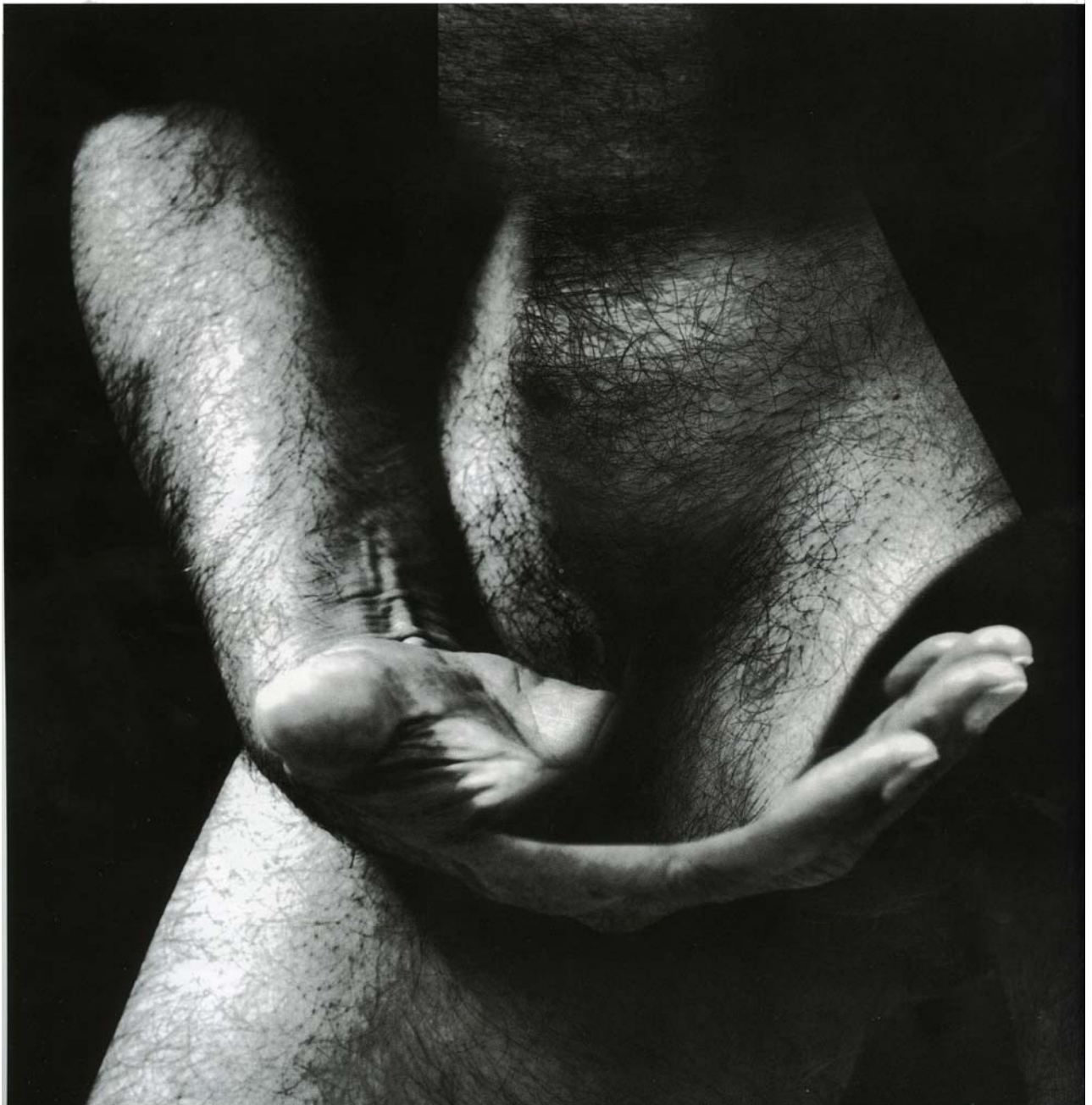


[Lead Essay]

Outside the Dark Room



Shukla Sawant assesses some of the significant uses to which Photography has been put in recent times.

Rameshwar Broota. *Untitled*. Photograph.



