

## In their own words:

### Arpita Shah

*This Q&A was produced alongside the exhibition Nalini, shown at Impressions Gallery from 17 January to 17 March 2020.*

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#### **IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?**

Dayanita Singh, Thomas Struth, Emmet Gowin, Hannah Starkey, Zharina Bhimji, Maud Sulter, Hellen Van Meene, Jeff Wall, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Diane Arbus, Juliet Margaret Cameron and Richard Avedon.

And I'm also really inspired by the work of Esther Teichmann, Rania Matar, Miyako Ishiuchi, Trine Søndergaard, Sophie Calle, Siân Davey, Tim Walker and Dana Lixenberg.

#### **IG: Why do you choose photography as your artistic medium?**

From a young age, I've always loved photographs, especially portraits – I like how they can linger in your memory for years, even haunt you. I started studying photography from college onwards and was always fascinated by how photographers can create magical worlds and capture intimate moments through their lens – sometimes staged and sometimes candid – and freeze it forever.

For me – I compose images in my head first, sometimes based on a memory, or a painting or expression I've seen before, I'll combine it with a palette, lighting or a flower that reminds me of my childhood home and then I'll have a sitter in the image who is usually my mother and they'll bring in their own narrative into the image. Then I'll take this one photograph and it will be imbued with all these elements, plus the viewers own story when they look at it – this is why I love working with photography.

**IG: What was the trigger for this project?**

As a photographer, I've always been really interested in exploring notions of home and belonging, this stems from my own experiences of growing up across India, Ireland and Saudi Arabia before settling in the U.K. I often explore these themes through the subject of the family, particularly focusing on intergenerational relationships between mothers and daughters. The family archive is also something I often draw from in my work, so *Nalini* in one sense felt like a very organic direction for me to go in.

However, thinking back at when I consciously decided to start the project, a few years ago I had just arrived to India with my mother, and my grandmother 'Nalini' was in a coma. We went to visit her in hospital and it was incredibly heart breaking. I felt this very heavy sadness, deep longing and regret. She was in a coma for almost three weeks, and when she finally woke I asked her if she remembers anything and if she could hear me talking to her and she said no '*I dreamt I was floating in the sea between Africa and India*'

I think that's when I knew; I wanted to and needed to make work about her.

**IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work?**

My father was an amateur photographer and he photographed my mother a lot during my childhood, he'd often photograph her reflection in the mirror, and her dressed in brightly coloured sarees standing next to trees and flowers in the all different places we lived and I think this really influenced me and the images I make of her.

In terms of photographers, when I was studying photography - it was photographers like Dayanita Singh, Thomas Struth, Emmet Gowin, Hannah Starkey, Zharina Bhimji, Maud Sulter, Hellen Van Meene, Jeff Wall, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Diane Arbus, Juliet Margaret Cameron and Richard Avedon that took my breath away and still continue to do so.

Visually, my photographs also draw a lot from paintings, so artists like John William Waterhouse, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Alan Ramsey, Raja Ravi Varma, William Merritt Chase and William Strang really influenced me in the way I compose my images and think about light. I also study Indian miniatures and Mughal era paintings that depict women in flora - so this also something I draw from.

**IG: Some of our visitors will be interested in the technical aspects of your project. What equipment did you use? And did it affect the way that you worked and the project outcome?**

I shot 'Nalini' predominately with a Mamiya 6x7 analogue medium format camera with Kodak Portrait 120 film – always with a tripod and light meter, using natural light (and very occasionally shot with Canon 5D Mark 11 with a Speedlight flash).

I like working with film because of the slow process of setting your equipment up, composing your image and engaging with your sitter and/or environment. I usually shoot 1 roll of film per set up and a session takes around 1 hour (ie. Nalini's back on the balcony rooftop where she's wearing a blue sari). I have 10 frames in 1 roll of film and this allows me to focus on every inch of the frame ensuring the lighting, composition and expression is exactly the way I want it to be - I then process this film and scan it with a Hasselblad Flextight scanner. I find editing with film easier as I have 10 frames to pick from instead of a 100 (which is what I usually do when I shoot with digital per set up).

Also for me – analogue film has a certain quality, which I can't emulate with a digital camera and I like not knowing what my image looks like till I scan it a few days/weeks later. There is this magic that happens in between and I like that surprise.

**IG: Do you have any recommended reading to further contextualise your work?**

Roland Barthes book Camera Lucida has always been a big influence in my practice, as well as the writings of Stuart Hall, Bell Hooks, Marianne Hirsch and Annette Kuhn.

**IG: What plans do you have for future projects?**

I'm currently developing a new body of work entitled 'Modern Muse' in Birmingham commissioned by Grain Projects. 'Modern Muse' is a series of portraits of young South Asian women based across the Midlands and the portraits are visually inspired by 16 Century Indian Mughal Paintings. The project explores British Asian female identity and will be exhibited in late 2020/early 2021.

I've also started new work about my father's father - which focuses on masculinity and loss, which I'm really excited about and am planning to make into a book.