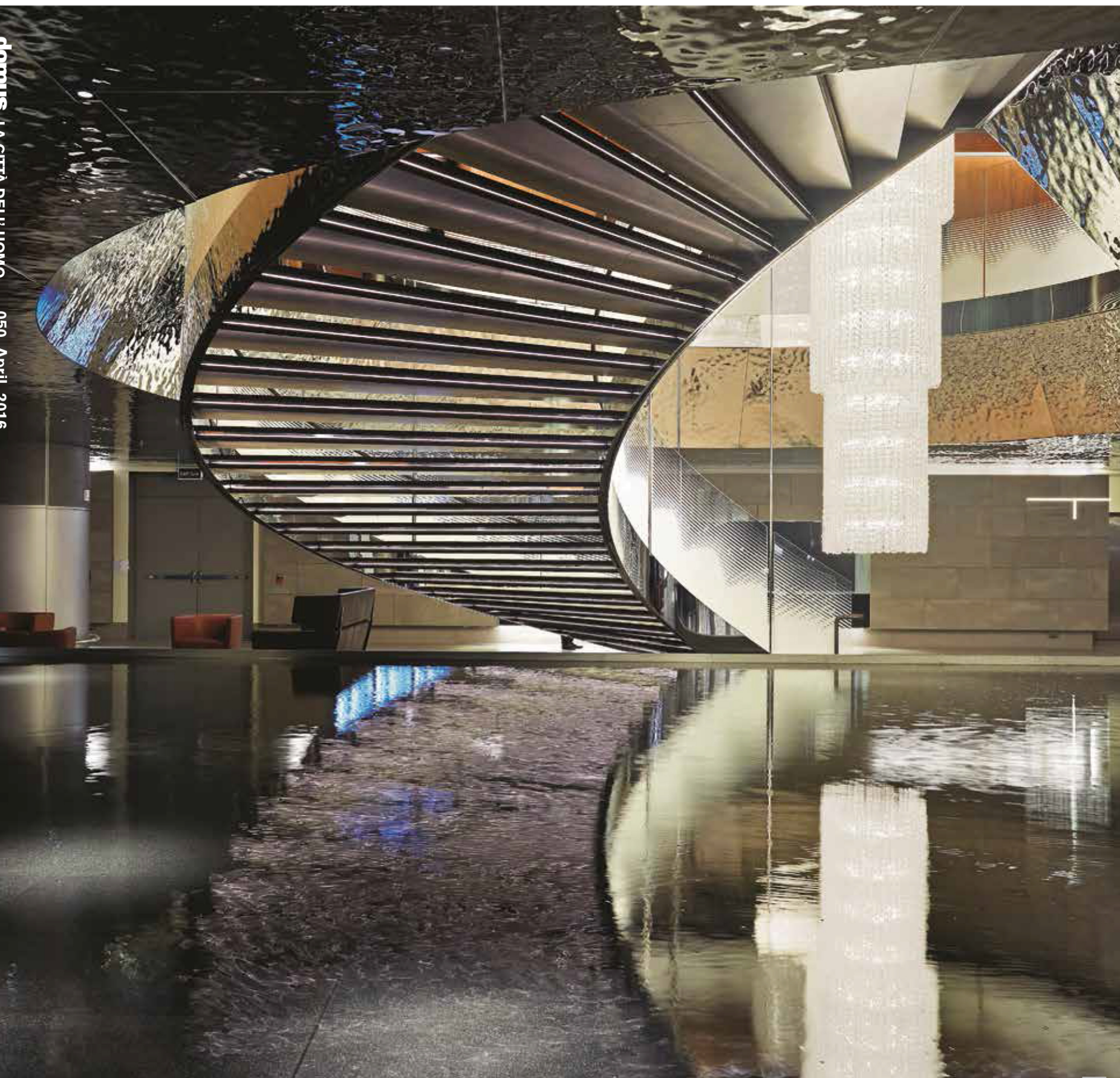


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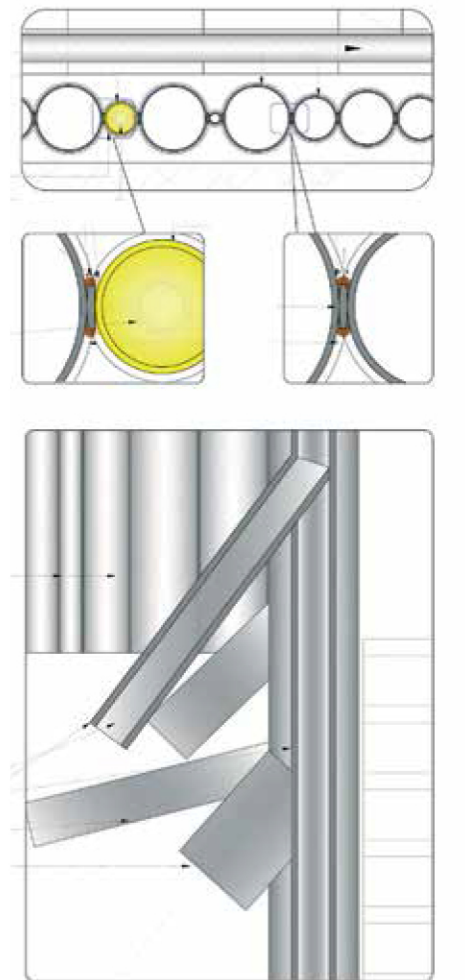
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Cover: View of the Al Mourjan business lounge, for Qatar Airways Hamad International Airport, Doha, Qatar. A curved steel stair leads to the restaurant on the mezzanine, which lies suspended between the pillars of the terminal. A reflection pool offers a play of dappled light on the hammered metal surfaces of the intrados and ceiling.



