

## ARTnews

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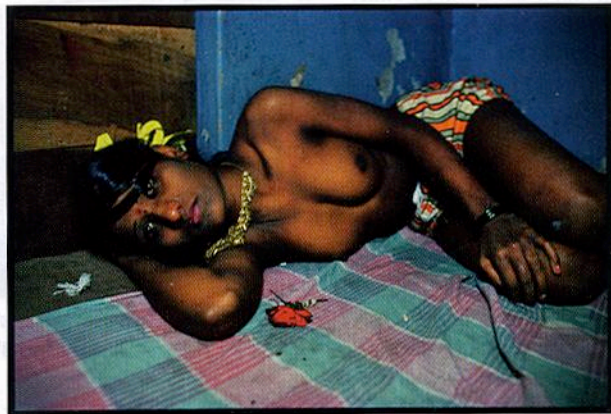
## Mary Ellen Mark

Yancey Richardson  
and Marianne Boesky

Shown for the first time since 1981, Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of Indian brothels were riveting. Unfolding against a backdrop of riotous color, lives that one might expect to be unremittingly grim and tragic were also shown to be full of warmth and ordinary humanity.

When the photographs were taken in 1978–79, Mark had already been visiting Falkland Road, a red-light district in Bombay, for ten years. It took that long to gain the prostitutes' and madams' trust, but the results were certainly worth the wait. Some of the pictures show the wire-fronted "cages" opening onto the street, where women and transvestites are on display like goods in a shop window or animals in a zoo. Others were taken in the tiny cubicles behind the cages and on the floors above them. Here the prostitutes, dressed in gaudy clothing, live and ply their trade in brightly painted rooms decorated with patterned bedspreads and curtains. The visual impact of these photographs is extraordinary: in *Putla on her bed with a crushed rose*, for example, a young girl wearing gold jewelry, a lime-green ribbon in her hair, and fuschia lipstick reclines on a pink-and-green bedspread against a bright blue wall.

The prostitutes are seen crying, playing with children and pets, washing, applying makeup, joking and working inside the claustrophobic rooms where they spend almost all their time. In *Munni with a customer*, Munni lies under a man in a red-and-white shirt and gazes away from the camera. Her seemingly passive indifference is the exception, however, as most of the women are full of life. In *Girl with a potential customer and girl with a baby*, a woman in black shirt and shorts has her arm around a man reclining on a bed. Leaning over him, she smiles playfully into the camera's lens, just one manifestation of the unexpected beauty suffusing every print in this unforgettable exhibition. —*Elisabeth Kley*



Mary Ellen Mark, *Putla on her bed with a crushed rose*, 1978, Cibachrome, 16" x 20". Marianne Boesky.

# MODERN PAINTERS

In View

**Mary Ellen Mark: Falkland Road**

Marianne Boesky Gallery and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

17 NOVEMBER – 23 DECEMBER

For several remarkably productive decades now, Mary Ellen Mark has practiced a popular, engaging and much-imitated brand of personal photojournalism that aspires to Diane Arbus's confrontational clarity but often settles, these days, for something closer to Annie Leibovitz's professional aplomb. Although she works in the tradition of the concerned photographer, tackling social issues from homelessness and poverty to mental illness and old age, Mark is also very much at home in the pages of *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*, where her pictures tend to have more impact than weight. Her photographs are arresting and nervy – rarely slick, yet oddly impersonal and frequently frustrating. Mark gets the picture but, it seems, little else. Her subjects remain objects; if she connects with them emotionally, the evidence of that connection is elusive if not completely lost.

It's important to be reminded that this was not always the case, so Mark's recent exhibitions at the Marianne Boesky and Yancey Richardson galleries were especially welcome. Both shows were devoted to one body of work, made in India over a period of three months at the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979, and first exhibited and published in 1981 as *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*. The enlarged

and expanded version of that book, just reissued by Steidl, prompted the shows and includes 11 photographs that hadn't made the original cut. But even *Falkland Road*'s most familiar photos look brand new because Mark has reprinted the entire series, dispelling the murky pall that shadowed many of the images and allowing the colour to sizzle and pop. The effect is vivid, jolting, as if a dark cloud has lifted.



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Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of brothels in India—which include this one, "Saroja Braids Kumla's Hair. Mari Hugs Saroja. Bombay, India, 1978"—are on view in two concurrent shows at Boesky and Richardson.

