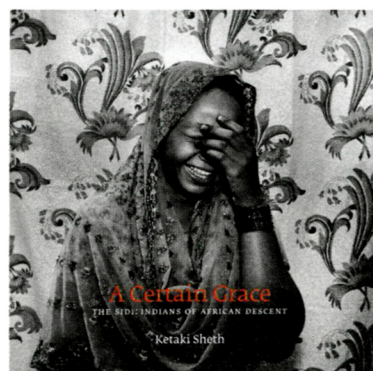


Ketaki Sheth: A Certain Grace The Sidi: Indians of African Descent

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Book Title: Ketaki Sheth, A Certain Grace
The Sidi: Indians of African Descent

Published by: Photoink

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On page 27 of *Certain Grace, The Sidi: Indians of African Descent*, photographer Ketaki Sheth's new book, two girls sit at the edge of a bed in the foreground of the picture. In the background, are curtains, in their stiffstillness, they seem to be a painted backdrop of a formal tea-room, their bold stripes drawn back symmetrically. Arresting and incongruous as this mise-en-scene is, Sheth's insertion of the subject matter is insidious in a way, even as it takes over the page: only after taking in a frou-frou like dress and a shiny, yoked *salwar kameez*, does one look at the direct gaze of the subjects. In Sheth's trademark square format, close to the subjects, there's the drama of the setting conveyed almost instantaneously first, then the eye, in an iris-in motion reminiscent of silent film techniques, draws you to the faces. Dark skinned, thick lips, wide-eyed, the two girls stare back, one gaze captured instantly by another.

On the next page, is *Hirbaiben Lobi*, on her three-acre farm, Jambur, 2005. Light shafts through coconut trees and through her dupatta, softening a time worn, dark skinned, thick-lipped face that looks at you with quiet confidence, a woman comfortable with circumstance. Arms akimbo, one hand is stretched out touching a tree the next page has a picture of a *Girl by doorway*, Bhuj, 2009 with a hand against the wall on the left of the picture; it draws a formal continuity from the previous picture. Overseeing the girl who stands unselfconsciously to attention, you wonder if it is Hirbaiben's maternal gaze that soothes her. In a book that is peopled by more women than men, Sheth captures this confident, unselfconscious ease that is both a testimony of an integration of a migrant community in an alien land, and a photographer's able sensitivity in drawing out the subject's relaxed emotion in front of an outsider lens.

The Sidi are an Indian community of African origin, who came as free men and as slave soldiers, in waves, from the



Wedding guests, Surendranagar, 2006.

9-16th century. Somerose the ranks to become regents along the Western coast of India, the majority remained as slaves. The descendants, contemporary Sidi, live in communities in Gujarat and Karnataka. Sheth focuses on this marginal, Muslim community in Jambur and Sirwan, two Sidi villages near Jamnagar, in a predominantly Hindu state, Gujarat. They have been filmed in the past - in documentaries by Beheroze Shroff, and in Sumantra Ghoshal's *The Speaking Hand*, they feature, drumming frenetically (the traditional goma music), in an Urs procession near the Mahimdurgah in Mumbai, showing the influence it had on a young Zakir Hussain.

Sheth's choice of a square format (using a Mamiya 6, negative size 6x6, with a normal and a slightly wide lens) and prominently portraiture, in black and white, allows little for an extended surround. It's a pronounced statement: that, it is the people she is interested in, not a documentation of place or time specifically, but a way of life through its denizens. Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, "There is something appalling about photographing people. It is certainly some form of violation. So, if sensitivity is lacking, there can be something barbaric about it." Sheth resists the barbaric urge to capture specificity solely - here, the African-ness - rather, she chooses to bring out the peculiarity through the seamless assimilation of these physically foreign faces into everyday Indian custom, habit and religion. She handles with gentleness, these migrated souls, who know no other land other than the photographer's own. In the documentary transaction between them, both are the other, both belong.

Like in *Twinspotting*, Sheth's book on Patel twins, choosing a specific set of people, allows Sheth a contemplative study - the pictures do not sentimentalise, they have a sparse, mordant quality. Like the British documentary filmmaker, Molly Dineen, who is "very interested in the human condition, where there is a common denominator, so whether you are filming a zoo-keeper or a soldier or a prime minister, I am looking for what it is that we all share something that we all have," Sheth brings emotion into the documentary moment. In her previous books as in this one, it is the human condition that is the common factor, the delving in, to catch the ordinary beneath the extraordinary, that binds Sheth's oeuvre.

