

For many artists, particularly painters and sculptors, a book of their work in reproduction is a secondary item – a useful adjunct to an exhibition, a means of communicating their ideas more widely and a catalogue of their production to date. For photographers, it's more complicated. Since photographs are already reproductions, the main difference between a fine art print and the pages of a photobook is down to the quality of the paper and the printing. Beyond that, what matters is the way it is presented: framed on the gallery wall or edited into a sequence and bound into a book.

For the Indian photographer Dayanita Singh, these traditional formats have never been enough. And despite considerable opposition from the art world, which relies on the value distinction between the mass-market book and the limited-edition gallery print, her desire to elide the two has driven her, over the past two decades, to push the book form beyond its conventional limits. This week, a new exhibition opens at Frith Street Gallery in Soho, which has shown the various incarnations of her work since 2001. But while the main exhibition continues upstairs, from October 1 – during Frieze week in London – Singh is taking over the lower ground floor for a “pop-up” gallery, where she will show what she refers to as her “book objects”: small wooden box frames measuring 16cm x 21cm

that hold 30 of her photographs mounted on cards that can be shuffled and the leading image changed at will. Somewhere between a framed print, a book, a pack of cards and a miniature sculpture, the box can stand alone on a table or be fixed to a wall.

The idea evolved naturally from the much larger, wooden structures resembling tall, rectangular, folding screens (into which anything from around 70 to 160 black-and-white images can be slotted) that made up a significant part of her retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2013. Singh calls them “museums”. Each has a title that loosely indicates the collection of images they contain: for example, the Museum of Machines, the Little Ladies Museum, the Museum of Shedding, the Museum of Chance.

That familiar line of identically framed, mounted, glazed photographic prints along a gallery wall “felt like death to me”, Singh says, speaking from her home in Delhi. “And it felt like the death of photography for me too. The images would be fossilised behind glass, and I *myself* couldn't move them... My pleasure is in playing with them, you know? Having 40 prints on the table and rearranging them and finding different connections, looking at them with different people. The pleasure of photography is that it changes so much depending on what it's next to.

“And you've seen how people look at a photography exhibition,” she continues. “They take in the room in one glance. Whereas my sculptor friends have people walking around, up and down, different angles, and I thought, ‘Why

should photography be this thing stuck on the wall?’ And so one thing was to get it away from the wall. And the other thing was the need to build a new architecture for it, that could change the space as well, in the way a sculpture does.”

So she invented what are, essentially, giant wooden bookcases, with a wide selection of framed images you can take out and look at, rearrange and slot back. To the Hayward, she also brought a small wooden table and stools that fitted inside the museums, so she could unfold them and invite a visitor to talk to her about her work. It is a level of showmanship that she seems entirely unselfconscious about, generously welcoming all-comers, interested in their reactions and talking about her work.

Singh was born in New Delhi in 1961, the oldest of four sisters. Her father, an agriculturalist, was “very protective”, she has written, and her mother had “to fight with him” to allow her, at 18, to study visual communication at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where she planned to become a graphic designer. But for a routine class assignment to photograph people's “moods”, she chose to focus on the celebrated Indian tabla player Zakir Hussain. Realising photography was what she wanted to do, she continued: following his concerts around the country, photographing him at home, putting together material for what became her first book.

In 1987, persuading her mother to give her the money that would have gone towards a dowry, she left India to study at the International ►

Dayanita Singh at her home in Delhi last month

Thinking outside the book

The photographer Dayanita Singh has been pushing the book form beyond its conventional limits, blurring the boundary between photobook and exhibition. She tells *Liz Jobey* why the idea of identically framed photographs along a gallery wall feels ‘like death to me’. Portrait by *Sohrab Hura*



Dayanita Singh's 'Sent a Letter' (2008/17): leather case embossed with a poem, teak wood enclosure, seven accordion-fold offset printed booklets



'Museum of Machines' (2013): one large structure, four small structures, 73 framed photographs



Left and below left: 'Box 507' (2019): teak box with 30 image cards

Below: 'Montage XV' (2019): black and white archival pigment prints, archival tissue



◀ Center of Photography in New York. While there, she interned with the respected American photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark before returning to India, “naively believing that my photographs could make a difference”. She joined Network, the London-based photo co-operative, but after several years of assignments she felt her photographs were making no difference at all to India’s social problems and she could not go on “earning a living from the distress of others”.