Detail of pipe wall installation in the Collage House by S+PS Architects

## FAMILY ALBUM

A recent exhibition of sculptural objects that adorn rooftops of homes in the hinterland of Punjab forms a colourful narrative of celebration, self-perception, and memory. Often entwined with the personal histories and aspirations of their owners, these 'rooftop trophies' dramatically, also often humorously, animate the otherwise nondescript skyline

Rajesh Vora, Kaiwan Mehta



The exhibition *Everyday Baroque* currently on show at the Photoink Gallery in New Delhi is an exposition of photographs by Rajesh Vora, framing rooftops in the Punjab countryside over the last three years. These photos immediately bring to my mind the *havelis* of Shekhawati, richly and intricately painted mansions of rich merchants who made their fortunes in Colonial India and essentially traded out of metropolitan centres such as Bombay and Calcutta. These merchants identified the small towns in the region of Shekhawati, in the north-western Indian state of Rajasthan, as their home and returned with their profits and prosperity to commission the construction of elaborately painted mansions. The other reference these photos bring to mind is Gautam Bhatia's *Punjabi Baroque* – and the kind of architecture in late-twentieth century urban India that he discusses; the title of the show consciously and clearly alludes to the title of Bhatia's book, *Punjabi baroque and other*

*memories of architecture* (Penguin Books, 1995). The village mansions, amidst green fields, that Vora's photographs capture are also built over time by immigrants, who have now returned after having made profits abroad. The NRI (Non-Resident India) returns to his town and village prosperous and rich to build a home, his own 'Buckingham Palace' (as one of the homes in a village close to Ludhiana is named, and has always stayed in my memory since I first saw it). Like the *havelis* of Shekhawati, these are very often not actively used homes, but remain locked or with very few family members as permanent residents. These locked home await the NRI family to return to it for vacations, festivals, or weddings. These homes, like the winner of an award, hold high above their heads a prized trophy – a pinnacle to the happily built mansion! What emerges then is a landscape of 'wondrous objects' – buildings rising above green fields, and a dramatic terrain

of terraces – finely decorated or patterned, with objects of pride, amusement, and wonder, sprinkled all across the field of terraces. It is an open-air *ajayab ghar* – a museum of objects and memories. These objects clearly are well thought through, invested with design, time, labour, money and construction skills. These objects recall the urban as much as the rural, but also a sense of nationalism imagined through its air and military forces. The human body is celebrated as much as the technological nature of civilisation. The male human body in the version of the sportsman, or soldier, or farmer is present strong and alive. These have often been forms in which the human body is overlapped smoothly upon the idea of a nation or motherland; the farmer that tills the motherland and feeds the nation, the sportsman whose agility and strength reflect the youthfulness and power of a nation, or the soldier who fights and dies to protect homeland – are energetic masculine symbols.



This spread: the homes photographed and featured in the exhibition hold high above their heads a prized trophy. What emerges then is a landscape of 'wondrous objects'; an open-air *ajayab ghar* – a museum of objects and memories.

The male human body in the version of the sportsman, or soldier, or farmer is a fairly popular motif. Below: set of 3 photographs, thematised on the farmer and his bullocks





