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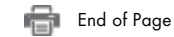
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## NOTICEBOARD

### Shared Solitude



Gayatri Sinha

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Gayatri Sinha is an art editor, critic and curator. Her primary areas of enquiry are in gender and iconography, media and the study of classical texts.

She is the founder of [criticalcollective.in](http://criticalcollective.in), India's first web based archive and news magazine on art.

As curator she has worked with photography and video art from archival and contemporary sources. Her curatorial projects include: *Moving Still Performative Photography in India* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Ethnographic Museum, Heidelberg, 2019; *Envisioning Asia: Gandhi and Mao in the Photographs of Walter Bosshard*, Navjivan Trust, Ahmedabad 2019, KNMA, New Delhi 2018; *Part Narratives*, Bikaner House, New Delhi, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai 2017; *Diary Entries*, Gallery Espace, 2015; Video Art Programme, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, 2013-2015; *Water* in the Musee d'Anselmbourg and the Grand Curtius Museum, Liege, 2013, *Ideas of the Sublime*, Lalit Kala Akademi, 2013; *Cynical Love: Life in the everyday*, Kiran Nadar Museum, 2011; *Looking Glass: The Existence of Difference* (Religare Arts Initiative, Max Mueller Bhavan, British Council), 2010; *Constructed Realities*, Shanghai, 2010; *Failed Plot*, KIAF, Seoul, 2009; *Public Places, Private Spaces: Contemporary Photography and Video Art in India*, The Newark Museum, New Jersey, 2007 and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2008; *Watching Me Watching India* Contemporary photography in India, Fotografie Forum, Frankfurt, 2006; *Middle Age Spread: Imaging India 1947 - 2004*, National Museum, New Delhi, 2004; *Vilas: The Idea of Pleasure*, Birla Academy, Mumbai, 2000; *Woman/Goddess* 1998-2001 (Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, New York); *The Self and the World*, Women artists at the National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997.

She has edited *Voices of Change: 20 Indian Artists* (Marg, 2010), *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857- 2007* (Marg Publications, 2009); *Indian Art: an Overview* (Rupa Books, 2003), *Expressions and Evocations Contemporary Women Artists of India* (Marg, 1996) and written monographs on Krishen Khanna, Himmat Shah and M F Husain. She has lectured widely including at the Tate Modern, MoMA New York, the Rockbund Museum Shanghai, Arken Museum Denmark, CUNY, Duke University, USA.

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She has received research grants from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India and Ford Foundation. She was the recipient of the Tate Asia Research fellowship 2017.

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Even under the long shadow of death, the pandemic has revived some art forms with urgency, the foremost of which may well be the family photograph. The 'pandemic portrait', emerging as a new category of sorts gains salience because it brushes aside the protocols of the family portrait, smudges the line between the studio and domestic setting, and vigorously outlines the 'captive' image with a new urgency. Once the marker of special events – weddings, birthdays, graduation, anniversaries – the studio visit marked what Barthes describes as two kinds of affective response, the first being the 'studium', that produced the convention ridden or "polite interest" in a photograph, that evokes a "vague, slippery, irresponsible interest" in the viewer. In contrast is the second response or the punctum, which inflects this passivity with an affect that can be bruising and poignant, and which dislodges our expectation of the photograph.

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Anita Khemka and her partner Imran Kokiloo have used the vice like grip of the lockdown on the roving photographer to completely recast the family photograph, as a postmark of these times. While addressing the subject of personal space, they decided to approach the families in their apartment block for a series of composed portraits. In the parks surrounding their building community in Delhi, they created the suggestion of an open studio, with bare fragments: a few stools and a table. Neighbouring families were invited to bring their valued objects to create an environment for the portrait, to dress up and pose, as they would in a studio setting. As is current in pandemic portraits, the sitters were also invited to comment on the picture. Thus the participatory nature of the event, of rearranging the seating, and bringing in valued family memorabilia from the domestic setting rendered the event highly immersive and collaborative.

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The dissolution of the boundaries of home and studio in the making of the portrait however make for a powerful affect, a sense of limbic dissolution, and a reinhabiting of the reading of the photograph. Usually a studio portrait would mark a milestone of shared achievement; here the identifying marks of the solemnity of the family portrait are replaced by the occasion of the miasma, one not bound by time or space. Kokiloo and Khemka inflict a third form of absence by occluding the city and its skyline. The limbic sense of families in a tenuous vacuum reinforces the sense of the anthropause. Rendered with just a few objects of their choosing, the figures appear to stop and pose, like passersby in the vestibule of time. It follows that the location of the photograph within the time of the pandemic must be read through a series of displacements, odd conjunctions and the evacuation of the logic of the family portrait. Set against a Manetesque sprawl of trees and tall grass, each portrait becomes different in the open air park, the *plein air* setting dissolves the "cumulative affect" of the studio protocols. Writing on the reception of the studio photograph, curators Deepali Dewan and Sophie Hackett make a case for "cumulative affect", because of "its repetitive nature which can define its affective force". [1] They state that as "the one genre that crosses all cultures where photography became used", studio photography had an effect because of the "codification of certain practices and the repetition of visual elements".

