

Capturing Assamese Icons and Nature: A Mumbai Transplant's Perspective through Utpal Datta's Lens



Some of the Photographs from the Exhibition

I am new to Guwahati, and I am even newer to its arts scene. I came from Mumbai with a background at NCPA and Jehangir Art Gallery. So, I was pleasantly surprised when I visited a solo photography exhibition by the renowned film critic and author Mr. Utpal Datta of Guwahati. It featured faces and nature combined and intertwined to explore the relationship between humans—some prominent, some iconic, and some unknown—in their natural surroundings.

Utpal Datta, currently a Professor of Practice and Dean of Performing Arts at Assam down town University, Guwahati, has

worked for All India Radio for a long time and is a man of many talents. His books '24 Frames' and 'Film Appreciation' are well-known in film studies. He has also received a special jury mention for his writings in the National Film award. Utpal Datta is creative, and his creations do not end with writing books and making films; they also involve photography. He has a keen and observant eye for things, which is well reflected in his photography show.

Seeing Bhupen Hazarika, Deepali Borthakur, Homen Borgohain, and Birendra Nath Datta was a pleasure. Particularly, I liked Birendra Nath Datta's photo in chiaroscuro in his simple yet elegant study. The light falling on the bookshelf reflected his love for studying in depth. Deepali Borthakur, the iconic singer of Assam, looking fondly over a calendar with her own photo, made by Utpal Datta, is another memorable piece. A rare photograph of Bhupen Hazarika with a full open smile accompanied well by his wife in another frame. Utpal Datta, over his illustrious and long career, was privileged to capture the moments of the icons of Assam. So, a Homen Borgohain looking askance and a Jadab Payeng, the forest man of India, looking tenderly over his greenery creation is something to experience at the exhibition.

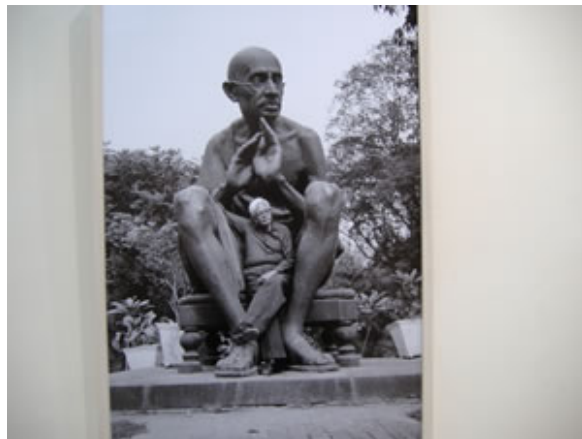
It was not only with great people he hobnobbed but also, his photos of female vendors in a busy local market and an old photographer suavely dressed and standing to focus his camera exuded a certain amount of energy. Then there were serene beach photographs of the Andamans and the river banks of the mighty Brahmaputra. In the end, the exhibition concluded with the painted scriptures of "Sarva bhabentu Sukhina" from the Upanishads beautifully capturing the theme of nature and humans.

Overall, it was a delightful experience peering into the nature and icons of Assamese culture, coming from Mumbai. I was thrilled to experience some of the unique faces and landscapes inextricably intertwined. (Exhibition venue:

Guwahati Artists Guild, dates 8th to 12th march 24).

Tailpiece: Well-known film director Biswajeet Das made a short film 'Fragments in Time' based on the exhibition. The film is available on YouTube.

Bioscope – Ram Rahman's photo exhibition – A REVIEW by Divya Raina



In Mahatma Gandhi's lap –
Bhupek Khakkar as seen by
Ram Rehman

When does one become a tourist of reality? Can photography explain man to man? It was a famous photographer who once said; "A photograph is a secret about a secret...the more it tells you the less you know". These thoughts came to mind while visiting Ram Rahman's recent photo exhibition called Bioscope, held at the Rabindra Bhawan Gallery in New Delhi recently. From the wonderfully intimate collage mounted at the beginning of the exhibition; featuring Ram's famous parents,

dancer Indrani Rahman and architect father Habib Rahman, it felt like an instantaneous view of the entire trajectory of Ram's life from infancy onwards.

