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Darshan

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

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Abstract

The thesis project examines the phenomenon and concept of *darshan* in the context of photography. Interpolating and extrapolating ideas from tenets of Indian philosophy, it presents a perspective on image-making and its relationship to me as an artist. With the artwork mainly situated in the cultural geographies of India and the United States, the text discusses the role of spirituality, light, colour (blue), and walking in my practice. It also references themes of painting and music – *raga* and *rasa* that are constructs of Indian musicology – and how they influence the photographic work.



Fig. 1, *Untitled*, 2022

Introduction

I came to photography through photojournalism. In my initial years of education, I was learning from professionals who were working for newspapers and magazines. They were going out into the world and looking at “events.” They referred to this activity as following a story. A story on the politics, poverty, and daily life of the city of Delhi. They were documenting the world around them and producing images for an audience that reads or looks at the content of news. I have moved away from this approach to taking photographs. I don’t go out and photograph news events anymore, but I think I still retain this strong influence of having a journal/record of photographs to collect and share moments of insight or *darshan* (fig. 1).

Darshan and the infinite

Darshan (दर्शन) is the Hindi word for philosophy, and that comes from its Sanskrit root *drish*¹, which means to see or to view. As a cultural phenomenon and practice in India, *darshan* is most commonly used in the context of a visit to a place of religious significance. Going to a sacred space means to give and get a *darshan* of that place. As a phenomenon itself, *darshan* is a metaphysical connection established by sight or, the act of seeing.² Simply, it means to get a glimpse of the divine – like the falling of light on consciousness. Since the root of *darshan* relies on sight and vision, this ongoing body of work is about presenting a mystical experience of spaces that is connected by light.



¹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1923), 43-44.

² Manjari Sharma, “Darshan (2011-2013),” <https://www.manjarisharma.com/darshan-1>.

Fig. 2, *Untitled*, 2022

The photograph shown in fig. 2 is a photograph from a small town in the Himalayas. I made this photograph while looking down into a cavity in a mountain, composed of bricks, with thread like shrubs flowing through the space. The small, winding staircase seen in the left of the image reads as an entryway, maybe a portal of light, perhaps into a world that speaks to a possibility of enlightenment. Since photography is to my mind the capturing of light, it is a means of spiritual engagement. Making photographs is an act of seeking and presenting an elemental essence. The process of going out into the world to take pictures is a way to collect moments of sight, similar to giving and receiving a *darshan*. Many of the photographs for this series were made around such sites of spiritual significance, including temples, shrines, bodies of water, and sacred forests (fig. 3). These images encourage us to imagine a possibility of something magical in the world. All these places hold a history of ritual. For centuries, people have been coming to these spaces to practice their beliefs. They come here to seek something bigger than themselves. This body of work is not about the specific religiosity of a place, instead it uses these sacred sanctuaries as containers, as points of encounter, to present a constructed mythology.



Fig. 3, *Untitled*, 2022

In a book of Tantra paintings, writer André Padoux discusses *darshan* and describes the importance of the phenomenon of seeing in tantric ritual and other ways of religious worship.³ I believe the idea of the infinite to be a container of the vast unknowable and unexplainable. It exists because of the human mind's constant urge to define reality that it cannot always grasp. The infinite is something that is intuitively felt and experienced. In society, the infinite is defined through the phenomena of religion, science, mathematics, and art. In Hindu philosophy particularly, infinity is tied to the experience of time – *darshan* is a glimpse of the infinite in the moment. Through photography, I capture a moment by camera to realize the phenomenon of *darshan*. When considered with the concept of time, light plays a pivotal role in my approach. Light is also a symbol of the infinite. In this sense, photography becomes a way to chase the infinite in an attempt to gather *darshanas*. In my work, I am playing on the idea of a constant tension and balance between the ephemeral and the eternal.



³ André Padoux, “Of Images and Beauty,” in *Tantra Song: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2011), 10-12.

Fig. 4, *Untitled*, 2022

For this body of work, I chose to use film, which is a much more fundamental and organic way of capturing light using elements like silver and chlorine. This suits my approach of capturing a glimpse or *darshan* and having a physical memory (like a negative or instant film) to record moments. Photographing with film also leaves room for chance and accidents, as in the image above (fig. 4), where a piercing sliver was an accidental incident. A light leak cut through the negative and, in the image, makes it seem like the sky is on fire.