She began to work closer to home: making portraits of middle-class Indian families in rooms where, in their dress, their behaviour or their interiors, the evidence of a traditional, colonial, religious India was overlaid by a more hard-edged, contemporary western cultural style. During a trip to Zurich in 1992, she left some of her prints for the Swiss publisher Walter Keller to see. Days later she received a fax: “Admire your eye. Come back to Zurich.”

In Keller, whose Scalo imprint published artists such as Robert Frank and Nan Goldin, Singh found her first real mentor. He gave her confidence to trust her visual instincts, which, as was becoming clear, found beauty in simple things: she could isolate an object or a person, and the resulting image had a kind of stillness that demanded concentration from the viewer, as if she was transferring her own pleasure in looking to theirs.

The images were without an obvious narrative. She might choose something as insignificant as a teacup, or a chair, or a room full of empty chairs, or a sparsely furnished room with,

perhaps, a bed and an old family portrait, a light bulb and a ceiling fan. They spoke of India, but not insistently; they avoided cliché and sentimentality; they were clearly the product of curiosity and offered a sense of discovery to those who bothered to look.

Her first exhibition in London, *Empty Spaces*, was held at Frith Street in 2001. While taking the family portraits, she had made a crucial discovery. In her book of portraits, *Privacy*, she explains: “One day, when Mrs Braganza, one of the Goa residents I was photographing, left the room to answer the phone, I suddenly realised that the room was not empty. I could sense the many generations who had used this chair, and I realised that I could make a portrait without a person in it... Very soon I was consumed by this seeming emptiness: beds of those who had passed away, but that were still made every day, beds turned into shrines, with photos and sandals on them, and, of course, the beds of the living, but without their physical presence. Chairs, too, in particular those that had been in the same place for decades, but whose sitters had moved on to other worlds in the meantime, but their presence was embedded in the chairs, or so it seemed to me.”

It was while overseeing the printing of *Privacy* that she met Gerhard Steidl, not yet the major international art publisher he would become, and they began a conversation that would lead to a creative professional partnership they still

enjoy 20 years later. “When Dayanita came to do her book with Scalo, we were talking about the situation in India,” he told me. “And she said the photobook was an ideal way to communicate photography as art in India. She said, ‘I’m dreaming about making accessible exhibitions for India, not expensive ones for the gallery, just for normal people who are interested in photography and visual things.’” This, he said, connected to his own interests as a publisher. “I always believed that the photobook is a gallery of photography in book form,” he said. “Ideally it’s an art object; a multiple, not signed and numbered, not in an edition. I see it as a tool to bring photography into the hands of everybody who is interested.”

For any international artist living in India, travelling becomes part of your life. As she ventured abroad, sometimes accompanied by friends, Singh would take photographs, and, like a series of personal postcards, select pictures that represented a particular journey, cutting out small prints from her contact sheets and sticking them into small Moleskine accordion-fold notebooks, more as an editing exercise than anything else.

“And then one day in the library [at the printing works],” Steidl remembers, “she made up a little book dummy, a zigzag fold, and she glued in little contact prints and she set it up on the library table and it was self-standing and at that moment we had the idea that this is a ready-made for an exhibition. You have five or six booklets in a box, and you take it, you go to India or wherever – into a school building, or in

a gallery, or wherever it is... you set up a table with the zigzag folders and immediately you have a room with an art exhibition at no cost at all.