**BAS JAN ADER:** Rubenstein, 534 W. 24th St. 212-462-4905. Through Dec. 22. **MARK BRADFORD:** Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262. Through Dec. 3. **JOHN CHAMBERLAIN:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258. Through Dec. 3. **TRACEY EMIN:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through Dec. 17. **APRIL GORNIK:** Danese, 535 W. 24th St. 212-223-2227. Through Dec. 23. **HANS HAACKE:** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through Dec. 23. **MONA HATOUM:** Alexander and Bonin, 132 Tenth Ave., at 18th St. 212-367-7474. Through Dec. 22. **REBECCA HORN:** Sean Kelly, 528 W. 29th St. 212-239-1181. Through Dec. 3. **MARY KELLY:** Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. 212-727-3323. Through Dec. 3. **MARY ELLEN MARK:** Boesky, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9889, and Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610. Through Dec. 23. **KEN SCHLES:** Schoormans, 508 W. 26th St. 212-243-3159. Through Dec. 17. **NANCY SPERO:** Lelong, 528 W. 26th St. 212-315-0470. Through Dec. 3. **BILL VIOLA:** James Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500. Through Dec. 22. **"TWIXT TWO WORLDS, OR THE UNINVITED QUEST: A MAGICIAN AT THE SÉANCE":** Burgin, 243 W. 18th St. 212-462-2668. Through Dec. 10.

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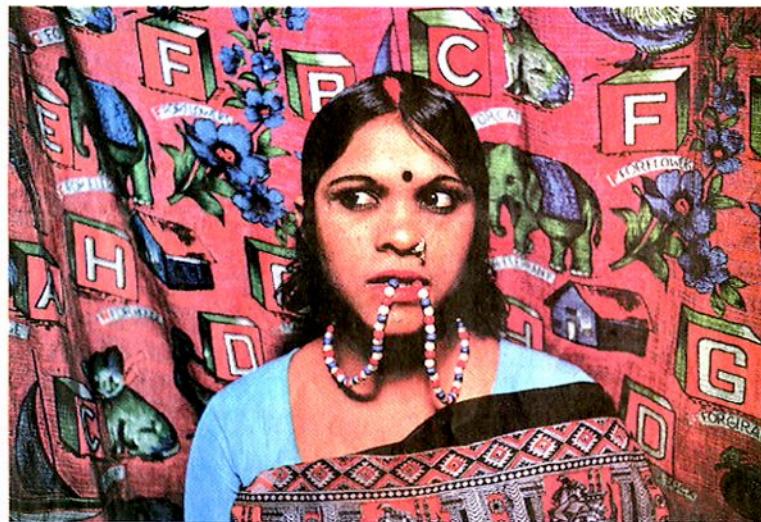
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK  
MAKING HER MARK

In 1981, Mary Ellen Mark, a frequent contributor to this magazine, published a book of photographs that she had made in Bombay over a three-month period in 1978, when she spent the better part of every day on a street of brothels called Falkland Road. Her subjects were the young prostitutes (the glaring, bare-breasted girl on the book's cover was thirteen) and transvestites who worked the street, some

out of cage-like storefronts, others from warrens of crowded cubicles in the tenements above. Many of them had initially thrown garbage, water, and insults at Mark, but she was eventually given complete access to their lives. The disconcerting intimacy of the pictures—now on display at the Boesky and Richardson galleries in Chelsea in conjunction with the book's reissue—never feels exploitative. Mark views these garishly made-up characters with affection and concern. She can't transform their lives, but she can render them clearly and carefully—and, in these brighter, supersaturated new color prints, more vividly than before.

—Vince Aletti





**FOR SALE** Mary Ellen Mark's "Falkland Road" series is on display in its entirety for the first time since 1981 at two Chelsea galleries. Top, "Cages on Falkland Road at Night, Bombay, India" (1978). Above, "Rekha with Beads in her Mouth, Bombay, India" (1978).

**SCENES FROM A ROAD** Mary Ellen Mark's "Falkland Road" series of photographs is on view at two Chelsea galleries in its entirety for the first time since 1981, along with 11 additional images. Shot mostly between 1979 and 1981, the photographs document the brothels of Falkland Road in Bombay. Ms. Mark visited the area over the course of a decade before she earned the trust of the prostitutes there and gained entry to the brothels. She captured them waiting for business, applying makeup, in sessions with customers, napping, bathing, and crying. The exhibit is presented in conjunction with the release of a new edition of the monograph "Falkland Road" (Steidl Books). *Through Friday, December 23, Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Yancey Richardson Gallery, 535 W. 22nd St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 646-230-9610, free. Also: Marianne Boesky Gallery, Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., 535 W. 22nd St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-680-9889, free.*



# The New York Times

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2005



Photographs by Mary Ellen Mark

From the book "Falkland Road," a photograph of a prostitute, Kamia, with a customer behind curtains, in Bombay, India, 1978.

