

Photo Essay: On the other side

A shot at understanding how photographers and their subjects feel when they ‘confront’ each other



The lady of the house at Roshanbhai Haharwala House in Sidhpur, Gujarat. Photograph by Sebastian Cortés

In 2013, Puducherry-based photographer Sebastian Cortés travelled to Sidhpur, a small town in Gujarat, to photograph the Bohra community.

“The younger women were shy in front of the camera but the older women wanted to be photographed,” says Cortés. “However, I was not interested in the portraits.” He wanted to capture the rich architectural heritage—their unique houses, which are an amalgamation of Hindu, Islamic, Persian, European and colonial architecture. “This is a domesticity that resists decay and that is discerned in the residual memories, histories and traces of past lives that persist in the facades of buildings, in empty rooms, windows, doors, stairways, and other distinguishing features of Bohra architecture,” explains Cortés.

Cortés’ *Sidhpur: Time Present Time Past* series will be on display at the first edition of the annual international photography festival, Goa Photo, starting 25 February. Based on the theme of “The Other”, the festival features photo essays consisting of portraits that emphasize the sense of “difference” or “strangeness” that the photographer and

the subject feel when they confront each other. Each photo essay is a collection of at least 10 pictures.

“The ‘Other’ sums up the attitude of strangeness with which the photographer, since the invention of photography, has related to the other, the portrayed. Indeed, a portrait is never neutral: It is a set of choices and a personal background that the photographer projects into the sitter,” says Lola Mac Dougall-Padgaonkar, the director of the festival. Nineteen photographers from India, Belgium, Mexico, South Africa, Argentina, Spain, Chile and Finland, among other countries, will showcase their works at key locations across Goa, as well as in the Reis Magos Fort on the bank of the Mandovi river.

The festival will also have four parallel exhibits by well-known photographers, including Raghu Rai and Alex Fernandes. “Aesthetics, storytelling, innovation were equally important in the final selection,” says Mac Dougall-Padgaonkar.

Also on display will be *The Alkazi Collection Of Photography*—images from the 19th and early 20th centuries that document socio-political life in the subcontinent through the inter-disciplinary fields of architecture, anthropology, topography and archaeology.

Among the Indian photographers selected is Mumbai-based Ketaki Sheth. Her 2012 series, *Pilbara Stories*, documents the lives of people living in Pilbara, western Australia. The black and white portraits reveal “curiosity” in the eyes of the subjects. “It is a very closed place and I had to break the ice by showing them old works I had done in Sydney, and also by telling them that tribal communities in India have many more hardships than them,” says Sheth.

Kolkata-based Soumya Sankar Bose will be displaying his series *Jatra*, inspired by the Bengali folk theatre form of the same name. This series documents the lives of the *jatra* artistes of the 1960s and 1970s. “My uncle was a *jatra* artiste in the 1960s. However, after the TV boom, he could no longer earn a living from *jatra*,” says Bose. His uncle ended up joining a railway factory.

For German photographer Nina Röder, “The Other” finds resonance in the staged memories of her mother’s youth in her old house in Bavaria, Germany. Röder shows her mother’s life in three distinct perspectives: her mother’s, her grandmother’s, and her own. “Although we are one family and we have this genetic and emotional close connection to each other, there are still a lot of aspects in my family which can surprise or shock me,” says Röder.

Goa Photo, 25 February-7 March. Venues vary. [Click here](#) for details.