

Linnert, Nicolas. *Dayanita Singh*, **Artforum**, January, online and print

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Dayanita Singh

CALLICOON FINE ARTS

The *Pothi Box*, 2018, is Dayanita Singh's latest "book object," an unbound photographic publication, produced in an edition of 360, mounted directly on a gallery's walls. Thirty boxes—each filled with thirty prints—were hung in a horizontal line at Callicoon Fine Arts. Additional copies were wrapped in cloth that was fastidiously knotted, and arranged in stacks on a nearby table. Most of the book's imagery documents material accumulations, such as countless towers of film, rows of uniformly bound novels, and entire rooms lined with swaddled groupings of archival materials. One picture depicts a dense bale of fraying, ragged paper—seen up close, it looks like petrified wood. Together, these images thread a narrative wherein items that gesture to something beyond themselves—newsprint, film strips, and loose-leaf paper—draw attention to their own physical presence through accumulation.

Another publication on view, *Sent a Letter*, 2008/2017, was a suite of seven photographic leporellos. All but one are titled after Indian cities in which the images for the works were taken, such as Calcutta, Deigarh, and Varanasi. The sequences of images were intended as a symbolic form of address to fellow travelers who accompanied the artist on these journeys. Singh's black-and-white pictures show sumptuously lit interiors, strikingly posed human subjects, and placid landscapes. Her exceptional eye is matched not only by her assiduous ordering of the photographs, but also by her unconventional approach to printing: Instead of using techniques such as chromogenic or silver-gelatin processing, Singh works with offset (in collaboration with the publisher Gerhard Steidl) to produce her prints, aligning her fine-art output with more common industrial publishing processes that are typically the domain of newspapers or mass-market paperbacks. The way Singh arranges her images is crucial to her work—in *Sent a Letter*, one leporello includes a set of family photographs taken by the artist's mother (the subject of most of the shots is Singh in her youth), arranged here in a particular sequence as if pulled from a carefully organized photo album. The artist has emphasized that, by editing her materials, she expands her authorial role to one nearing that of curator.



Dayanita Singh, *Pothi Box*, 2018, thirty image cards, teakwood enclosure, inscribed napkin, 7 7/8 × 6 1/2 × 1".

Singh often references the museum in her work (see *Museum of Gestures*, 2018, or *Museum Bhavan Box*, 2017, two more photo publications that were on view). At Callicoon, scarves, canvas bags, pillows, and other common goods, frequently with the titles of older projects printed or embroidered on their surfaces, were elegantly appointed on stands, echoing the refined displays of museum shops and concept stores—sites that echo the aesthetics of the exhibition space. That she also positions herself as her own licensee is a nod to how an artist can control not only the way her work is presented, but also how discrete objects might invoke her photographic work. Of course, Singh walks a fine line; the consumerist aura of her items could be seen as a contextual threat to the elevated status of her wall-mounted prints. One sleeveless jacket, sewn with nine pockets, each to hold one of the nine *Museum Bhavan* books, had my life is a museum written across its back. What, then, is a museum? What is at stake in claiming the practices of holding, ordering, presenting, and ultimately selling as one's primary *raison d'être*? Singh implies that the position of viewership, of constant seeing, is an inescapable space wherein one must only continue processing that which is seen, and that at some point within this dynamic, a price (beyond dollars and cents) must be paid.

— Nicolas Linnert