## Old Images of Prostitutes in India Are Newly Wrenching

By HOLLAND COTTER

"Picturesque" is what the West has called India for centuries. But when the American photographer Mary Ellen Mark started visiting in the 1960's, she didn't head for the Taj Mahal. She hung out on a jammed and noisy street in Bombay called Falkland Road, the city's busiest low-rent, red-light district.

Her goal was to photograph the prostitutes — men and women, children and adults — who lived and worked there. Along with their handlers and clients, they were figures absent from most travel guides and histories. In a book of photographs titled "Falkland Road," published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1981, Ms. Mark put them, indelibly, on the record.

Long out of print, the book has been reissued in an expanded edition by Steidl. And the complete photographic series, exhibited only once before in the United States, is on view in two Chelsea galleries, Marianne Boesky and Yancey Richardson. Last seen nearly a quarter of a cen-

Mary Ellen Mark

Marianne Boesky Gallery  
Yancey Richardson Gallery

tury ago, the images are as startling and engrossing as ever. And with the devastating spread of AIDS in India since they were made, they are something more.

Ms. Mark had a tough time starting the project. The Falkland Road prostitutes greeted this American with a camera and unknown intentions with voluble distrust, pelting her with garbage and insults. But she kept coming back, and persistence was persuasive. Eventually, one of the madams befriended her, and everything followed from that.

For three months beginning in October 1978, Ms. Mark spent much of her time on Falkland Road. She photographed prostitutes at work: bathing, putting on makeup, displaying themselves in doorways or in cage-like street windows, or having sex with clients in upstairs brothels.

She also documented their private lives. Madams were hardnosed man-



A photograph of Putla and Rekha, on Falkland Road, in Bombay.

agers but also surrogate mothers to the teenagers who worked for them, and who, in certain cases, already had children of their own. Prostitutes often forged bonds of mutually protective affection among themselves.

Some had steady boyfriends.

Transvestite prostitutes — many of them eunuchs, or hijras — seem particularly at ease in front of Ms. Mark's camera, with or without their male lovers. They look as if they're having fun, flirting and vamping. (For another, very different photographic take on Indian eunuchs, I highly recommend Dayanita Singh's book, "Myself Mona Ahmed," published by Scalo in 2001.)

In short, the forms of intimacy were manifold, and Ms. Mark caught many of them. She also caught ruin in progress, in images of young people made old in ways that no amount of makeup can hide. "Falkland Road" is about a life of necessity, not luxury, though it is a life with its own codes of honor, pride, status and glamour, and one with its own dangers.

When Ms. Mark was working, AIDS had not yet surfaced. Anyone coming to these photographs for the first time will surely be struck by their almost overwhelming vitality. Anyone who also saw them in 1981 will feel a remembered wonder and a sense of foreboding that is new.



LONDON SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

**Cage girls of Bombay**  
May 24, 1981



300D-003-059

(cover)

The life of a Bombay cage girl.



300D-002-023

A Falkland Road exterior.

The squalid brothel district of Bombay is hardly the place to look for tenderness and beauty. Yet the distinguished American photographer Mary Ellen Mark, famous for her reportage of Indian life, went on such a search. After three months living among the prostitutes she produced some haunting images, to be published next week in a remarkable book.



401P-012-010  
Photographer Mary Ellen Mark, on assignment in India.



300D-001-009  
A Bombay madam with her girls in one of Falkland Road's more elite establishments. "They worship and fear the madam," says Mary Ellen Mark. "They have a master-slave, mother-daughter relationship."



300D-004-071  
Prostitutes off duty. They rarely leave rooms like these, apart from going on brief errands or visit the doctor.





300D-153-005

Inside the cubicles of male pleasure and female work. Left : a customer bargains. Right : a girl arranges her clothing.

The prostitutes of Bombay have for long been the subjects of scandal, concern and curiosity – attracting the voyeur as well as the paying customer. In the last century, in the Imperial age, the city had European brothels staffed by the victims of the white slave trade for the sexual gratification of the bachelor servants of the Empire. Indians were appalled and intrigued by such behaviour from the ruling race.

“No educated native,” wrote the Quaker reformist Alfred Dyer, “thinks he has properly ‘done’ Bombay unless he has seen the seething hell of European vice.



300D-158-020

Two playful Falkland Road girls at the doorway of their workplace.





300D-01X-01X

Kamla, customer and curtain of decency. The clients are mainly lower middle-class Indians, though Arabs, says Mary Ellen Mark, may rent a girl for a couple of days and are considered lucrative prizes.



300D-003-050

A transvestite and client. The child looking on is the daughter of a prostitute.