IN RECENT YEARS, THE PRACTICE OF PHOTOGRAPHY - THAT IMMENSELY creative form of "mechanical reproduction" - has become a mainstream consumer pastime with millions of images being produced and disseminated digitally every minute. While most images thus produced have been denied relevance as exhibition-worthy works of art, a number of visual artists are beginning to draw upon these visual domains, that is to say, the glossy advertisement photograph, the informal snapshot, the found photograph, the family album and other repositories of memory, as a conceptual point of departure for their work. Additionally, artists are also adopting visual strategies that show a profound influence of the photographic medium and its ancillary tools. This open embrace between painterly goals and the photographic reference and other forms of reproduction technology is a rather refreshing change from the cagey attitude of an earlier generation of artists who would take elaborate measures to deny their works' reliance on photography as an aid de memoir. The attempt to downplay their involvement with photography was often made in order to crystallize their identities as painters - for whom the modernist celebration of the painterly unique mark was of paramount importance.

The recent publication of *Portrait of an Artist, the Diary of C. Raja Raja Varma*, Raja Ravi Varma's brother has proved to be an eye opener for many¹. The ghostly black and white apparitions of his models - photographed gesturing into empty space - only in order to re-appear in painted form as bearers of an altogether different meaning, has given contemporary viewers of his paintings a completely different perspective on his creative process. The realist exactitude achieved by him through his reliance on the photograph as a source of documentary reference has opened up an interesting space of enquiry vis-a-vis the relationship between photography and painting. While the history of this relationship over the last hundred years is rather blurry in India, the turn towards photography in the last decade or so has led to a full-scale acceptance of the practice within the rarified domains of 'Art'. In fact, photography has come to occupy a fairly large space in the creative output of many a former painter or sculptor. No longer seeing it as an adjunct practice in the service of their main work, many artists have begun to take creative liberties with a medium which was once seen as being too technical and prescriptive for any direct expression.

This, of course, has a lot to do with the relative ease with which photographs can be taken today. The miniaturization and user-friendliness of digital technology with additional features such as instant re-viewing, deletion, as well as ease of storage and retrieval, now allows users a set of possibilities that older technologies could not. Moreover, digital photography's complete compatibility with various image manipulation softwares, has given photograph-makers a sense of agency and control that perhaps 'straight' photography lacked.

[Lead Essay]



Rameshwar Broota. *Untitled*. Photograph.

In this context, it makes sense to go back to the original meaning of the word, 'photography', which meant "to write with light" instead of what it came to stand in for, namely, its indexical capabilities. To see photography as a means "to inscribe with light" rather than a method "to bounce light off and register as an echo, a physical presence" offers us a different way of understanding photography today. At the outset, it might be constructive to remember that the belief that analogous photography is somehow true to the moment because it records directly by the chemical transformation of the film, giving the medium a degree of veracity, has its own pitfalls, and a great deal has already been written on this issue. Although adherents of straight photography remain 'true to the medium' by disallowing all attempts to alter 'reality' through technical intervention either before or after the photograph is taken, seeing it as a violation of the practice, it has repeatedly been argued that the 'un-doctored photograph' has always stood on slippery ground. A photographer's choice of a frame from a whole range of alternative frames, after all, is also an act of agency – an act of erasure of that which is not framed. Moreover, photographers, more often than not, have often an inconsistent relationship with the indexical. There are numerous ways in which photographs have been altered prior to the invention of digital technology, and as Satish Sharma and others have pointed out, it was a fairly common practice in vernacular photography in India.²

On the other hand, photographers who have been wielding the camera for long, taking analogous images, have developed a love-hate relationship with the digital medium and its synthesizing abilities.

Photography, as seen by them, has always had a different imperative, with its own set of magical possibilities. They have hardly ever sought legitimation within the domain of 'art' and not aspired to the unique condition of painting by creating the artificial rarity of a 'limited edition' of their work. They have, in fact, been rather circumspect in switching over to the digital mode – the digital form has increased the likelihood of photographic fiction, throwing into disarray their relationship with the indexical. The photographer, Sainath P., whose works have been viewed by over half a million people, primarily in rural India, is a case in point. In contrast to Sainath, his current collaborator, the photographer, Dayanita Singh, who began her career as a photo-journalist, has now carved a niche for herself within the white cube of the gallery space after a long internal tug-of-war with respect to the practice of photojournalism and its reception.

