

Left: FELICE BEATO *View of the Kutcherry, Lucknow ca. 1858*Below: DINESH KHANNA *Untitled 1997*Bottom left: ABDUL KALAM AZAD *Untitled 1997*

review

Divine Façades Views of Indian architecture

Impressions Gallery, York, 15th August—5th October

In a year that has seen the hand over of Hong Kong to the Chinese people, Indian history celebrates its first fifty years of Independence from British rule. The events of 1947 have been marked in many ways across the world. The horrors of Partition that divided the country by religion and ethnicity created a multitude of sub-cultures that launched a discourse into the role of public spaces and ownership issues.

Divine Façades aims to critique the effect of the last fifty years through the use of space within constructed environments. For a civilisation revelling in a cultural history that stretches over four thousand years, fifty years is a diminutive yet significant space in time. This visual arts project consists of archive photographs from the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) and three views of Indian architecture from contemporary artists Abul Kalam Azad, Dinesh Khanna and Ram Rahman. Part one of the exhibition titled *The Orientalist Gaze* consists of twenty pictures from the CCA. Photographers Felice Beato, Samuel Bourne and John Murray amongst others travelled North India at the turn of the century recording images to send back to Britain to be seen by armchair travellers such as Queen Victoria. The photographs are almost completely devoid of people, creating a vision of the 'empire'

without referring to those who lived there. The reproductions have been produced from original negatives stored in the archives of the CCA.

In contrast to the seeming serenity of the archive prints, Ram Rahman's *After Ayodhya contested space* exposes modern India's continuing conflicts. The series of photographs were made during a normal journey around Delhi charting the many ruined mosques and the new temples which have sprung up next to them. Some of these new temples have not been given permission to be built on public land and most are facing litigation, yet officials are reluctant to approach these temples as they fear the Tantric powers of the babas that worship Bhairon, a strong aspect of Shiva there.

Divine Façades was originally titled *The Babri Mosque* with reference to 6th December 1992 when 20,000 people gathered at Ayodhya to tear down the mosque, reinforcing by example the extreme cultural value placed on public spaces. The photographs have a documentary element to them, witnessing the long term effects of Colonialism. One photograph describes a desolate graveyard of British statues and other figures from the Raj, including King George V which was planned to be dismantled in order to construct a statue of Gandhi in time for the celebrations of Independence. Rahman's photographs address the people who inhabit the public spaces around Delhi and their continued struggle to live and worship within the consequences of Colonialism. The consumption of space often leads to conflict, however these photographs do not deliberately seek out sites of conflict as they "are all around us in India today. And more than just places of religious ritual, it is all space—of freedom of thought, belief, artistic creativity—which is contested space."⁽¹⁾

Dinesh Khanna's portfolio presents a physical form of architecture photographed almost to the point of abstraction. These pictures are very painterly in their construction with an aesthetic use of colour. According to Khanna old buildings "store old stories. If we break these buildings—the stories die with them."⁽²⁾ It seems to be Khanna's quest to document the old architectural landscape of urban India before many of these beautiful buildings are torn down and replaced with ugly modern structures.

All four corners of India have been covered by Khanna recording the scenery and revisiting towns to note the changes. A real sense of personality can be seen within these prints through the charting of a family history, a cultural awareness through the choice of materials and ultimately the decoration which represents a status in society. All this is lost with the destruction of these buildings that Khanna photographs, the heritage and a way of life unique to that particular society. Khanna's photographs raise questions about personal identity and personal political history.

One of Khanna's projects was to photograph in Ayodhya and Varanasi at 'disputed' sites and places of conflict where a new style of architecture is evolving in the form of barbed wire, iron fences and police tents. This is a sign of the times which Khanna touches on briefly to raise more questions about public ownership.

Throughout these prints there is a very strong commentary concerning the complexity of architecture and the links with culture and society, yet the most overwhelming element to these photographs is the sheer beauty of composition and colour which captures an essence of the Indian experience which is absent from the other photographs in this exhibition.

The most experimental use of photography is apparent in the work by Abul Kalam Azad. The photographs are large-scale, printed with the entire nega-



tive exposed. Some of the principal characters are out of focus, others with their heads chopped out of the frame. These snapshots have a childlike quality to them which is reiterated by scratches and pencil marks over the top of the prints. This results in an interruption to the reality, a re-reading of history and a parody of the human experience often misrepresented in beautiful pictures by tourist boards and Colonial photographs.

Azad places the people he photographs in the foreground and the buildings sit almost insignificantly in the background. They gaze out of the photographs and give an identity to the human beings who live and work around these architectural structures. The buildings themselves, represent the growth of civilisation just as they do all over the world, yet ordinary people are constantly absent from this representation of history. Azad redresses this by creating a common illustrative discourse of history by comparing overpowering architecture with incidents of everyday life.

The use of photography in this exhibition is an ideal medium to express the many different views and issues confronted by each artist. The fact that the exhibition begins with Colonial photographs, an expression by a medium monopolised by the West is an interesting irony and sets the scene for the rest of the exhibition.

The agendas create a discourse within a historical context and it is one which will not conclude at the end of the celebrations. The children born after midnight that had "the genuine gifts of conjuration and sorcery, the art which required no artifice"⁽³⁾ have played out over half their lives. It has been fifty years since that ideological time after midnight on August 15th 1947 and it is now a time for reflection, to understand the reality of contemporary Indian life. This exhibition would seem to be a part of that introspective and is touring around Britain, from York to London, Edinburgh and Nottingham. However, I would be interested to see how it would be received if it were to show in Delhi, in the mists of where many of these questions seek to be answered.

Michelle McGuire

¹ Ram Rahman. *Divine Façades Views of Indian Architecture*. Catalogue. Impressions Gallery. 1997

² Dinesh Khanna. *Divine Façades Views of Indian Architecture*. Catalogue. Impressions Gallery. 1997

³ Salman Rushdie. *Midnight's Children*. Picador. 1982