The native streets of vice are decorous in the extreme (by comparison) ... the women are decently clothed and many of them veiled, and the contrast is most humiliating."

Today the trade in voyeurism has been turned about. After the curious European visitor has inspected Bombay's famed Towers of Silence, where the bodies of the Parsi dead are picked clean by vultures, he may then proceed to Bombay's famed libidinous quarter – to streets with old Imperial names, Grand Road and Falkland Road, where Indian prostitutes solicit their clients from cages. Many of them are children, kidnapped or bought from Indian villages. Others are hijras, transvestites or eunuchs castrated shortly after birth.

Prices are cheap the average in rupees is the equivalent of 20 pence but few Europeans who have come to scoff remain to pay, and trade is mainly plied with Indians of the lower middle-class. For the European, therefore, the common Bombay prostitute has remained merely a tourist curiosity, a beckoning unfortunate imprisoned in a cage. Such is not the case with Mary Ellen Mark, who first saw Falkland Road and its girls as a young American photographer in 1968. She tried to photograph it then and failed. "The hostility and aggression were just too much," she says. But the faces she had seen haunted her for the next ten years. She went back a dozen times to India, where her reportage of all aspects of life won her international acclaim. On each visit she returned to Falkland Road, and each time it continued to elude her. Then, in 1978, she came to Bombay prepared to spend three months living with its prostitutes, in a final, determined effort to get beneath the bizarre and inhuman surface of their lives.

At first Mary Ellen Mark found the going tough. Hostile men would gather round. Women would hurl insults and garbage. But eventually she made friends and after a few weeks she was popping in and out of brothels like a French bishop. What she is most concerned to show is that the cage girls are thinking people rather than trained animals. "They were just great people. Those months were really joyous."

She also uncovered a few hitherto hidden layers of sociology and, perhaps less unexpectedly, some sisterhood. The prostitutes of Falkland Road can be divided into four groups. There are the street girls, who hire rooms from madams by day and sleep among beggars on the pavement by night. There are the transvestites, who have heterosexual as well as homosexual clients. There are the posher girls with rooms on the upper floors of Falkland Road houses (Ms Mark once had to hide under a bed there during a police raid). And then there are Falkland Road's most famous inhabitants, the cage girls, ridiculed and abused by the rest. No one seems to know where the idea comes from, but the cages are used to protect and display their contents not imprison them.





300D-002-039

A young prostitute gets made up. Sometimes they will dress as little girls, sometimes as "English ladies".



300D-126-019

Potential customer, potential goods. The first stages in a deal that will probably cost five rupees (about 25p).



300D-136-012

Later stages in a similar deal. Girls rely on their colleagues and madams for protection. Pimps are rare.





300D-127-014

Cage girl. "All of them, even the most seemingly aggressive, are vulnerable," says Mary Ellen Mark.



300D-121-001

Companionship. A prostitute sits with an elderly friend now retired from the game. They are both transvestites.



300D-122-015

Cage girl at home. Girls eat, sleep, rear their children and work all within the confines of the brothel.

The girls defend one another. They form close friendships, share food and jokes. They asked few questions of their visitor. She writes: "They wanted to know only my age, why I didn't wear a brassiere and why I wasn't married. I think the reason I was finally accepted was that I was single alone in the world like they were."

Mary Ellen Mark describes Falkland Road as "the most gentle and interesting street I've ever visited. Prostitution is a way for these girls to survive, and the one thing they have going for them is that they're not involved with drugs or pimps."

During the 1890s American missionaries came to Bombay and patrolled the streets from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m., knocking on brothel doors and windows and quoting scripture ("Be sure your sin will find you out."). Sometimes in ill lit streets their female helpers were mistaken for prostitutes by the British soldiery. Fighting ensued. One courageous Christian, Malcolm Moss, would sing hymns outside brothel windows and follow clients home by tricycle to note their addresses, thence to bombard them with tracts through the post. According to records recently unearthed by Professor Kenneth Ballhatchet of London University, Moss was frequently assaulted for his pains once by a major and once by a lance corporal of the Lancashire Regiment; presumably buttoning up their flies first.

Beside this Ms Mark's own intrepidity pales somewhat. But then great fortitude is often a product of great moral certainty.

Ian Jack

'Falkland Road' is published by Thames & Hudson. Hardback, £12, paperback, £5.95.

Most of the photographs in this article appear in the book. An exhibition is now at the Olympus Cameras Centre, 151 Piccadilly, London W1 and is on until June 19. Opening times are Monday to Friday, from 10 a.m. until 5.30 p.m. Admission is free.

END