Darshan and Blue



Fig. 5, *Untitled*, 2022

Cyanotype is a printing process that was discovered around 1842 by Sir John Herschel. It was used to create reproductions of texts and natural specimens in contact with sensitized paper, producing white impressions on a deep blue background. This is also known as the “blueprint.”⁴ In my work, I use the cyanotype process for its specific rendition of the colour – as means to make a blueprint of a *darshan*. With the cyanotype process, I use blue to present an aura, a feeling, which I believe is an inherent mysterious property of the colour itself. The blue makes the elements of nature and culture take on a spiritual significance. The photographs are not only tracing a geographic location but also presenting an active or passive presence in these pictured spaces. Like this photograph made at Mendon Ponds in Western New York (fig. 5) – the wooden gate amid an expansive blue represents a space that simultaneously feels minimal and expansive. This also alludes to the notion of the sublime.



Fig. 6, *Krishna's Longing for Radha*, from the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva, c. 1820-1825

⁴ Malin Fabbri and Gary Fabbri, *Blueprint to Cyanotypes: Exploring a Historical Alternative Photographic Process*. (Stockholm, Sweden: Alternative Photography, 2006), 7-9.

Throughout cultural history, there has been an obsession with blue, whether it is the use of blue by the fresco painter Giotto from Europe or the portrayal of Hindu deities Krishna or Shiva in paintings from India. In Indian miniature painting, the colour blue is used to represent Krishna, a Hindu God.⁵ The colour is believed to be the reflection of infinite space, like the sky, the sea, the expanse essentially. Growing up in India, I was exposed to a lot of traditional imagery that depicted such visuals using the colour blue (fig. 6). The presence of these images extends beyond the domestic and exists in the general architecture of cities, towns, and villages. I am very interested in this symbolism of the colour as it has passed down in the collective culture through centuries.

Blue is not only a colour but an experience. It's a mood; one can "feel" blue. It has been used to explain phenomena, which are seemingly unrelated in their functions, but related by appearance or affect, from Blues music to blue films, the azure of the sky or a dark indigo dye. In his *Theory of Colours*, German poet, novelist, and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe defines blue, as a cold colour temperature coming from darkness, as opposed to yellow, which is a warm colour temperature that comes from light.⁶ This alternate perspective of looking at the colour as a foreboding element lends to its mystique.

⁵ Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 34-36.

⁶ J. P. S. Uberoi, "An Other Science of Colour." *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Issue 5 (Oct-Dec 1983), 28-38.



Fig. 7, *Untitled*, 2022

Alluding to these interpretations of *darshan* and blue, a thread of my work involves printing cyanotypes of images that represent intuitions of an infinite expanse, an allusion to a dimension beyond – one that may be perceived psychologically or metaphysically. As previously mentioned, I photograph around sites and spaces that reference Indian mythology and its iconography of blue deities. Such specific places are signifiers of these mythologies in their geography as well as in culture at large.⁷ This connection could be through specific geographical locations (the ancient religious city of *Kashi* in India) or even one that is conceptual (a domestic space considered sacred). I took the above photograph (fig. 7) while standing on a pillar that was partially submerged in the water of the river Ganga, a sacred river with a variety of historical and

⁷ For example, the sacred Aravalli Forest near Delhi for its reference to the *Mahabharata* or the ancient city of Varanasi (ancient name *Kashi* which means “shining” in Sanskrit) for its reference to many of the *Purānas*.

contemporary stories and rituals associated to it.⁸ It appears as if these men are rowing the boat towards a source of light, a field of illumination as seen on the top-left corner of the image. This image projects an effect of longing, as the boat strives to reach for the light. By representing subjects from these locations in material form, I am engaging in a dialogue with the history of art as well as the history of religion in the Indian subcontinent.



Fig. 8, Rinko Kawauchi, *Untitled* from the series *Halo*, 2007

I am also interested in how *darshan* has such symbolic affectations. The work by contemporary Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi work demonstrates how seeing the sacred and the profane photographically is also to see the world symbolically. The subjects of her photographs are from her everyday life in Japan as well as from different places or sites of rituals

⁸ The river is considered sacred as it is believed that it flows through the hair locks of Hindu deity Shiva. The river also has significant association to death and *moksha* – ashes of cremated bodies are flowed into the river as part of a post cremation ritual.

that are of historical significance. Her work “hints at the possibility of photos serving as a medium for memories that transcends the places where people were born, grew up and live, and possibly even cultures and generations.”⁹ In this photograph (fig. 8), the birds are a symbol of migration and also serve as a metaphor for the collective subconscious.

