

A classical eye

Photographer Ketaki Sheth breaks with her own tradition and embraces colour and digital. But her art is still purist, says Avantika Bhuyan

As one enters PhotoINK, a gallery in Delhi's Vasant Kuri, a grid of images greets the eye. It takes one on a journey through the fast-vanishing culture of photo studios in the towns and cities across India. Each photo is embedded with myriad stories of a studio in Mumbai, which once counted Raj Kapoor and Nargis as its customers; another in Odisha, which features backdrops hand-painted by the owner; and yet another, Prince Studio in Bhavnagar, which has a 100-year-old cut-out of Mahatma Gandhi. A long time ago, the present owner's father would place it at the centre, with schoolkids flanking either side. Excited parents would watch, happy that their kids were "being photographed with Baba".

Through such portraits of people and objects, photographer Ketaki Sheth excavates, like an archaeologist, hidden stories, and presents an almost classical facet of photography in the age of selfies. This exhibition, titled *Photo Studio*, is significant in yet another respect. It marks a shift in Sheth's practice of over 35 years, from committed analogue photography who worked with film and black-and-white to one who uses colour and digital photography. "It is also her first experiment with still life, a genre she has not explored previously," writes Lola Mac Dougal, founding director of GoaPhoto and JaipurPhoto.

I meet Sheth a day after her talk at PhotoINK about her latest exhibition and book. Dressed in simple white shirt and trousers, she radiates a certain calm and speaks in soft, measured tones. Sheth moved from her analogue Leica M6 to the digital Leica M9 in 2015, around the same time that she started photographing photo studios. The very act of picking up the digital camera, which she had bought two years previously, was difficult. She had reserved it for a time when film supplies became entirely unavailable. "But everyone close to me, including my close friend and noted

photographer] Sooni Taraporewala, and my husband [famed design consultant, Anurobind Patel] asked me not to be so diffident," says the Mumbai-based Sheth. "So one day, I just picked up the digital camera. Sooni was there. She told me, 'Pretend that there is film in it. It is the same dial, same shutter.'" Once Sheth started using it, the mental barriers fell away.

A diverse set of triggers underlie each of Sheth's works. A chance glimpse of a directory of the Patel community in the UK, an exhaustive record of every member, formed the basis for *Twinspotting* (1995-98). Similarly, a 2005 trip to the Gir forest led her to Sirwan, a village in Gujarat predominantly inhabited by the Sidis, Indians of African descent, which resulted in a landmark show and book, *A Certain Grace* (2013).

A recent *Texts* MAIS talk, she elaborated on her process. "Triggers that inform my ideas are varied and numerous. Some ideas fall into by chance. Others are generated by memories of a place, a person, a thing, of time, or even of a particular object or situation." Her most recent project, shot between 2015 and 2018, was triggered by the dazzling curtains and a blue stool at the Jagdish Photo Studio in Manori, a village outside Mumbai. And that led her to find 70 others across the country.

In her talk, Sheth says that thoughts and ideas need to be explored either before embarking on a project or after, but never during the actual act of photography. She has also often quoted Henri Cartier-Bresson on what constitutes a perfect picture — a combination of light, form, timing and luck. His definition of the "decisive moment", which requires the heart, mind and eye to work in sync, has informed much of Sheth's practice. This approach is evident right from early works such as "Bombay Mix: Street Photographs", in which she creates a lyrical portrait of the city's streets and its dwellers, finding stories that we tend to miss. "Ketaki's photographs, so formally interesting, so sharply seen, so deeply felt, give these street lives the greatest gift such work can offer: the dignity of art," wrote Salman Rushdie about "Bombay Mix".

In Sheth's experience, no matter how prepared one is, not all factors come together on location. It could be pouring, the place could be shut, or as in the case of Nandorani Studio in Julpa, a village in West Bengal, there could be power cuts. "That's when you start innovating, and your experience as a photographer begins to count," she says. Once, at a small studio in Odisha, Sheth saw a table with a floral pattern in melamine. As she pushed it closer to the backdrop featuring snowy mountains, thus concealing its legs, the table started to look like a mysterious flying carpet. "If you have an idea, and it's happening then and there, the process becomes very quick. It either works or it doesn't. If it doesn't, you move on," says Sheth.

Old contact sheets of her work help trace the learning ground that Sheth has covered in the past 35 years. Early on, she used to be daunted by crowds. But she realised the only way to overcome her fear was to go out and shoot every day amidst throngs of people. She started reading books by photographers such as Garry Winogrand. Robert Frank's poetic images of America and Diane Arbus's portraits of marginalised people moved her. In fact, it was Arbus's iconic picture of twins



that spurred *Twinspotting*.

"Sadly, I don't look so much at my contact sheets now because distance is a wonderful thing, in terms of time. But with *Twinspotting*, I do go back to the contact sheets from time to time, to see if I might want to do a different image, which I might not have selected earlier," she says. Some projects remain unfinished — one being images of women in the defence services, taken long ago. "Those days, it was a little easier to get permissions. Being a woman, I was able to go to their hostels. I photographed the women, while training and in recreation. But I never printed that work," she says.

One of Sheth's excitements is to move on to the next thing. Already, as we speak, her attention is trained on another project — inspired by the outdoors and nature, a departure not just from what she has done so far, but a different take on the subject altogether. With *Twinspotting*, *A Certain Grace* and

Photo Studio acting, respectively, as documentation of a way of living, a community and the changing engagement of the viewer with photography, does she see her work as anthropological? "No," is the firm reply. "I am not telling myself that I must document how the Sidis braid their hair, or how they put silver pins in or have tattoos on the hand. It is always something visual that elicits a response from me and attracts me — like the curtains demarcating spaces within tiny Sidi homes."

For a person who has spent a lifetime photographing others, Sheth, surprisingly enough, doesn't like being photographed. "It is a bit unfair on my part," she laughs. "Something of a recluse, she is most comfortable at her work, at home or in her office. 'Today, because of social media, people don't even think twice about taking a selfie. But I don't do that. I am not even on social media.'"