Therefore, for a more nuanced understanding of the recent shifts in photography-based practices, it is necessary to see how interdisciplinary exchanges have mutually transformed ways of thinking about the medium. To illustrate my essay, besides the work of Sainath P. and Dayanita Singh, I will look at the work of Rameshwar Broota, Pushpamala N., and Probir Gupta – artists who have used photography extensively in their work in order to either transform or reinvent its function.

One artist, who has had a long term, consistent relationship with photography is the painter, Rameshwar Broota. His foray into photography – which he learnt entirely by trial and error, began in the



1970s, and it has remained an obsession with him for over three decades. Piled up in his studio in New Delhi are stacks of negatives and contact sheets of photographs, as well as collages and manually altered photographs. Several images appear in the form of cut-outs on sheets of plastic, placed over each other, strangely anticipating one basic photoshop method of building up an image in layers. Cloning, altering scale, or else, inverting the image, are various other ways in which he seems to have anticipated what computer technology would eventually allow. A careful look at these photographs reveals that three decades ago, Broota had launched a full-scale investigation into various ways of expanding the parameters of photography by manual additions. Edges of photographs sandpapered to a smooth blend, white lines coaxed out by scratching with a blade, and copious notes on the margins of images on how exactly the images should be, were they to take on full life as art works. For him, photography, by itself, was inadequate in its technical limitations, and manual intervention became a way of wresting control over the accidental surprises in photography. In dismantling the basic premise of photography, Broota sought in it a take-off point for engaging with the transformative potential of the creative imagination. Some seven years ago, he began to work on the computer, finding in it the ideal means to control images giving him greater agency over the ideas he wished to express.

The photograph as reference has often been the back-bone of his work. Unlike voyeuristic photography, he is both the subject and the object of his own gaze, whereby the camera becomes a means of

inscribing his physical presence into the painting. The almost monochromatic, monumental humanscapes that form a large part of his work take their cue from photographs of his own body or of his close compatriots. The extraordinary optical faithfulness of the photograph and the degree to which it can shorten the sitting time of the poser has meant that photography has enabled artists to introduce into their work, awkward angles and difficult-to-hold poses of transition. If once, the mirror was the sole optical device for self-imaging, setting up a tricky relationship with the lateral image and the three quarter profile, the camera made possible a direct frontal representation, captured in an instant³. Strangely though, Broota's paintings and photographs are not about the instant. They are posed, composed images by which the notion of dynamic change is turned into a constant, wherein transformation is offered as an eternal phenomenon.

The LCD viewfinder on digital cameras has changed the way artists introduce autobiographical material into their work. The luminous LCD screen, flipped so as to allow a view of the pose, displays a miniaturized frame of the image to be recorded. Micro-lenses allow for extreme close-up images, and timing devices have done away with the need for a second presence to take the picture. Film-based cameras more often than not make the task of self-framing and focusing difficult to control. Moreover, the process is usually collaborative, with hours spent in explaining to the technicians at a photo-studio what exactly is required of the image. The discreetness and flexibility of computer technology has given Broota the capability to collapse the boundary between fixity

[Lead Essay]



Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni. *Lady in Moonlight* (after the 1889 Raja Ravi Varma oil painting). From *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*. Photograph. 2000-04.