This is also something that I intend to present with my images for this series. In one photograph (fig. 9), the archetype of a boat symbolizes a voyage or journey. This photograph was made in the ancient city of Kashi (which means “shining” in English), from the end of one of the river platforms there. The trimmed pieces of wood are stacked on top of each other, with some space left at the front end of the boat, probably for the person who was navigating this vehicle, who is nowhere to be seen in the image. This is a very particular boat that has wood which is going to be used to cremate the dead. This is metaphorically, and in this case, literally, a vessel of death and rebirth.



Fig. 9, *Untitled*, 2022

⁹ Kenji Takazawa, “Photographs a a medium for the memories of strangers,” <http://gallery916.com/exhibition/therainofblessing/>.

Darshan and walking

Walking is another formative part of my photographic endeavor. For me, walking is an exercise in seeing. It is through walking in urban and natural environments (and the liminal spaces between them), that I come across the subjects of my interest, these different instances of *darshan*. Philosopher Michel de Certeau describes walking as a “way of operating” in a city-space.¹⁰ There is a rhetoric to the walk by moving through the main roads, the hidden alleys, the cul-de-sacs, and the crowded crannies. In moving through these spaces, I am curious about the familiar – the trees on the street or the simple architecture of a house. These spaces are laid out with a strategy (defined by power structures like the city development authority) through which I maneuver and improvise a path (by taking a by-lane instead of a main road, which might even be slower to reach my destination). This kind of meandering and photographing is part of a poetic inventiveness in the everyday.



Fig. 10, *Untitled*, 2022

¹⁰ Michel de. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 2013), 91-110.

There is something mysterious about the ordinary or the mundane. By taking photographs of such subjects, these ordinary scenes start to symbolize an extraordinary value – moments of beauty, of mystery, of *darshan*. One photograph depicts a stream of people walking on staircase platform evoke beauty in the ordinary act of transit (fig. 10). Writer Ian Farr describes how spatial images (of the external world of objects) and the self (the internal world of interpretations) inform each other and become interlinked in a symbiotic way.¹¹ What we see builds our perceptual framework that further builds upon how we see the world. For example, repeated walking in the same spaces as a matter of everyday ritual presents new insights to me every time. I am building on a visual archive of images that exist in the mind (conscious and unconscious) and in the material (the photograph as object). Even though I may be mapping the same spaces, there is always a novelty in this everyday way of operating. I believe this lends to the mystery – a poesis – that we can bring forth in the everyday. For me, photography becomes a way to present such mysteries as they happen to exist all around in our immediate surroundings, in our different ways of operating in the everyday (fig. 11). Photographers including Dayanita Singh from India, J.H. Engstrom from Sweden, and Daido Moriyama from Japan, take on a similar approach by repeatedly photographing in the same spaces they inhabit, and looking for a glimpse of the overlooked.

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, extract from 'Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire, *Les Travaux de L'Année Sociologique* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925); trans. Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 168-70.



Fig. 11, *Untitled*, 2022

***Darshan* and Music**

Hindustani shastriya sangeet (Indian Classical Music) has had a positive influence on my photographic approach. *Hindustani shastriya sangeet* is formally based in the *raga* system. A *raga* is a melodic structure that comprises a set of notes, which when sung or played in a specific manner evoke a *rasa*, which is the overall emotion explored by the musical piece. *Rasa* literally translates to “juice” and refers to a particular *taste* that a work of art like a musical composition evokes. Musicologists argue that *rasa* has spiritual or “trans-empirical” appeal for the listeners as well as performers, very much like a *darshan*.¹²

¹² Pradip Kumar Sengupta, *Foundations of Indian Musicology* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1991), 100-101.



Fig. 12, *Untitled*, 2022

It is understood that a *raga* has the ability to “colour the mind”— akin to the use of blue in my work (fig. 12). Raga is an improvisation, very much like wandering and photographing, which results in producing a *rasa* or juice that affects the viewer’s emotion. There are nine main categories of *rasa* described in standard literature: Śringāra or Love; Karunā or Grief; Raudra or Anger; Vira or Enthusiasm; Bhibhatsa or Disgust; Hāsyā or Mirth; Adbhuta or Wonder; Bhayānak or Terror, and Śānta or Peace / Tranquility.¹³

¹³ Sengupta, 110-111.



