

On Museum Bhavan

As an artist who works with photographs, Dayanita Singh was never satisfied with an image on the wall. After years of crafting books as a form to engage with photography, Singh's recent explorations include the photo-sculptural works of *Museum Bhavan*. The latest and most elaborate showing of *Museum Bhavan* is on view at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi. It shows nine mobile museums, each like an Oriental folding screen in which photographs are framed together to create visual story-telling pieces.

Singh insists on photographs not being the work but the raw material to make work. There have been several instances when artists and filmmakers have challenged the adequacy of an image on the wall. Many times it has resulted in a new form or creating an aesthetic language. Shirin Neshat uses calligraphy on photographs to explore the idea of martyrdom, exile and identity. *La Jetée*, a 1962 film by Chris Marker, uses photographs to tell a story, marking perception of time and movement in cinema. JR makes public art projects using large photographic prints on buildings, incorporating his work into urban landscape. Over the years, Singh's practice has been centred around re-defining the viewers' interaction with images. As a bookmaker too she experimented with different formats of the book to prod viewers' relationship with a photograph. *Sent a Letter*, in its accordion format, was a turning point where Singh's fascination of book as an exhibition was realised. Books on a window display at a shop in Calcutta and *House of Love* with unique covers was followed with books on the wall with *File Museum*. People who inspired her often became her collaborators on these works like Walter Keller, Gerhard Steidl, Sunil Khilnani and Geoff Dryer.

With *Museum Bhavan*, the cinematic imagination has manifested in Singh's work. If *House of Love* was a literary photo-fiction, *Museum Bhavan* is a cinematic work. The photographs in the mobile museums are documents of different times put together. The simplicity of image composition and clean lines, advocate the observing and recording of the camera. The eye documents, so does the camera; the camera is eye, kino-eye.

The cinematic quality of Singh's works is not restricted to the aesthetics of the photographs, but the arrangement of the photographs as well. Photographs in it itself are engaging, but the structural form in which they are embedded is protean. The mobile museums of *Museum Bhavan* are the architectural reification of montage. The Soviet montage, in its basic sense, is a series of images put together create a different, a third meaning. As Sergei Eisenstein, Russian film director and film theorist, puts it "...in my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another...as in Japanese hieroglyphics in which two independent ideographic characters (shots) are juxtaposed and explode into a concept."ⁱ Eisenstein takes up a linguistic model for describing montage,

similar to Singh's earlier works of images in form of a book. Eisenstein described various methods of montage that produced different effects. The methods of arranging and adding structures to the mobile museums are numerous, allowing for multiple meanings. A complex idea can be presented through the arrangement of images in a dialectic relationshipⁱⁱ. The *thesis* is presented in the name of the museum, where a topic is presented. Like the *Museum of Machines* contains 73 photographs of different kinds of machines. The *antithesis* occurs when in a vertical column, we see an image of a man sitting among huge cooking utensils with his back towards the frame resulting in the *synthesis* of the idea of the human body as a machine. Among the images of huge machines, the utensils also look like parts of a machine. The food is the fuel to run the human body. The *Museum of Furniture* has images of chairs, tables, desks, sometimes together, sometimes separate. The images show the furniture in full size, in sharp focus, empty, but carrying great intensity. The people less images let the chairs and tables be the subject. But, where are the people? The empty chairs face to face is inviting a conversation, the desk busy with papers has been interrupted. Was there a young girl on the armchair contemplating life before a door bell interrupted her reverie?

Montage, however, is a pre-filmic process. It has been referred to as a method of thinking by Eisenstein. Described as "the height of differentiatedly sensing and resolving the organic world"ⁱⁱⁱ, montage thinking is a technique that has been discussed at large in literature^{iv}. It is largely based on arrangement, editing, re-positioning and relating in an effective way. Montage thinking puts together small parts, the details of which make the entire picture. *Museum Bhavan* emerges as a result of this thinking. Singh has always controlled the encounter with the image in her work. As a book the images are presented in a certain sequence. While in the mobile museums, the meaning making happens through the relation between two or more photographs, and many times lies outside what is seen in the images. The conceptual, emotional or social values are added by the viewer through a cognitive process of association while viewing. It's a combination of the elements of each photograph and their interaction with elements of other photographs along with the composition and lighting that creates a story, idea or emotion. A vertical block in the *Museum of Chance* starts with an image of a dilapidated house on top, followed by a group of women, small bundles of cloth, boy with a cage, and an empty room. In the *Museum of Vitrines*, the photographs are taken from different angles with almost the same shot size, maintaining a visual continuity. Photographs of animals in vitrines, cabinet displays in offices and homes might carry a sense of accomplishment or they may just be long forgotten objects. The strength of the images lie in the unframed.

The structure of Museum Bhavans are like rolls of films placed together like scrolls to allow reading them vertically or horizontally. The once 'real' images are juxtaposed to create a fictionalised event. Years of her works come together, existing in different temporalities, the

images come together like streams of consciousness flowing in the background of Singh's conversations, travels and stories.

In the mobile museums of *Museum Bhavan*, Singh, like an auteur, maintains her creative voice by showcasing a selected arrangement of photographs. Following the books, Singh has consciously retained an arrangement of photographs where they are in an intimate conversation with each other. The mobile museums are already curated by Singh in terms of ideas, story and its progression through the placement of the photographs. As a curator-in-residence, Singh will be changing the images and adding new ones, but in a packed space where the mobile museums are on display, one is deprived of viewing them in their full grandeur.

One can raise doubts over the legitimacy of a 'museum' in *Museum Bhavan*. As each mobile museum is a collection of photographs from Singh's archive, is calling them a 'museum' exaggeration of personal archive? On a functional level, these are museums as they preserve and display a collection in an interpretative fashion for public display. On a conceptual level, I would like to borrow the words of Orhan Pamuk who created the *Museum of Innocence* along with his novel of the same name. The fictional museum displays objects from the love story of Kemal and Fusun, lovers from the novel. Pamuk calls for celebration of museums by individuals: "Large national museums such as the Louvre and the Hermitage.... now national symbols, present the story of the nation—history, in a word—as being far more important than the stories of individuals. This is unfortunate because the stories of individuals are much better suited to displaying the depths of our humanity. It is imperative that museums become smaller, more individualistic, and cheaper. This is the only way that they will ever tell stories on a human scale. Big museums with their wide doors call upon us to forget our humanity and embrace the state and its human masses..... The future of museums is inside our own homes."^v

- Charu Maithani

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End Notes

ⁱ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Edited and translated by Jay Leda, Published by A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1949.

ⁱⁱ The dialectics of Soviet montage are based on thesis, antithesis and synthesis, which means that $a + b = c$, and not ab . By juxtaposing a statement with its opposing statement, one arrives at a new statement of a higher order.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Edited and translated by Jay Leda, Published by A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1949.

^{iv} Stendahl and Gustave Flaubert have been discussed on montage thinking. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's reading of Homer has been discussed by Eisenstein in his essay *Laocoön*, as 'montage thinking'.

^v Orhan Pamuk, A Modest Manifesto for Museums, <http://en.masumiyetmuzesi.org/page/a-modest-manifesto-for-museums>