

# When eyes opened in Reverie

**A** PHOTOGRAPHER who explores the directness of a single shaft of light or hunts for a curious unworldliness, a clarity of purpose, and a freedom of decision-making. Pankaj Mistry's subtle instincts make him go for the essentials of rustic earthiness. A consummate technician, known equally for the immaculate descriptive quality of his industrial shots and for his masterly exploration of photographic materials, these images echo the solitude of stones, the power of light, and the nocturnes of walking rhythms, and that is why this show is called 'Reverie'.

For Mistry each image is a form of genre play, of course, a way to subvert the convention, and also a way for the artist in him to tap into a certain sense of nostalgia and mortality in a matter of face to face beckoning. It could either be while roaming the bylanes of Kolhapur or Kolkatta or stepping into the little unknown hamlets of Goa.

This portfolio captures the nuances of street material as much as the soliloquy of the silent interior.

Pankaj quotes Paul Cezanne and says: "Knowledge of the means to express our emotion is essential - and is acquired only after very long experience".

"To me photography is that medium of expression which gives me liberty to transcend time and space, express my emotions as honestly as possible and has been so for more than 24 years - the time when I was into com-

mercial photography, that phase of my life which has played a very important role in transforming my thought and vision which in turn altered the way I see my subject, the way I perceive it, he adds.

Twenty years of commercial photography doesn't even begin to unveil Pankaj Mistry's quest for seeking a frame of dulcet dualities. He says that his initiation into Zen gave him the sensitivity to let a photograph find him. ("I do not seek. I find," he quotes Pablo Picasso.)

Between the time constraints and pressures of the corporate world, and the quest for driving out on a limb, each assignment for Pankaj is a journey to savor.

His series of images in the past include the rare insight of an inside story of a butcher in Mumbai, which was shown at Kaashi Gallery at Kochi. However, Mistry is one of those who reflects prudence in shooting. He says, "I shoot exactly the number of images I want, nothing in excess, the discipline has come from years of commercial work."

"I am an instinctive classicist as you put it, my instincts tell which images I want no more no less," he adds.

This unveils him as an instinctive classicist, with a mystical gift for visual rhythm, for making something insignificant—a pattern of decaying walls look miraculously in its one best place



"Photography has been a liberating experience, a medium by which I communicate my thoughts and vision as I see them," he adds.

"It has helped me accept not only my tools, materials and circumstances for what they are but also helped in accepting myself as I am. I have understood that at the core of every strength or technical advantage lies its weakness, and that in every weakness or disadvantage there is strength waiting to reveal itself to you."

Photography for him is beyond grace, and gravity. The inventiveness of his search, the lively and surprising elegance of his line, and his sensitivity to the character of a composition, make Pankaj's pictures, even the slightest ones, a pleasure for our tired eyes.

Mistry himself recognises the kinship of the difference between religious and spiritual. A set of vessels can become a dynamic vignette. In the shaft of light that falls through a window there is the angle of light that can create an abstraction of deep shades. A subject can become both image and object—what is cool and aloof can also be stately.

For a curator the question that remains is: If photography is an art, what kind of art is it? If we call a specific photograph a work of art does that mean it shows technical excellence? That it reminds us of a particular kind of painting or drawing? Provides a good record of something we regard as beautiful, such as a sunset? Questions persist and provoke. Today photography is more than a mere tool, it is an instrument that defines posterity. Beauty is one thing, intriguing visual dialogue is another. That's where we are today.

The famed Irving Penn once wrote: "I recognise [the camera] for the instrument it is, part-Stradivarius, part-scalpel." He was also astute enough to recognise the medium's main limitation: "that the inside is recordable only in so far as it is apparent on the outside". Reverie echoes that sentiment—an apt epitaph for small apertures and long exposures in natural light.

**UMA NAIR**

(The show which opened in Delhi's Lalit Kala Akademi will move to Gallerie Nyva and will be on till October 10)

## AIRBRUSH ALERT

# UK wants to keep fashion ads real, promote body confidence

Sylvia Hui  
LONDON

**BEWARE** those impossibly tiny waists and never-ending legs: looking at too much airbrushed beauty in glossy magazines can be hazardous to your health.