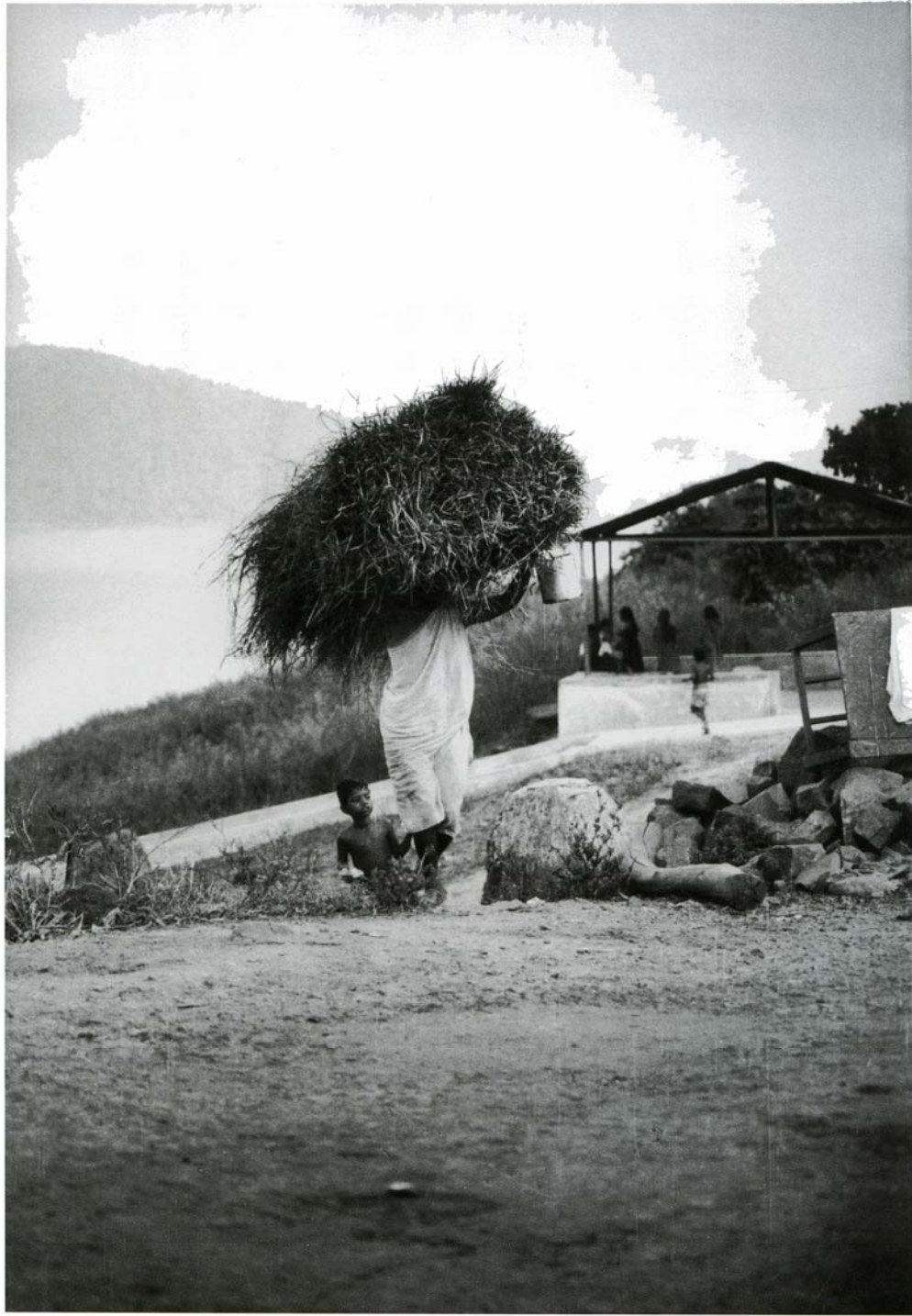
Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni. A popular series photograph from the tableau *Returning from the Tank*. From *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*. Photograph. 2000-04.

and transience, where the photographed image fed into a computer allows him an opportunity to exercise his imagination. If his early body of experiments with photo-collage retained an element of fragile transparency, his digital collages have ironed out the wrinkles where the photograph and the autographical mark seamlessly blend giving the images a fluid presence.

In contrast to Broota's approach to photography, Pushpamala N., in her decade-long engagement with the medium, has sought a social context for her work by questioning photography's evidentiary role and its use in the construction of representations. At first glance, her works may appear to be a part of "the banality of what has become an industry of post-colonial criticism"⁴. But what is of interest to us here, is her use of photography to critique photography. From her early experiments with the photo-romance format to her recent collaboration with Clare Arni to produce "studio photographs", Pushpamala's primary concern has been to question genres of photography by inserting herself into the frame. Shifting with ease from one genre to another and by drawing upon a range of cultural markers to render different personas, she is able to expose the artifice and limits of photography. In her work, the production of identity is a work of fiction, a self-dramatized, cultural performance. While the instrumentalization of photography in its

construction of Otherness as a part of the colonial enterprise has been an important field of enquiry for several artists in recent years, it is interesting to note that this has been done largely by appropriating the form of colonial photography in a tongue-in-cheek manner. By pushing its limits to the very edge, artists like James Luna, Fiona Foley, and Renee Valerie Cox, among others, have successfully drawn attention to the absurdities and inherent instability of the colonial enterprise of photography. Pushpamala's work though is marked by a restlessness in its exploration of the artifice as well as the violence of photographic representation. Beginning with the film still, she has also recently focused her attention on police surveillance photography and the studio photograph. Curiously, while the former may have its locus in colonial photography, studio photography in India developed "on the margins, in the spillover" of a colonial form of domination.

