

Silence

An exhibition of Photographs by Sandeep Singh



Silence speaks in the stillness. Silence informs without words. Silence reveals ourselves to us. But silence is elusive in this frenetic world of instant gratification, instant communication and technologies that crowd the mind with the cacophony of incessant stimuli. Sandeep Singh brings forth the many facets of **Silence** through his exhibition of black and white photographs, held at The Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre. Born in Punjab, he discovered his fascination for photography at the age of 14 and further honed his skills at Goldsmith College, University of London.

Photography is no different to a painting when it comes to seeing, for in the realm of the visual it reveals as much or as little as you are able to see. Singh's photographs compel you to look. They draw you into their silence. This is what he wants. This is what he achieves by the sheer starkness of the imagery that precludes any kind of human life or suggestion thereof beyond what we can imagine or ferret from memory. You find a large playing field with a football waiting to be kicked in the foreground, but not a player in sight. There are empty benches and spaces made for human living but not a soul around. It is positively eerie to see endless empty roads; boldly labelled trucks neatly parked at Billingsgate market devoid of any human activity; or Terminal Four at Heathrow, one of

the world's busiest airports, with not a single sign of human life. One is made to think that life on earth has been abandoned. And one is tempted to ask why? Why has this neat, orderly, technologically progressive world been abandoned by the beings that created it?

This is intentional, for the photographer seeks to separate man from his grounds and present modern design without this encumbrance. Through this he attempts to seek silence in these urban-scapes, away from the pandemonium of post-modernity. He believes that the basic premise on which the post-modern world is constructed, which questions and deconstructs the existing paradigms of myth and reality, create extreme anxiety in the human mind, causing us to run away from ourselves, fragmenting the wholeness of being.

One day while meditating in a Gurudwara, he found himself questioning the role of man-made objects and appliances in the "evolution of mankind", reflecting on the idea that "modern design and architecture seems to be very functional in the general view, it's beautiful but deceitful.....for our contemporary design and the new rolling technology have the potential to eliminate mankind." He further elucidates his point by citing the example of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York where the "enormous height of the buildings and the abnormal ability of human beings to fly in the sky made us lose thousands of lives." The world, we know, is still recovering from the tragic proportions of this incident.

Lines, contours, geometric patterns, vertical and horizontal lines, constitute the many elements that form each picture photographed by Singh. There is not just a singular point of interest but the scape is stark nonetheless, because of the elimination of human forms. When I first saw the images, it was like a breath of fresh air; a haven away from the crowded cacophonous spaces of life in India. The more I looked, the more I saw and understood the whole concept of a stillness that speaks through its depths, where silence is not always restful, but tormenting; not empty but bursting to tell its story – your story and mine; for isn't reality a question of perception?

The visuals are not romantic; they do not allow you this illusion. Their beauty lies in their attempt at truthfulness but there is something missing. The quest is not quite fulfilled. The images beckon but do not endear. One is curious but not enthralled because in seeking silence in the midst of such urban-scapes, by eliminating the very component of life that we are, one denies the spiritual aspect of being, that in the midst of strife, tension and cacophony, can delve into itself and revive its beleaguered mind. Life and the breath of the living is poetry itself. These visuals deprive us of that component of art, where the poetry and illusions of that ultimate romance, infuses us with the enthusiasm, the hope with which to live and brave the odds.

In England, even in the hustle and bustle of a city like London, you can find these moments where other human beings do not intrude on your mental or physical space, such as Sandeep Singh has demonstrated through his photographs, is indeed possible. However, in a country such as India, with its multitudes of beings and all their noise, one

has no choice but to train the mind to delve into its depths and find that silence despite the screaming sounds around. This is perhaps the genius of our spiritual wealth that evolved because of the cacophony and not despite it. There is no ideal world. Silence is a state of mind as the sages and saints of India have been saying for centuries. You can separate man from his grounds, you can isolate yourself from other beings but you may still not find the silence, the peace there is within. The silence we seek is one so resolute that its depth of conviction remains despite the crowded breath of many beings, despite the cacophony of their screams, despite the chaos of technology and more: A silence where, as the song goes:

*“And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dare
Disturb the sound of silence.”
(Simon and Garfunkel)*

Gopika Nath