

GESTA KAPUR / ART CITIES OF THE FUTURE

Dayanita Singh / PHAIDON

Dayanita Singh cannily converts her privileged upbringing among Delhi's elite into the hubris needed to contest the leading male photographers of India and the world. She has determined her genre, perfected her composition and recorded a fully signified space for the human subject that includes the homeless, the vagrant and the migrant at the fringes of institutionalized local-global contexts. Her work is about a denial of the decisive moment, and about disavowing meaning attributable to the world-as-image. With an editing sensibility that defies representational and narrative pressure, she continues to shoot on film and make prints from thousands of contact sheets

In her recent work, the social field has been pared down. *File Room/File Museum* (2011/2012) is a series of evidentiary photos where a bleak labyrinth of rooms – office, library, archive – spell obsolescence: buried histories, laid-off clerks, a redundancy of data and civic loss. These black-and-white photographs complement her long-explored project on empty spaces, where she affirms formalist repetition and, at the same time, photography's (now discounted) principle of indexicality.

For another recent exhibition and book, *House of Love* (2011), city-nocturnes in fluorescent colours compose image chapters without a story. Because love so persistently eludes, she 'figures' it here liminally, with a sense of dread bordering on the sublime. Any single photograph serves as a lurid sign, stumbled upon in a remote image-space; the house of love is a work of fiction. In this disparate selection, Singh frequently includes images of the Taj Mahal as kitsch, allegorizing love's mausoleum with an irony that resonates with the thematic of image as absence and death.

Persisting with her contrarian position, Singh makes photo books because the book defuses the aura of the image, yet turns it into a handy, graspable object. Besides a recent

retrospective volume and other conventional books, she has produced a mock biography (*Myself, Mona Ahmad*, 2001); a modest booklet without text or titles (*Go Away Closer*, 2007); a book of postcards that perversely minimize modernity's great industrial complexes as twilight ruins (*Blue Book*, 2009); and a slim edition of glossy images she also shows as wallpaper (*Dream Villa*, 2010).

The series of images in her set of accordion books, *Sent a Letter* (2007), were drawn from serendipitous photo shoots in proximate and distant worlds. Indifferent to place names, maps and geography, Singh was oddly personal with the dispatch – as if it had to be her hand to paste the pictures, pack the box and send the letter beckoning a singular addressee. In addition to her accordion books and boxes, she extends her iconoclastic impulse by presenting clues within the image-field, in the unframed image or the framing device itself. She now invests conceptual energy in fabricating supports that rescue her works from being mere wall displays.

Consider Singh's edge-to-edge layouts, the structural interface between images; contrast this with their (dis)orienting spatiality and their hints of image liaisons; return to her acts of scaling and de-scaling, reformatting and reframing: would Derrida's concept of the 'parergon' be useful here? (As something that stands out both from the 'ergon', the work, and from the milieu; something that is against, beside and in addition to the work: figure on ground, an aesthetic surround, a sort of architecture.) The parergon is neither simply outside nor simply inside, and might indeed be a suitable trope for Singh's ambiguous projects: looping around her denial of conventional representation, spurning both the tedious quest for a worthy signified and the lure of the punctum, and endorsing semiotic slippage, whereby the inside-outside conundrum of her work radically reorients the viewer's subject position.

