color series featuring Pushpamala posed in scenarios from film stills, late 19th-century portrait painting and newspaper photographs. Employing a film crew to create painted backdrops, costumes, lighting and makeup, Pushpamala serves as the “producer”—in the Hollywood or Bollywood sense—of the entire image. In *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*, a catalog of her works from “The Native Types” and other concurrent series, Pushpamala gives detailed credits for each image, explaining its source, showing the referent source image and naming her collaborators. In one of the most striking works from series, *Yogini* (2002), Pushpamala models her image after a 16th-century Deccani (Bijapur school) miniature painting showing a yogini with blueish skin, dressed in red and adorned with golden scarves and jewelry, eyeing a small bird perched on her hand. To create the image, she hired a commercial artist to paint a backdrop featuring a white house on a hill, a landscape of trees, birds and flowers, while Pushpamala herself made the painted plaster model of the bird.

Along with these highly produced images, the catalog shows Pushpamala’s informal images of herself in these same costumes. But instead of re-creating old paintings, she is shown with modern devices, such as telephones and sunglasses, or posed in front of the backdrops with her collaborators. In one, the blue-skinned yogini wearing sunglasses reclines on a large divan with potted plants beneath her and a portable telephone in hand. Yet another series shows the making of

these images, with Pushpamala having her hair done, posing in front of painted backdrops as she is photographed by her collaborator Clare Arni—a curious twist of documenting the many layers of artifice that go into producing Pushpamala’s work.

#### DAYANITA SINGH AND NEAR-ABSTRACTION

Whereas Pushpamala N. considers and manufactures to a painstaking degree every element of the photographic frame, Dayanita Singh has taken a different route to a similar end, as her approach has evolved from traditional photojournalism and portraiture to forms of abstraction. Trained under American photographer Mary Ellen Mark (known for her stark portrayals of Indian prostitutes, London junkies and American homeless families) at the International Center for Photography in New York, Singh worked as a photojournalist for many years, shooting series on child prostitution and AIDS sufferers in India for Western magazines and newspapers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the mid-1990s, Singh turned away from the tragic imagery of India, which she felt was becoming stereotypical, and began to photograph well-to-do families from her peer group. She showed these pictures in 1997 at Scalo Gallery in Zürich, after which she began to photograph empty rooms in these same families’ old homes where, as she writes in the introduction to one collection, *Privacy* (2003), “I could sense the many generations of who had used this chair, and I realized I could make a portrait without a person in it.” Beginning with “Go Away Closer” (2001–06), a series of uncaptioned photographs also published in book form, Singh moved

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DAYANITA SINGH,  
*Sati Guptoo's Bed, Calcutta*, 2002, silver  
gelatin print, 100 x 100 cm.

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DAYANITA SINGH,  
*Dream Villa 20*, 2007, 2008, C-print,  
102 x 102 cm.

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DAYANITA SINGH,  
*Blue Book 1*, 2009. C-print,  
46 x 46 cm.



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away from photographs with clear subjects. The square black-and-white images are of interiors, empty hallways, an empty locker room, the corners of the rooms and the many objects that occupy these spaces.

Singh's shift toward photographs without an obvious subject, in which the whole image is given an equal albeit diminished weight, is evident in her two recent series. The pictures in "Blue Book" (2008), her first foray into color photographs, were taken in industrial locations (in India and elsewhere) at twilight, giving the images their distinctive blue hue. Singh stood on towers above factories waiting for the moment when dusk would flood her film with blue light, producing images that are not so much depictions of the empty factories as they are studies in color and mood—subjectless images. Singh's compositions project a vacant feeling, as the center of these compositions lacks a primary or proximate object. *Blue Book 25*, for example, shows angled roofs in the lower half of the picture but the middle ground is a dark, open space in front of another building and the landscape in the upper portion of the image. Similarly, *Blue Book 1* is a picture of a marsh, with a slight opening in the reeds that reflects the sky, a void in the middle of the composition.

In her latest series, "Dream Villa" (2008), Singh takes this premise further with photographs of the night sky and objects illuminated by artificial light. *Dream Villa 20*, 2007 (2008), is a square-format, color picture showing a strong beam of yellow-orange light illuminating part of a tree at the end of a bright lawn that appears like an apparition from the dark, giving the image a strong otherworldly appearance. *Dream Villa 27*, 2007 (2008), similarly depicts what looks like a backyard at night. The cloud-obscured moon in the top right corner is balanced by

the glare of a white street light that illuminates a small white hut in the middle of a clearing. *Dream Villa 32*, 2007 shows the moon partially hidden by the leaves of a tree, which is illuminated from an off-camera source. Singh described the series in a February 2009 interview with *The Hindu* newspaper as: "a landscape that exists in my head. A world where nothing is as it seems to be. It appears only at night and is lit by existing artificial lights. The moon is just a backdrop . . . The work has no geography." By emptying the image of a defined focus or topic, Singh approaches abstraction, and the "Dream Villa" works become a classic evocation of the artist's inner vision projected onto the world in front of the camera, rather than realistic depictions of a subject.

Singh's career itself embodies the myriad potential for photography as a journalistic tool or art medium—or something in between. Her black-and-white portraits of Indian families, like Vyarawalla's *Rehana Mogul and Mani Turner* (1937), contain a formal elegance that surpasses their documentary function, becoming alluring as aesthetic rather than purely informative objects. If Pushpamala N. took apart the photographic image, isolating its referent images, playing up tropes from popular culture and calling attention to each corner of the frame, Singh has put the photographic image back together as one whole aesthetic surface, ironically returning photography to its earliest, most elemental state as intangible sensory data—light—made manifest by chemicals on a sheet of paper. As with Pushpamala's projects, Singh's works are explicitly those of an artist thinking about the meaning of making an image, and as such could never be confused with photojournalism, propaganda or an amateur's snapshot.