Fig. 13, *Untitled*, 2022

Hāsyā (हास्य) or mirth

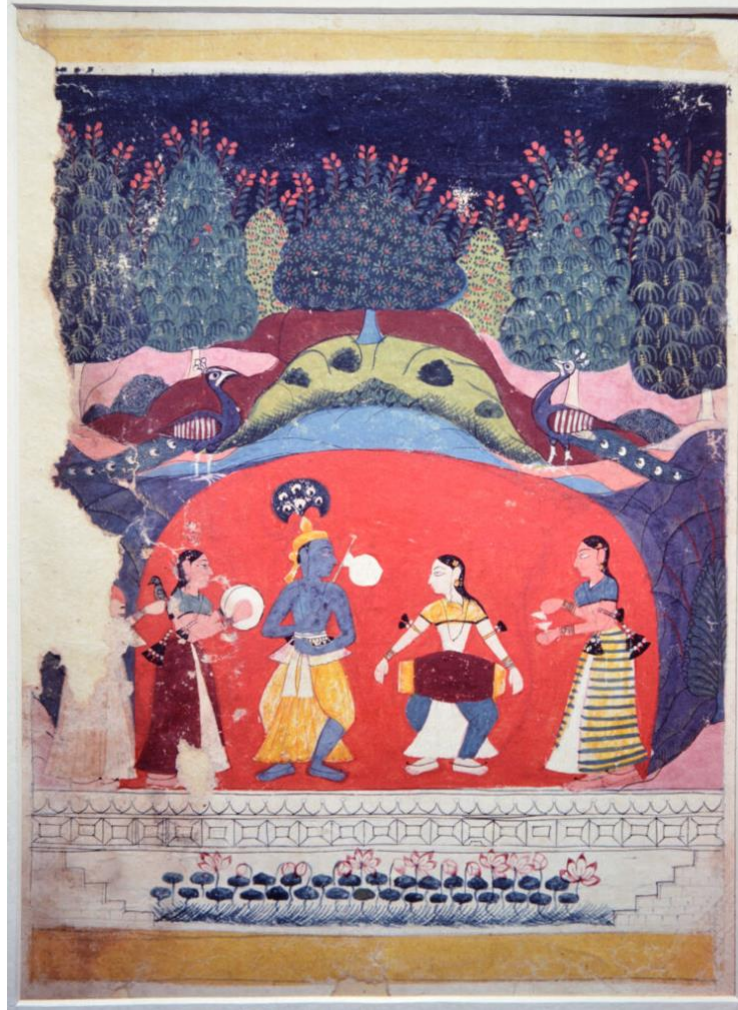


Fig. 14, *Set 25: Malwa, Vasant*, Rāgamala Paintings, 1660

Many artists produce works exploring the relationship between *raga*, *rasa*, which are constructs of musicology, as well as the visual depiction of moods. This is a painting from the *Rāgamālā* series.¹⁴ *Rāgamālā* is a Sanskrit word that means a “garland of ragas,” or a garland of melodies. These were a series of paintings made in the Indian subcontinent from the 16th century until the 19th century, when the British Raj colonized the region. These artists employed symbols from local culture with religious implications (fig. 14). One example is of a *rāgamālā* painting which presents the *rasa* of *Shringara* and *Vira*, which is love and enthusiasm. Contemporary

¹⁴ Unknown, “Set 25: Malwa, Vasant,” <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3796778>.

artists including Om Prakash Sharma have explored similar themes of music, tantra, and spirituality. As seen in his painting (fig. 15), Sharma uses forms and shapes to present a spiritual geometry. The geometric form and subtle colours create an affective juice, a *rasa* of *śanta* or tranquility.



Fig. 15, *Paradise Mandala*, Om Prakash Sharma, 2007

Reading about this theory of music and its art historical connections to Indian painting, I wondered how this phenomenon might be applied to my own practice of taking photographs. Analogously thinking about *raga* and *rasa*, I imagined how images from the world around me might produce such immanent feelings that take on form and colour (fig. 16).