The exhibition consists mostly of black and white photographs, with compelling images and portraits of both the well-known and not- so -well- known, taken at various periods in this extraordinarily gifted and socially committed designer and photographer. Ram's forte is in the capturing of the moment and freezing it in time. The overhead view of Safdar Hashmi's funeral, for instance expresses the horror and sense of solidarity at this most ghastly slaughter of an amazing life.

Also, Ram revels in the relationship between foreground and subject and there is generally an extraordinarily fraught tension between the two as can be seen in the accompanying picture of painter Bhupen Khakhar in the lap of Gandhi.

Whether Ram has taken pictures of left- liberal friends and SAHMAT colleagues, or pictures of Rajeev Sethi and other "culture-czars " and "czarinas" or of wrestlers or of inanimate figures, dummies, posters and graffiti, everything is touched with a faintly self-mocking irony. Finally, these pictures at the exhibition, tell us more about the photographer himself, his concerns and ultimately his "ethics of seeing".

**Kanchan Chander: A Woman
Artist of Vision by Seema**

Bawa





Kanchan Chandar Oil on Canvas

While most art is influenced by the personal history of its creator, Kanchan Chander's paintings *are* her personal history; from student to artist to hopefully married and then joyful mother to estranged wife and then a single mother. The three decades of her paintings reflect and reinforce these states, and are emotively and expressively explored through her art which is not only visual but experiential.

In her early sketches, the impact of a brother's death on her and her family are delved into. In *Drifting Apart* two female figures, her mother and she, cling to one another in shared grief while the male figure, the father, stands alone masking his sorrow.

The angst emerges again in her etching *Expression II*, a feminine interpretation of Edward Munch's *Scream*. The contorted female face with a wide gaping mouth from which a silent eternal scream seems to be emerging is a very powerful image that is a testimony to Kanchan's early potential.

In the first decade of her artistic journey she concentrated on print making especially etchings, lithographs and woodcuts. It is in the latter she uses bold, almost rough strokes to match the thematic of primitive primordial relationships and identities. Using archetypes from African and Polynesian tribes, she has posed a couple where the female figure stands with her legs crossed while the man stands in a hieratic pose, neither looking at each other, emphasizing an estrangement despite the intimacy of nudity.

During the period of her estrangement from her husband she painted on window, frames doors and furniture, which came out from her parental house (which was being rebuild) where she had to move in. As if painting on the dismembered utensils of her life and through this process reassembling her "self" under a dramatic new aegis.

Her signature work that emerge out of her re-assertive new female "self" are voluptuous female torsos. Sensual, confident and centered these are projected in bright feminine colors such as pink orange royal blue. Over a period of time she has experimented with ornamenting the torsos with so called feminine accessories such as sequins, beads, gold and silver foil; unapologetically emphasizing and celebrating the ornamental, alamkara and also the physicality associated with womanhood. In contrast the relatively later male torso, Male/Nail are superimposed with symbols of masculine power and violence such as hammers, saws, scissors and knives.

Simultaneously she used the iconic symbolism of Indian Goddesses in her paintings such as *Durga and Me* in which she has juxtaposed the three eyed dark Goddess, with a red tongue hanging out seated on a stylized lion, with various profane motifs of masculinity.

During the next period came her series, *Pallav's world*, which she painted with mixed media on takhtis representing the child's world of school, play and homework. The use of motifs

such as alphabets, kitschy popular heroes and boyhood ideals such as the cartoon character of He Man, emphasize the environment in which the mother and child dwell.

In her recent works two thematic trends are obvious. The first continues from her earlier *Vatsalya* series through which she had expressed the bonding between the single mother and child; now the roles seem reversed in *What's your POA, MAA* where the child standing behind her seated self portrayal seems a young adult, protecting her. The second trend is a more settled, peaceful portrayal of flowers and Buddha's head, with of course some hint of disturbance, with an overall coming to terms with life, desire and expectations.

The show significantly highlights the works of a woman-artist who is comfortable and indeed assertive of this dual identity. Though she and indeed her work are not radically feminist with a rejection of all that is male or seeking to glorify only the female, there is a refreshing and unapologetic delving into feminine, domestic and maternal concerns and sensibilities in her art.