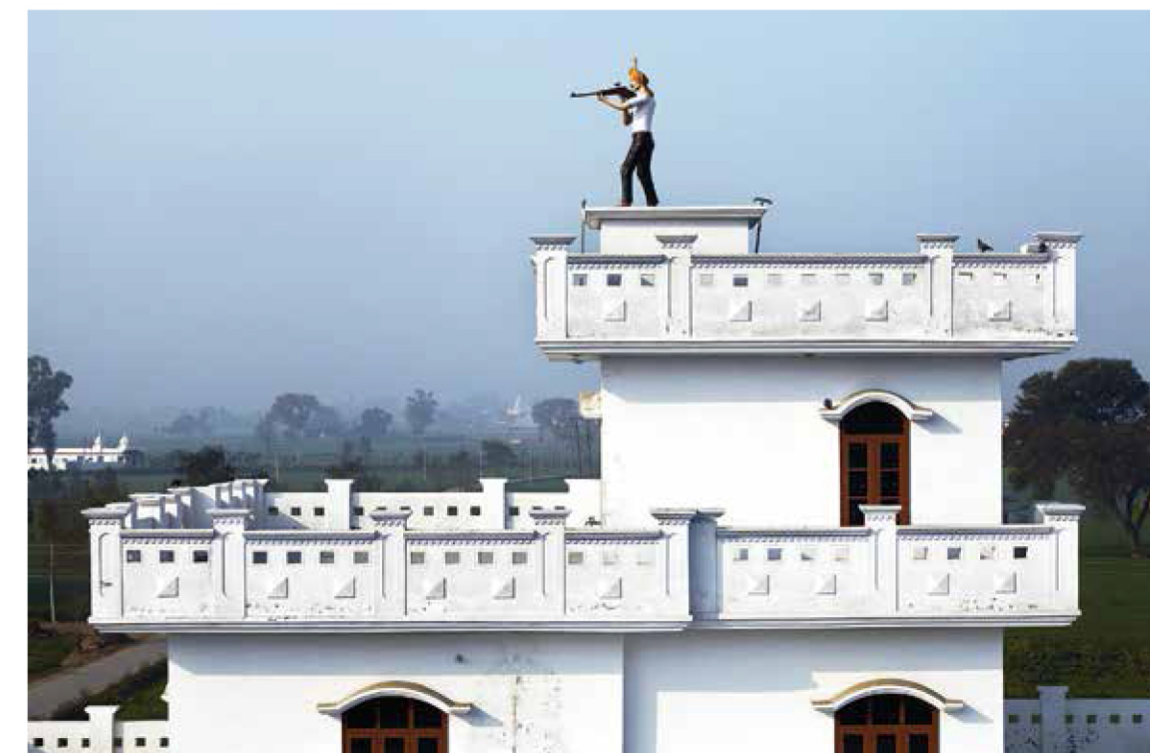
They signify the self-imagination of a people who commission these architectural trophies, as well as reproduce a national perception of the people they are. Often the same ideas are represented through objects of technology and progress – the army tank, the fighter jet, the ‘world-cup’ trophy, the football, or at best, even a pressure cooker! The lion or a cock as part of rural or forest life does also appear. However, the classic one is the Statue of Liberty on a very post-modern mansion – a recall to another nation, not the homeland, but the new-land of prosperity and promise, of gifts and benefits. Family portraits, wedding-couple photos, or growing-up children often adorn walls and cabinets in a home, and many similar ones fill up the treasured family albums; in the days of the ‘selfie’, the album is digital, or the photo is your screen wallpaper. The photo is often digitally fitted into a scenic landscape or a tourist-city backdrop, with flowers and stars circling around your adorable baby, or your pretty wife! This world of pictures is now transformed into the landscape of sculptural objects and fanciful building surfaces, patterned railings, and decorative windows and parapets. Each house is the externalisation of this family portrait, the photo of the beloved, decorated beyond the real, shaping a newer reality – of the home away from (new) home, the land of recall, away from the land of new (migrant) life and prosperity.



This spread: while certain objects clearly signify technology and advancement, such as airplanes and jets (left and below left) others are indicative of the idea of a nation, often reflected through the soldier who fights and dies to protect the homeland (below)



This page top: the Statue of Liberty on a post-modern mansion is a recall to another nation, not the homeland, but the new-land of prosperity and promise. Above and right: energetic masculine symbols such as the healthy, sporty (weight-lifting) human body are celebrated as much as the technological nature of civilisation (opposite page and next spread)



A recall that combines patriotism and prosperity; patriotism in the wake of having left the motherland, the earth of birth (*janm bhoomi*), and moving towards the land of action and building a life (*karma bhoomi*) where there is prosperity. A patriotism in fighting for the motherland – fighting to win 'world cups' (cricket or football), the sports of national popularity, the forces protecting the borders, with their instruments and vehicles; or patriotism that is directly connected with land – the cock, the bullock, the lion, the farmer. The pressure cooker is a symbol of the 'home' progressing, moving away from the rural (land, and organic techniques) towards urban and the technological. The car and the bus, connect the ever-present rural to the urban (migration, technology, aspirations). But the final destination of the healthy, sporty (weight-lifting) body is the landscape even beyond the urban – the post-modern environment, beyond normative comprehension, of multiplicity, of the statues of liberty. @



This spread above: set of 5 photographs, thematised on the flag-holding citizen; a sense of nationalism is imagined through the homeland's flag, air and military forces ( far below). Opposite page below: the car and the bus, connect the ever-present rural to the urban (migration, technology, aspirations)



Below: set of 9 photographs, thematised on airplanes and fighter jets which is a recurring motif. Opposite page: the sportsman who's agility and strength reflect the youthfulness and power of a nation, winning 'world cups' for the motherland – signifies an alternative interpretation of the idea of the nation, and patriotism



All photographs featured here are from the exhibition *Everyday Baroque* (2014 - 2015) on view from February 13 – April 09, 2016 at the Photoink Gallery in New Delhi. All photographs are Untitled and some are presented in thematic sets; all images courtesy of Rajesh Vora/Photoink.