

In America- An Immigrant's Story

Photographs by Aditya Dhawan



“In photography creation is a quick business – an instant, a gush, a response.....you make a painting at the same time that you take a photo.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

The Street photographer is an observer of the social landscape. Exposing metres and metres of film roll in a single day; as flaneur, bystander, witness or interloper, the photographers of this genre have augmented the lexicon of visual culture with images of contemporary urban life. Recording visuals of ‘unsorted human traffic’, temporary frames of reference, often just a glimpse - that elusive fleeting moment; gradually moving from weighty matters of social relevance to the reflect the “nervous activity around them - so that the images became fields of disparate elements” as in the collages of the cubist painters, are some of the attributes that they present.

Seeing is subjective. It is about our relationship with the world and us. Street photography is as much a portrait of the subject being viewed as that of the photographer, catching in an instant whatever captures his empathy, curiosity and imagination. In his exhibition at The Visual Arts Gallery, IHC, Aditya Dhawan gives us insights into the world of the Indian immigrant in America. Inspired by the works of Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank and other distinguished photographers in the tradition of street photography Aditya observes the Taxiwallah and other Indians and documents the world they have created in displacement, yet trying to belong.

Their story is not removed from his own feelings and predicament for he also relocated to Berkeley, California from India in 2001. His involvement with the people often goes beyond mere photographic observation. His work entails conversations, sharing of stories and spaces: getting to know them as people. Aditya Dhawan does not attempt to document in the traditional sense; he possibly doesn't represent street photography in its purist form either; but speaks with a quiet, subtle sense of humour and sensitivity that one is touched by this gentle, yet compelling voice.

His images make you think, but more than that, his thoughts on his images make you look, which is perhaps the most memorable aspect of this exhibition. He does not expect you to grasp the significance of the images without sharing the thoughts that prompted his explorations. However, Aditya does not impose this with certitude and finality but persuades you to look. He speaks with the quiet, assured honesty of one who is confident of the way he sees and feels about things; showing you his version of the world with the intensity of one deeply involved within and without.

The exhibition brings together three series of works: 'Streets of San Francisco', 'Little India' and 'Taxiwallah: An Immigrant story'. The compilation captures on film, everyday moments in a city that fascinates and continues to draw immigrants from around the world; explores facets of one culture trying to find its place in another; as well as the lives of South Asian emigrant Taxi drivers in the city of Berkeley. The photographs are black and white silver gelatine prints. Aditya uses a fixed Nikon 24mm lens and himself develops the film on fiber paper. In many of these works, the narrative seems to be incidental, while feelings dominate.

Anthony Dubovsky, an artist based in California, who is also Aditya's program chair at UC, Berkeley; says that Aditya's work reflects a sense of his alienation as also his being a part of the environment he photographs, which he observes as "a clear-eyed stranger looking in on the denizens of a modern American metropolis", adding that his feelings also come through. His work provides a counterpoint to traditional documentary photography where he avoids "imposing meanings", where "nothing is obvious and everything remains to be discovered.....the essence here is reflection."

In a world so crowded with information and temptation, how can we look at images; seeing, hearing and comprehending their import, unless we are involved? Aditya engages us with his musings and feelings through lucid thoughts in a written text. In trying to locate these in the photographs, the images begin to speak. What he says is subtle but heart-felt even if not completely convincing in each frame.

In the Taxiwallah series, the images do not seem as complete in themselves, in as much as they succeed when the frames are connected with each other. Aditya is clearly involved with the immigrant story in this series. The photographs are not just about observation on the street with a camera. He writes of his engagement with them, where he "entered the world of the taxi drivers....., perhaps to visit a world outside of my own. Perhaps to revisit parts of my own world inside theirs, in them I saw a people raised in

the rustic heart of a land I feel my own. In their profession, I saw the strains of freedom and mobility that forms the life breath of the restless nomad”.

His images speak from a standpoint that encompasses an experiential knowing and also observing changes, in their relocation from Punjab to California. Here he is painting with the lens, capturing meaning and significance imbibed much beyond the realm of observation in the tradition of street photography, but unlike painting he does not juxtapose images. This is perhaps one of the differences between painting and photography, where ideas are brought forth without changing or distorting a given image but finding another to make you see and feel the way in which the Taxiwallah has changed from being the rustic, earthy Sardar sitting on his haunches in the local dhaba in Punjab to the relatively sophisticated, jacketed and *fixofied* persona he has acquired in America. Aditya does not impose an opinion, yet what he feels is not left unsaid because his choice of images leads you to it.

In ‘The Streets of San Francisco, we see a more detached view: Swishing of revolving doors, of trousers as they brush past each other on pedestrian crossings; of intimidating tall shadows as they loom over diminutive birds encroaching on man-made spaces. Here there is none of the nostalgia that one found in ‘Taxiwallah’. But we see the ‘clear-eyed stranger’ identified by Dubovsky. Aditya thus represents the impersonal nature of the city; its lack of time for engagement, conversation and sharing of spaces. Fascinated by the city, staring at reflections in the numerous show windows; watching people come in and out of stations; ambling through to spaces of retreat from the cacophony of city life, he says he has watched people “maintain their pace while artfully dodging each other on crossroads, sometimes taking a momentary break to find a corner in an alley, put their handbag down, rest their backs against the wall and light a cigarette” and in doing so, has become one of them.

‘Little India’, dwells on “posters of Bollywood stars that sing and dance behind store owners wearing expressions of home sickness”; of sarees draped on blonde mannequins; of “images of Gods and Goddesses creeping into crevices between aisles holding ‘pappadams’ and Samuel Adams”; noting with humour the Indian immigrant’s attempts to fit into the American culture adding her own ethnic flavour.

Here he comments on the “sometimes poignant, sometimes funny cross-cultural cacophony” from the viewpoint of an insider, who knows the salient features and also the American-‘sanitized’-Indian, who sees the oddity of it all, for its displacement is obvious to one whose cultural identity has eroded. As he notes: “In the end, these images are markers en route my own short journey into a world refreshingly familiar, yet unwittingly foreign.”

Gopika Nath