So it is, in a comb through frizzy hair, *Rizwana gets ready Ratanpur*, 2007, a night shot of a dancing man in tribal regalia in *Sidi dancer shatters a coconut on his head while performing for the royal family*, Sachin, 2009, or the chequered grids of *Girls at play*, Patthar Kua colony dargah, Ahmedabad, 2009, that Sheth is able to access mundane moments and through titles spelling out the ordinary, subtly points to the extraordinary - the anthropological, the custom, the faith. In each she brings emotion into a moment, the human condition underlies. In this, she succeeds in placing, the Sidi, (like the Parsis, who came to Gujarat and assimilated over centuries), as distinct, even as they are one of us.



Girls at play, Patthar Kua Colony Dargah, Ahmedabad, 2009.

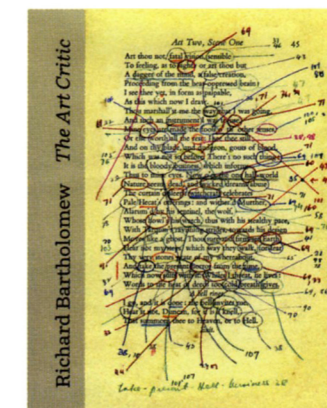
In documentary photography especially, the photo book has taken the place of photo essays in magazines, and Sheth asserts a conscious choice to shoot in black and white and on film - most contemporary photographers have shifted to colour and digital. Colour removed, makes one focus more assiduously on the subject matter, and she gives no hints beyond the subjects, all but two photographs in the book are peopled. Light filters through foliage outdoors, picks up on graphic details in dress and interiors indoors, but it is the people who are centrefold.

Sheth's ability to access intimate moments is the book's narrative. From singular portraits it moves on to groups, from the personal into the community, from the playful to the ceremonial, in black and white, light and shadow heighten subject and surround, in in-between moments, the Sidi silently gaze, dance, laugh, play, idle, and we slip into their world silently. That is Ketaki Sheth's ability, to allow you in with a certain grace.

Image Courtesy: Ketaki Sheth and Photoink

Present Grace

Hemant Sareen



Book Title: Richard Bartholomew: The Art Critic

Editors: Rati Bartholomew, Carmen Kagal,
Richard Bartholomew

Hardback: 640 pages, 250 colour and black-and-white
illustrations

Size: 7.5 x 9.5 inches

ISBN: 978-93-5067-365-2

Price: 3000/-

"Painting in India today has reached this period of stability", Richard Bartholomew wrote in 1957, surveying a decade of Indian art since India's independence. He was one among a clutch of critics including W.G. Archer, Rudi Von Leyden, Charles Fabri, Mulk Raj Anand, to name a few, working at introducing Indian traditional art to a contemporary audience while tending to the fledgling Modern Indian art scene. The Progressives, as the pioneer modernists came to be called, were, at the time of Bartholomew's writing, evolving and enlarging, almost painting by painting, with their signature sensibility and chosen media, the vocabulary of Indian expressionism.

The "stability" alluded to, not to be mistaken with plateauing, was the defeat of ideology and kitsch of the Bengal School and the establishment of the high language of the Modern-of which Bartholomew was the zealous proselytizer-as fait accompli. The statement betrays, through its certitude and its claim to knowledge so comprehensive, a bravado perhaps, but also supreme confidence, pride, satisfaction, and even possessiveness, of a venture capitalist whose handpicked startups get listed on the national stock exchange.

What is remarkable about this one-line pronouncement ringing with a suspenders-snapping authority on the state of modern art in India, is the backstory of how a young Burmese lad who in 1942 sought asylum in India having fled his own country in the wake of the Japanese invasion, had, in a matter of twelve years, become an indefatigable champion and a grand arbiter of plastic arts of the alien country he had made his home.

This definitive collection of the edited writings of Bartholomew shuns chronology as its arranging criteria; it yet diffusely imparts a sense of how, just in a matter of a few years