

REVIEW ARTS

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Exit ladies, with picture

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Dayanita Singh's *Ladies of Calcutta* (Bose Pacia, until February 9), in spite of the affectionate drollery of its title, is an exacting exhibition. It is mounted profusely and precisely. There are eight large photographs, hung as two triptychs and a diptych, and more than a hundred smaller prints on three white walls, from almost floor-level to a little above eye-level. They are all black-and-white images of extraordinary sharpness, framed in grey without any titles. This combination of profusion, clarity and the avoidance of names and dates makes this an exhibition that demands time, repeated visits and close visual attention. It also asks of the viewer an openness to being moved to laughter, recognition or sadness even while being confronted with the impersonality and strangeness of art.

The ladies in the show, together with the gentlemen, children and animals they are photographed with, are — or had been — all Calcuttans. This is the principle behind the profusion. And to start with, the viewer, Calcuttan or visiting, may form at least four kinds of relationship with the photographs. First, he might know some of the people personally, or be able to identify their faces. He would thus bring this knowledge to bear upon the images. This, in turn, would recall or complicate what he had hitherto seen and known of these people. Then he might remember them from the artist's previous books, especially

Privacy (2003). So, seeing them in this new context and arrangement would make him think about the people, and the photographer, in a different light. Third, without knowing the people or Dayanita's other work at all, he might simply find himself being made to look at images of people in rooms. He might also reflect on what he sees, in relation to his own memories and feelings associated with other people and other rooms. Finally, and here the generic 'he' won't do, he or she might find himself or herself hanging on the wall alongside many others, and savour the singular experience of looking at oneself as part of a work of art in public space.

These are all forms of recognition that play with what it means for us to be ourselves, privately and publicly — in relation to other people, and to the spaces and things that we like to call our own. What is it that we see then when we look at these faces? For these are quite ob-

viously 'posed' portraits, each person conscious of being photographed and prepared for this experience. Yet what we respond to as we dwell on each image is how the subject's personhood is both embodied in, and exceeds, this pose. The moment of each image is just a little bit outside the perfected moment of the pose, when the people have allowed themselves to be arranged and placed, but have also begun to relax and be themselves within that arrangement. This is when their own idea of 'themselves and the artist's vision of them come together, but do not coincide. Out of this

delicate and fleeting disjunction arises the pathos or comedy of the photograph, its moment of truth.

Yet, it is not just the face and its expressions that make up the incalculable in these photographs. It is how the individuality of the faces coexists with the mystery of other absences and presences, of other people and objects lived with or possessed, that also gives to these images their peculiar richness of feeling and composition. Dogs, musical instruments, textiles, furniture, mirrors and books are all part of the "privacies" that we create, as much for ourselves as for the eyes of others.

They provide a wealth of detail in terms of which we read, and ask to be read by, others.

Looking at the women portrayed by Dayanita Singh, their faces often lit from below by the winter-afternoon light reflected off the floor of old, cavernous houses, which she associates uniquely with Bengal, one is struck by how much the natural language of expression, gesture and deportment is a matter of culture. The films of Satyajit Ray (*Charulata*, *Debi*, *Apur Sansar*, *Teen Kanya*), or an entire culture of women's devotion around Anandamoyee and Sharada (often seen, with Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Rabindranath, hanging on the walls in the pictures), or of classical music and dance as ways of being, inform many of these images. They not only shape Dayanita's vision of some of

the women she photographs, but also subtly choreograph these women's own presentation of themselves to her camera.

Midway through the show, the ladies of Calcutta will start carrying their pictures home, gradually emptying the gallery. The artist must devise her own vanishing trick, which, as a performance, will express frivolity as well as gratitude. There is a generosity in letting another eye catch the fragile essence of one's being. And this generosity must be returned.