Fig. 16, *Untitled*, 2022

I envisioned how they might present an emotional rendering, or *rasa*, in two-dimensional form – a sense of peace or *rasa* of *śanti*, when looking at an image of a quiet landscape or a sense of wonder or *rasa* of *adbhuta*, when regarding an image of a mystical forest (fig. 17).



Fig. 17, *Untitled*, 2022

Conclusion

Piercing the outward appearance to bring about an inner vision.

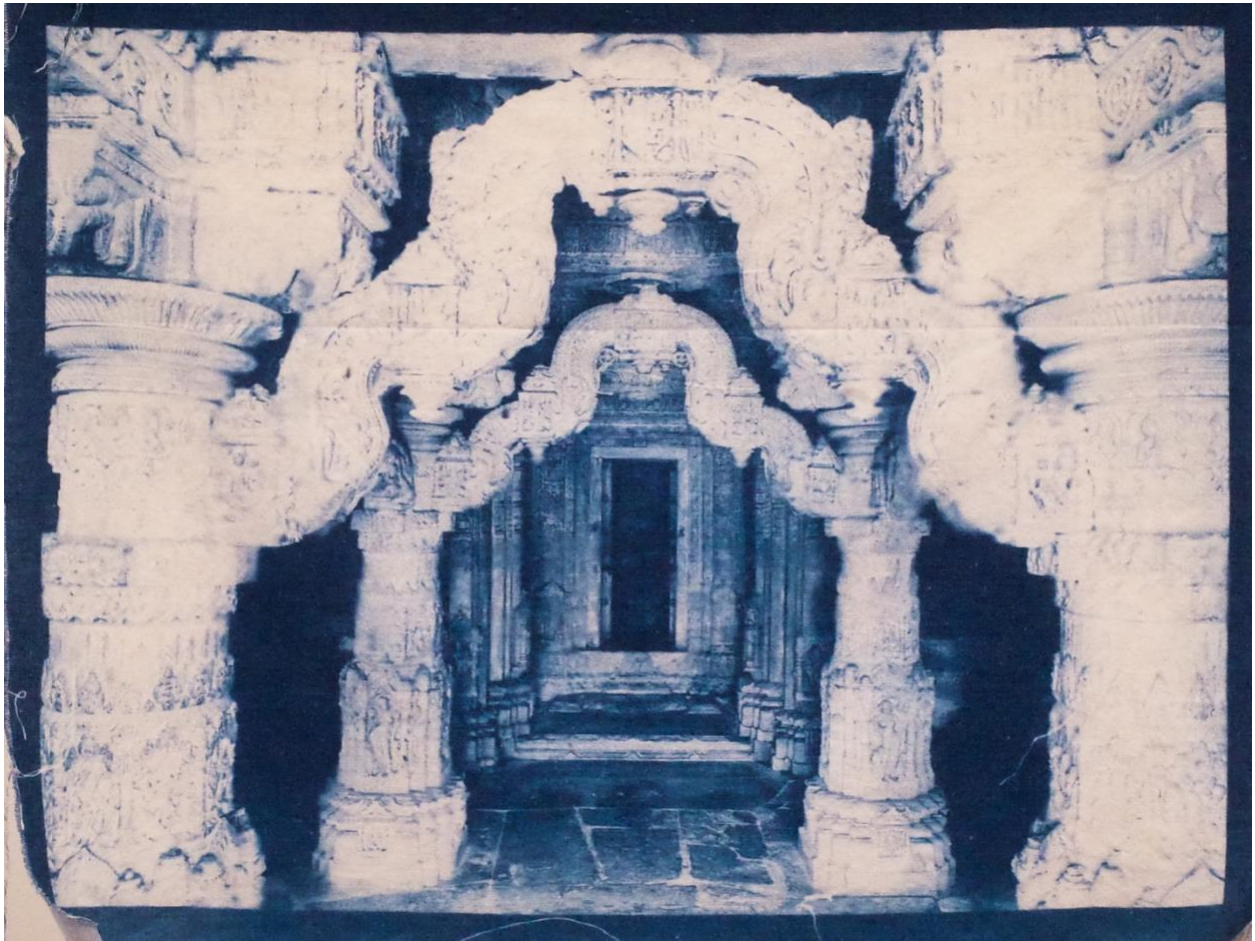


Fig. 18, *Untitled*, 2023

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