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In the present series, the family portrait is rendered enigmatic and suggestive through a slew of absences, and the dispersal of visual elements. The missing domestic interior, the most crucial site in the state of lockdown is only hinted at through an odd selection of family possessions – a single tea pot, clusters of unidentified photos of friends and family, books, bags and satchels, pets, 'decoration pieces', musical instruments, sports equipment. The tourist curios from trips abroad are other oddments, now seen against an absent backdrop. A single dress draped on a large rock, or an empty wheel chair within the portrait create a surreal unease. Under the regime of the shared coda of the 'lockdown', the indexicality of the family portrait then draws entirely on these objects for the reassurance of familiarity. A crisscross of gazes, of the sitters looking out and away at an uncertain future mark a disengaged, even dissonant presence within the frame. In the absence of the interior that would hold or house the family, the effect of a floating temporality becomes reinforced. In a final gesture, Imran Kokiloo who has shot the series on expired film enters his own family setting, as a portrait within a portrait, a frame within a frame.

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Looking at these images, one can only anticipate the questions that must have preceded the shoot. What would one wear, how should one pose, which object in the unseen home, would best reveal it? In one instance, an Egyptian head is placed against the stillness of the two sitters, a mother and daughter formally clad in glistening silk saris in the heat of a Delhi summer. Is the object meant to be an emancipatory gesture that speaks of a certain cosmopolitanism? Or in the unpredictability of the moment does the portrait offer an opportunity to exercise some control? Certainly in this period of pause, the photographs by Khemka and Kokiloo enable a coming to terms, a mirroring of how we were at this time. A collapse of different time cycles, all within a single frame, revise the portrait's very intent, that perhaps it is meant to be both of this time and outside it, both as participant and as witness.

Gayatri Sinha

Notes:

[1] In *Photography & Culture*, Volume 2, Issue 3, November, 2009. pp 337-348.

## Interview

1. This series appears as much about the art and craft of photography as it is about the actual making of the image. Can you speak about the photographic enterprise during Covid times – we see different attempts on social and print media – , and about the idea behind Shared Solitude?

The idea for this work developed from the missing structure of our normal family at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Imran was left alone with our daughters at home as I went with my mother for her emergency surgery and post-surgical recovery. This away time got further extended as we moved into a self-imposed quarantine for two extra weeks after the hospital discharge. Imran left alone, struggled to find the right balance to deal with his aging parents who live on their own 1600 miles away, an absent partner, and two daughters who could not understand why life around them had taken this sudden bizarre turn. This spurred him to contemplate on questions pertaining to the concept of a family, what it is built on, what it thrives on, and what it is limited by; how one comes together in this shared space and navigates between what is truly individual and what becomes familial. With this idea as the basis, we discussed the possibility of making formal family portraits. We talked to a few neighbors we encountered during our evening walks, they seemed initially perplexed and then intrigued at the idea of a family portrait, particularly since this tradition has been left far behind as something that belonged to a previous generation. For some, it was an absolutely unnecessary activity given the risks and fears around the pandemic. However, for some others, it was quite a fascinating idea to revisit the tradition as this would provide a break from the monotony of the slow-paced life that the COVID-19 lockdown had imposed on all of us. Now, looking at the way the work has developed, we believed that the portraits have transcended the boundary of this pandemic and has taken a direction that compels us to continue working on it.

2. The basic elements that the series draws upon are the evocation of the studio photograph, and portraiture, but this is done primarily through a redefinition of space. The elements of domestic life, which are chosen to be placed in the frame, recall both the absent studio and the absent home. How did you conceptually arrive at such a construction?

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When we decided to work on this project, we had clarity on photographing in the open, a constraint given the safety protocol for the COVID-19 outbreak. Our focus was the family portrait, and for us, the family does not just constitute the members; it is built up over the years in a shared space and also of objects and the attachment and connect we have with them. The coming together of the family in the open was also an exercise for the family members to choose where their most important associations lay at this point in time. We saw people bringing things out of storage for the portrait. In a way, it is like what Ishita, a sitter has recorded for us and I quote, "I have realized that specific relationships, having the time to read, be with dogs, and having enough meaningful work in the day is enough for me - this is all I would like to keep in my life." Similarly, it seems that the families chose to bring the most defining objects of their family as their impressions of belief, memory, nostalgia, loss, success, prestige, and class.

