

PHOTOGRAPHY

On the double

The striking quality of Ketaki Sheth's portrayal of Patel twins from India and the UK: an amplified humanity

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Twins are not uncommon, but they are still fascinating. Our own fascination is apparent to us when we look at photographs of twins. If the subjects were singletons would we care to look at their photos with the same interest?

Ketaki Sheth's portraits of identical twins in *Twinspotting* underscore this ordinary-extraordinary duality, holding our gaze as we look at photos of regular folks—men, women and children—posing with their carbon copies. There is a further focus to the works in that all the subjects here belong to the Hindu Patel farmer community hailing from the Charotar region of Gujarat. The subjects can be divided into two categories—those who emigrated to the UK and those who are still in Charotar.

It is this last distinction that is obvious when we look at the photographs—the show could just as well have been called “Indian twins and NRI twins”. While their caste, regional roots and individual stories provide a context to the viewer, these attributes do not inform the images themselves.

Sheth says over email that the project of photographing Patel twins took shape at a dinner party in Kent in England in 1995 where the host showed her phone directories of Patels residing in the UK. “I saw a lot of double birth dates within families and saw the opportunity for photographs,” she says. “I thought of Diane Arbus’ classic image and got inspired. I did not have a plan. It just happened.” The fact that she is a Gujarati herself and married to a Patel helped.

The result was a book of portraits of identical twins and some triplets titled *Twinspotting* that came out in 1999. Given the growing interest in photography in India and the availability of better infrastructure, Sheth has decided to hold a new show of a selection of photos featured in the book.

The particulars of the subjects, such as caste, region and personal history, draw us and provide a narrative structure to these por-



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Twosome: (above) Ramesh and Suresh, Wembley, UK, 1997; and Yesha and Niddhi, Piplav, Gujarat, 1998.

more real and brings the viewer closer to them.

For drama, there are the mini-stories that accompany the pictures—Sheth mentions Ramesh and Suresh, who had to flee Uganda to England, where they painstakingly established a shop, only to see it destroyed in a fire and be saddled with a loss of £300,000 (around ₹2.19 crore). “By the time I photographed them, they had set up shop again, were optimistic and lively as ever and had no trace of bitterness,” she says.

For Sheth the main difference between shooting in India and England was in the quality of light. “In the UK, I photographed in the four seasons and in the magical summer late evenings,” she says. In India, the light is “bleached and non-changing”, so she preferred to shoot in the early morning and early evening light.

traits, but what we take away after seeing them is universal—we share in the humanity of the people photographed and the fact that there are two of them in each frame amplifies these feelings.

One of the twins in the famous Arbus image Sheth refers to is smiling while the other has a half-frown, but the twins in Sheth's images wear identical expres-

sions. The teenage brothers posing in front of the shop against a backdrop of liquor bottles strike a confident, slightly cocky pose; the teenage rural Indian brothers, leaning against a charpoy, have similar restrained and reticent expressions. This sameness lends a blandness to the images but it is an authentic, everyday sort of blandness that makes the subjects

Twinspotting will be on view at the Photoink gallery, Jhandewalan, New Delhi, from 23 August-16 October. For details, log on to www.photoink.net