That, at least, is what campaigners working against eating disorders insist. For years, they have complained that the waif-like, size zero models favoured by fashion houses promote an unhealthy dieting culture. But digitally-trimmed celebrities and models, they say, are much worse: many people don't even realise what they see is neither real nor attainable.

Now the British government is taking up their cause. Next month, officials are sitting down with advertisers, fashion editors and health experts to discuss how to curb the practice of airbrushing and promote body confidence among girls and women. If the campaigners get their way, fashion ads and magazines in Britain may soon have to label retouched photos to warn people that the perfect bodies they see are but digital fantasies.

Coming just after London Fashion Week, which is under way, it's the latest initiative in a long-running battle to force the fashion industry to show more diverse and realistic beauty.

"The trend does seem to be more and more 'extreme Photoshopping.' Everybody's just moving towards Barbie dolls," said Hany Farid, a professor specialising in digital photo forensics at Dartmouth college in New Hampshire. "I don't think there's a single photograph in those (magazines) that's not retouched. They're all manipulated to hell."

Editors and ad managers have been making use of technology to improve the appearance of photographed models for some time. Before, it was taming the occasional stray hair or erasing a blemish. These days much more extensive trickery is approved without anyone batting a lash: flabby stomachs are tightened, necks and legs are lengthened, and bosoms are reshaped. The result: a flawless body shape no amount of dieting or cosmetic surgery can achieve.

Health professionals say the government must regulate such practices to stop the relentless pressure on young girls and women, but many others are dubious about the idea that we need the government to tell us what's real and what's not. Besides, hasn't advertising always been about selling dreams, and can a disclaimer change the fashion industry's aesthetic?

London-based fashion photographer Mark Nolan said that while he avoids and disapproves extreme airbrushing, magazines are driven by what readers want. The government should stay away from policing the market, he said.

"I think they should back right off. The media is driven by the consumer," Nolan said. "Magazines should be an icon for looking your best. (Readers) know what they get are the most glamorous, the best looking girls. It's always been that way."

Experts who work with young people with eating disorders, however, want the fashion industry to take up some social responsibility.

"We know these images by themselves don't cause eating disorders directly, but they certainly are an influence on people, particularly those already ill, or seriously at risk," said Susan Ringwood, chief executive of Beat, a British charity for tackling eating disorders that's behind the campaign to tackle airbrushing.

Digitally sculpted models are particularly harmful to girls trying to recover from an eating problem, she said.

"They cannot understand why anyone worries about them, when they look around them they see pictures of people who look just like them who are celebrated as successful," Ringwood said. "It perpetuates their disturbed views that they are right."

Her views are backed by Britain's Royal College of Psychiatrists, which is also pushing the government to regulate airbrushing. A growing body of research is linking repeated exposure of thin or perfect bodies to a drop in mood, more dissatisfaction in the viewers' bodies, and drastic dieting behavior, said Dr. Adrienne Key from the group.



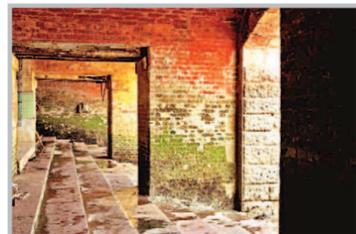
Airbrushing disasters have occasionally drawn the public eye to the practice. Last year the label Ralph Lauren had to publicly apologise when one of its advertisements showed a model whose waist was cropped to look smaller than her head. GQ, the men's magazine, triggered an early backlash against airbrushing when it acknowledged in 2003 that it altered a cover image of Kate Winslet. The actress said she was shocked to see herself looking so strangely thin in it.

Still, most people don't tend to understand the extent of photo manipulation or stop to think about it, Farid said. Photo tampering is now common even in political campaigns and news media. In a recent cover of The Economist magazine, for example, a solitary President Barack Obama was shown on the Louisiana beach inspecting the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. It turned out that two other officials were edited out of the image to make it more powerful.

Details of the British government initiative are still sketchy, but equalities minister Lynne Featherstone, who is leading the consultations, has indicated that she will push for a health warning on airbrushed photos. — AP

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