Perhaps, the most noticeable, germane example of the fakeness of photography as an empowering device is the studio photograph. This is a site where one can exercise one's fantasies. The image-making process in a studio-based practice is very different from surveillance photography, which is essentially an act of trespass. Employing photography to interpret dreams and fantasies within the enclosed space of the studio makes the photographic encounter in that space a



Sainath P. From *Visible Work, Invisible Women*. Photograph.

[Lead Essay]



Sainath P. *Brick Kiln Freeway*. Photograph.

collaborative act requiring a degree of identification between the photographer and the photographed and a rapport with the instrument that records dreams. While the “pathos of photography” may mark the stilling of time, the principal drive behind the creation of a space of fantasy and aspiration engendered by the studio ambience is the creation of an image the subject can identify with. In Pushpamala’s take on studio photography though, one is left with a sense of discomfort, for the very fakeness of these photographs elicits a knowing laugh. In fact, the photographs end up exploiting the naïve faith placed in the power of photography to fulfil dreams.

An interesting counterpoint to Pushpamala’s practice is the work of the writer and photo-journalist, Sainath. P. His documentary work in rural India and the manner in which he has chosen to showcase his work in the form of makeshift exhibitory spaces across the country has

opened up several new discursive spaces for the photog images, which he often co-produces with the people he photo also appear in newspapers and the popular press, expansive potential to mobilize opinion for collective action against injustice. His photographs are not escapist fantasies; instead, they attempt what Arjun Appadurai calls a “community of sentiment”. S effect, negates Susan Sontag’s acerbic observation that “photojournalists report that there was nothing to photograph; this usually means is that there was nothing terrible to photograph choosing to valorize invisible labour and survivors of calamity

His photographs of marginalized communities, titled, *Visa Invisible Women*, have been displayed in spaces belonging to the communities he documents, universities, and colleges, as well as mainstream galleries. Every encounter with this archive,

incessant reappearance in different venues, in railway stations, in bus shelters, on factory gates, as well as the unlikely space of the gallery, highlights the deep effectiveness and virtue of the multiple in its ability to have several simultaneous lives. The refusal of this archive to disappear into oblivion, its constant migration into different discursive spaces, its refusal to be effaced, has a lot to do with its location in the social reality of the people photographed and the empathy it elicits from the viewers. The photographs in their Black and White starkness are exhibited, accompanied by text, which underlines the fact that often images are, in fact, incapable of "speaking a thousand words". This act of speaking with the audience invites a response in the form of comments, which then become a part of the exhibition.

Another interesting dimension of his photography is his on-going project of documenting the families of farmers who have committed suicide. In this, he makes an interesting use of a photograph within a photograph - the image of the dead reverentially cradled in the lap of a surviving relative, effectively telescoping time for the viewer. The youthful presence of the deceased, photographed in their prime, ensures a posthumous continuation of a life that often anchored a family together in times of crisis. These poignant, posed photographs have none of the violence that normally accompanies the media specialization of private grief. Instead, they appear de-linked from the spectacle as evidence of a past that was lived with dignity, despite all odds.

Dayanita Singh's retreat into the gallery space from her previous engagement as a photojournalist has come about after a long period of self-introspection. In 2003, the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, held a retrospective of her work, and during the course of the exhibition, Singh chose to engage with the University community by inviting academics to contribute texts for the exhibition and by inviting several groups of students to participate in several informal discussions on photography. The discussions, as they unfolded, brought to the fore the very peculiar relationship between photojournalism and voyeurism and its complicity in the manufacturing of 'news'. A camera's power to elicit a performance instead of an ability to make a detached recording of a happening, has made Singh question her own practice to the extent, that of late, she has been concentrating on documenting places without people, where the inanimate objects convey a sense of fixity. The pose as a condensation of time, 'schooling in' of a particular way of making a self-representation too informs her family photographs. She remains a purist,



Dayanita Singh. *Untitled*. From *Go Away Closer*. Photograph. 2007. © Dayanita Singh.

for whom the "punctum", the surprise element that makes a photograph, is of great significance. Her refusal to crop or otherwise alter the image brings in a certain amount of detachment to her picturing of the world that is central to the archival as a form of photographic practice. Out of her enormous body of powerful work, perhaps the most engaging is the series on libraries, which are themselves repositories of knowledge as well as portraits of individuals. For example, her photographs of Nehru's library, at Anand Bhavan, Allahabad, which she documented extensively in 2000, gives us an interesting recombination of various modes of archiving: the neatly shelved books, the family photographs, mementos on shelves, all unite into one single frame of the documentary photograph.