“And from this moment on, it was an ongoing collaboration: that we develop books as unlimited art objects, always having in mind that the book should be an exhibition at the same time.”

In 2008 Steidl published *Sent a Letter*, a calico-covered box with seven of the small accordion notebooks inside. It freed her from the normal book format, and over the next 10 years, she would develop her idea of the book-as-exhibition and the exhibition-as-the-book, experimenting with books framed on the wall; books in boxes, books in a suitcase that she unpacked in galleries around the world. And although she still made single prints and exhibited them in the gallery, the line between the book and the exhibition grew increasingly blurred.

Her obsession didn’t always go down well. She remembers her first meeting with Frances Morris, now director of Tate Modern, in India. She had just published *Go Away Closer* (2007), a simple school-exercise-sized book with 31 black-and-white photographs, no text. Singh told Morris: “Frankly, I think you should have my book, because the book is the work, and the prints are just prints of the book.” Morris, she recalls, had replied: “Dayanita, we all love your books, that’s not the point. But what do we do with your book? We either make a facsimile of it, or we make a projection of it. I mean, we get 10,000 visitors a day, how can we just have your books lying around?”

“And that’s when the penny dropped,” says Singh, “and I realised that for the book to be in the gallery it had to be an exhibition itself. It couldn’t just be that I put my book on the wall. The book had to *become* the exhibition.”

All but one of the large museum structures have been sold – appropriately enough to major museums around the world. They were one-off pieces, and now that they are almost gone her focus has shifted to the more modest book objects. *Box 507*, the fifth in the series, is dedicated to the buildings of Geoffrey Bawa, the Sri-Lankan architect, famous throughout south Asia for a style known as “tropical modernism”. The simple, spare, interior spaces with strong perpendicular lines are familiar from some of Singh’s earlier photographs.

“For years I had wanted to visit Sri Lanka and it never happened, and then it did, and I went to his Kandalama Hotel and I recognised it. I recognised the aesthetic, knew the light. I knew if I turned that corner, I knew the expanse that would be there.” Singh realised she had been inspired by the same building that had influenced Bawa, the 16th-century Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kerala. “It was in my first *Empty Spaces* show: black shiny floor, three, four pillars...”

What is different about the Bawa photographs is the tonal quality of the printing: her habitual strong black and white has been reduced to layers of pale greys that gives the robust geometric spaces a ghostly quality, more like a memory than a factual record. It’s part of a growing desire to

“strip back” her images, she says, to pare them down to something more essential.

Upstairs, her main exhibition includes a new series of large photo-montages, made up of sections of Bawa buildings, which slot together almost seamlessly, producing images that seem both solid and dreamlike in their physical impossibility.

For the pop-up space, her one stipulation is that people have to buy the book objects directly from her at the exhibition, and once the edition of 360 has been sold, then the exhibition, and the work, will be over. In this sense, too, she is navigating between the book and the gallery. “I want to be in the middle,” she says. “I want to take the best of both. The dissemination of Steidl and the aura, or the exquisiteness, of the Frith Street Gallery. I want to see if there is room for a third space, where you might not want to go and spend all your money, but you might be very interested in a small book object that can also travel with you.

“And people invariably change the cards,” she adds. “So my artwork is alive in your house. I haven’t become a book in your bookshelf, I’m not a print on your wall. Yes,” she says, satisfied. “The artwork is alive in *your* house.” **FT**

.....
“Dayanita Singh” is at Frith Street Gallery, Golden Square, London W1, until November 9. “Box 507: A Pop-up Project with the Geoffrey Bawa Trust” is at the same address, October 1-5; frithstreetgallery.com. “Box 507”, £225, is published by Spontaneous Books, not available online. “Zakir Hussain Maquette”, by Dayanita Singh, is published by Steidl next month

SOHRAB NURIA/MAGNUM PHOTOS; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CALICOON FINE ARTS; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON; STEPHEN WHITE