By choosing the local park as a setting/backdrop for the portrait, not only did we bring the sitters out of their comfort zones, but ourselves as well. We were all now in a neutral territory, finding our loci. The open-air studio removed us from the convention of a studio backdrop and the adornments that come along with it, an aesthetic frame of reference imposed by the photographer traditionally. The relationship we could form with each family, their familial elements, as well as open elements of the park, was a new territory every time.

The challenge now was to create a different setting for each family with just the three chairs and two boxes that we were using. The aesthetic use of this furniture to construct a personalised setting that would make them comfortable and feel at 'home' was critical. Their association and dynamics with the objects they brought and their spatial placement was very important to make the final photograph.

3. In this fictive or shared space, what determines the elements of association are existing family photographs. The figures also appear with a high degree of performative self consciousness, some have described the taking of the portrait as a moment of release, recalling what Barthes had said " I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transfer myself in, advance into an image" (Barthes 1984:10). What was the nature of collaboration in the making of these portraits?

These images were made with through collaboration with the sitters, as the process we employed was quite elaborate. We started with four elements in mind: set, direction, performance, and space. After having agreed to be photographed, we shared with the sitters what we meant by wanting to create a familial and domestic setting in an open and neutral space. We discussed the relevance of objects of décor, daily and personal use in creating this minimalistic version of their private space. It had to be like a memory they would like to pack and take with them at this point in time. These discussions encouraged the families to think of these sessions, which lasted about 30 - 40 minutes, with a certain earnestness and gravity.

What this also meant for them was to look at the roles they play within their families. This further drove them to perform the character they considered for themselves given these roles, and perhaps of future responsibilities. Each image is symbolic of this state of mind, which extended for the duration of the sitting. The final selected image however is an impression taken in a fraction of a second. We could see this play out quite clearly in the audio recordings that sitters made for us after sitting for the portrait. Our brief to them was to record their experience of the "ceremony" of having to sit through the making of the portrait and any strand of memory or thought this experience led them to. Ushinor, one of the sitter records and I quote, "the result of this portrait shoot will either be a personal memory of

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a very stressful time with no end in sight or become someone else's insight into the beginning of the end." He and his partner had chosen to bring in his pen stand, a teapot, and some books to the frame. It was these thoughts, which were recorded after the images were made without having seen the photographs yet, which complete the collaboration for us.

4. India has a well established tradition of the family photograph: the studio photograph, the early TS Nagarajan pics of the vanishing family home, and the seemingly accidental presence of family members, Raghu Rai's images of middle class and Bengali bhadralok families, Dayanita Singh's wealthy and cosmopolitan families. Here, in removing the context of the domestic, objects gain a heightened importance – the wheelchair of a deceased father for instance. Did you anticipate the nearly surreal effect that this creates, of a limbic time, and an uncertain space?

The set we created for the photographs provided a space, which could take just the bare minimal and most essential objects. We saw families bring in personal elements of realism to adorn this constructed familial arrangement. The objects from the homes were clearly out of place in the open space of the parks, yet the proximity and placement of these objects with the sitters created a subliminal relationship between them. They are out of place, yet not so because of the intrinsic relationship they share with the family. Toys scattered in one setting and neatly arranged in another, photo-frames crowdingthesitter,abridgetable, books, typewriter - all narrate stories of bonds created or the ones that are being held tight through the projection of memories associated. The wheelchair in the photograph is of the missing father, who is a political prisoner for several years now and for these years, the absent father is a memory of short furloughs he gets due to his declining health. The line, which separates this painful and protracted absence from being deceased, is the hope for future memories that we can afford ourselves.

5. You apparently used expired film for this process, can you describe the process? What was the qualitative effect that you were seeking?

The lockdown limited us to using readily available expired films in our stock. They had been bought over a decade ago for a different project, which never took off, and now finally we had the opportunity to use them. Expired B&W films do not have much effect on the end result as they retain most of their quality for years after expiry if stored properly. It was the colour films, whose change in the quality of colour rendition we were counting on. With expiry, the vibrancy of the colour on the film starts getting subdued and gets slightly bleached in appearance and this desaturation of colour was something we were looking forward to. It fit into our aesthetic vision for the portraits. However, it was not this change in the final result on the film that was so important to us. The process of using film on a medium format camera, set on a bulky tripod, a sight that is unusual for most people today, became important to our image making. It slowed our sitters down, made them thoughtful about our process, and aware of their role in the making of the portrait. They knew we were using only ten B&W and ten colour frames to complete the shoot with no recourse to preview. It would take a few weeks before we were to process the films in our darkroom and see the results. This brought in a level of ownership in the making of the image for them, a level of collaboration we had been seeking.

Anita Khemka and Imran Kokiloo

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