It has become increasingly clear that altering, changing, and collapsing categories in order to subvert spatial and social configurations are important strategies for artists today. Photographic material that artists employ today too goes well beyond images produced by the camera with lens apparatus. Medical imaging

[Lead Essay]



Probir Gupta. *Cosmetic Surgery*. Installation with photographs.

technologies and other ways of extending sight and recording the visual, for example, have become important sites to explore for metaphorical appropriation. To experience the interior of the body through the CT Scan, the X-Ray, the ultrasound, and frozen images of a colonoscopy; to experience the internal body externalized, is a phenomenon peculiar to our times. Knowing that what lies at the heart of these imaging technologies is photography in its expanded form, has made medical imaging technology an interesting point of departure for artists. Probir Gupta, who has made extensive use of photography in his work, is not a photographer in the conventional sense of the word, but he has been using medical images in his work for some time now. He also works with marginalized communities in order to help them document through photography, their own stories in order to facilitate a dialogue with the mainstream in conjunction with several activist organizations. But in his recent installation, *Cosmetic Surgery*, he makes use of photographs as 'found material' in order to produce a cycle of messages

that pushes us to look at how profoundly photography and its extended form affects our visual perception of the world. The installation makes use of a painted studio backdrop as well as photographs retrieved from an urban village studio in Delhi, which was recently demolished in a bid to 'legalize' built structures in the city. Combining these found images with photographs of X-Ray plates (not X-Ray plates in themselves) which are discarded by the thousands by hospitals as well as plaster-casts of broken limbs, Gupta sets up an interesting dialogue between various forms of indexed signs and the fantasy space of the now demolished studio as a way of investigating our relationship to the city classified into legal and illegal entities.

The potential for abstraction, the seamless weaving together of disparate elements, and the stripping away of its 'truth value', has made photography, more than ever before, into a constructivist tool. In the future, it is unlikely that the development of photography will attempt



Probir Gupta. *Cosmetic Surgery* (Detail). Installation with photographs.

to ape analogue photography in all its characteristics. The stasis of the photograph though will continue to have the ability to hold attention. The single still from a sequence of stills that constitutes the moving image may constantly be retrieved for contemplation. In that still moment, there rests a compression of time, ideology, and emotion, that can be lost in the torrent of images that overwhelms us today. The static image, the multiple copy, and a degree of fidelity to appearance, will continue to give the medium currency even though modes of making the photograph will constantly evolve through time.

END-NOTES

1. Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger (Eds.). *Raja Ravi Varma: Portrait of an Artist. The Diary of C. Raja Raja Varma*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 2005.
2. Satish Sharma. *Rotigraphy: Indian Street Photography*. *Art Asia Pacific*. No. 13. 1997.
3. See, for example, the laterally inverted self-portrait painted in 1931 by Amrita Sher-Gil in the collection of the NGMA, New Delhi. See also Rupika Chawla's observations on it in *Talent, Tragedy and the Myth of Amrita Sber-Gil in Indian Art* :

An Overview, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Rupa & Co, 2003.

4. Susie Tharu. *This is not an inventory: Norm and Performance in everyday femininity*. 2006.
5. See Susan Sontag's interview in the *Boston Review*. 1975.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 1996.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang. 1981.
- Hulick, Diana. *The Transcendental Machine? A Comparison of Digital Photography and Nineteenth-Century Modes of Photographic Representation in Leonardo*. Vol. 23, No. 4. 1990.
- Pinney, Christopher. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. University of Chicago Press. 1998.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1977.
- Ogibe, Olu. *Photography and the substance of the image. In/sight: African Photographers; 1940 - Present*. Guggenheim Museum, New York. 1996.