

NUEVA LUZ

photographic journal

MANJARI SHARMA
WILLIAM R. WILSON
SUSANA RAAB
COMMENTARY BY FAYEMI SHAKUR



Supporting artists working in photography.
Residencies, exhibitions, publications, lab facility, and more.



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NUEVA LUZ

photographic journal volume 18:1

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Cover: William R. Wilson, *Roussau Nutter, US citizen and architecture major at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange series, 2013. Archival pigment print, 50"x40"*

Editorial



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En Foco turns 40 this year – bring in the band, throw the confetti and pop the champagne! FORTY... it's a long time – and, if you add up the time and effort (as our dear friend Sandra Pérez has stated) – non-profit years feel similar to dog years, in that it's even longer.

It is a monumental achievement that this Organization, which has played a critical role in bringing cultural equality to the art world, is alive and well. Its impact is appreciated by emerging and well-known artists, curators and historians alike. It has an unequalled track record of providing a first step in launching great talents toward the 'visible' stratosphere... all while remaining connected to its local audiences.

Summarizing En Foco into a sound bite – considering the art itself, identity politics and social justice undercurrents – can be quite complicated. Ariel Shanberg (Center for Photography at Woodstock) and I sometimes tinker with the idea of living to see the day that programs specifically for artists of color are no longer needed. But, we do not yet live in a post-racial society, so we persevere.

Change in its varied forms is inevitable, so we will be counting on hearing from everyone that is interested in what we do and why. It doesn't matter if you picked up this magazine at the library, your dentist's office, or have been subscribing for the past 30 years (but if you have, I'd LOVE to talk). Everyone's input is valuable in determining the shape of our future. So get ready to participate and be forewarned: we have been knocking on doors.

So for now, we rejoice and plan! What will the next few years bring? There are some exciting developments underway. Our beautiful web redesign is in progress and will soon be launched. The pages of this *Nueva Luz* may be thinner in weight, but certainly not in talent. Please bear with us as we take a moment to consolidate our efforts into that redesign as well. The new iteration will also include articles by the esteemed author, Ilan Stavans, who took flight on thinking about photography when he wrote for *Nueva Luz* in 2004 with Volume 10#1.

Other developments? Well, you'll just have to stay tuned!

Miriam Romas,
Editor & Publisher

SHARED CULTURES: THE POWER OF TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

by *fatemi shukur*

Transcendence is defined as going beyond ordinary limits—a powerful experience which speaks directly to the soul. Through photography, the artists selected for this issue – **Manjari Sharma**, **William R. Wilson**, and **Susana Raab** – present viewpoints that give voice to unique ways of exploring, seeing, and sharing.

Like writing or poetry, until a work of art is shared it is only a thought, a diary entry, a personal experience. That starting point is important but when *culture* is shared, the experience has power in its ability to expand our global and personal worldview. The photographic process itself can also represent this idea of going beyond, made more complete and complex by being open to the perspectives of others. With ever growing concerns about cultural appropriation, racism, sexism, exploitation and class issues, cultural storytellers are and have always been important. The potential to challenge prejudices and discover commonalities lies here.

“Curiosity expands our empathy when we talk to people outside our usual social circle, encountering lives and worldviews very different from our own,” says Roman Krznaić, author of *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*. Sharing cultures and being curious about others can certainly initiate the cultivation of empathy that could help evolve society. Like diversity training, it’s a good idea in theory but can be lost without important critical dialogue, mutual understanding and a willingness to listen and learn.

Nevertheless, the act of sharing contains the power to transform. Perhaps we have ancestral promises to keep as well and photography is another medium by which those promises are met. The artform continually reminds us that our personal and family histories, rituals and memories are important. The deeper we dig, the more we remember, imagine, and humble ourselves to things beyond us. While ideas about tapping into ancestral memories are not new some scientists believe these memories are never lost, that they are embedded in our DNA.

Experiences necessary for survival, psychological and emotional traits, intellectual and creative abilities, and negative experiences too all can be found deep down in our DNA, our ancestors within. I frequently wonder what we can learn from them. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks profoundly stated: “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” For this essay, I wanted to explore how these connections, ancestral memories and the sharing of culture inform the work of these three photographers and the process of the work itself.

**Manjari
Sharma**

Manjari Sharma’s *Darshan* series photographically recreates nine classical images of Gods and Goddesses pivotal to mythological stories in Hinduism. As a young girl in India, Sharma recalls trips with her parents to temples, experiencing the architecture, marble floors, sandalwood doors, assorted smells, textures and sacred deities that captured her mind and imagination. An incredible world with its own rhythm, for her it was not just a religious ritual but a familial practice.



Manjari Sharma, *Lord Ganesha*, *Darshan* series, 2011. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"

The sense of place inspired Sharma to revisit the romance of the experience. Compelled to create photographs of Indian deities, Sharma wanted to see what it would take to recreate the images previously only depicted as drawings or paintings. After moving to the United States to formally study her art, Sharma's ritual of going to temple was replaced by going to museums and art galleries. The museum had become her temple and mirrored her experience in the temple. Sharing the value of a sense of practice, faith and devotion are integral undercurrents of this series.

"Most artists follow some sort of practice of devotion and that presumption is familiar to me from watching my parents invest themselves in their spirituality. Artists need to have a respect for practice and devotion. I don't know if any artist can say they have succeeded without those elements. You go in a museum or gallery with all of these expectations. Sometimes you get let down by the art you see, or things that you wish for do not come through. You feel that way whether you are in a museum or a temple. But just because you walk out disappointed without your expectations being met, doesn't mean you don't return."

Serendipitously, the spiritual process of art making contains experiences waiting to be realized. Sharma's images reflect the sense of adventure a "darshan" experience provides and the images are meant to invoke a sense of spirituality within. Darshan is a Sanskrit word that means sight, vision or view, and is most commonly used in the context of Hindu worship. From creating photographs to creating an experience, the project draws upon her memory of having darshans in the temple as a child. A good art project will take a person elsewhere, Sharma says, perhaps beyond the original starting point. No longer creating the art, she moves the practitioner, a process that takes a certain willingness to lose oneself. As an examination of Sharma's identity, ideas, and beliefs she honors a legacy greater than herself and rediscovers a certain awe and grandeur lost after moving to the United States.

Presented as 6-foot high installations under the objective roof of a museum enables a change of context and frame of reference allowing the deities to be studied for their story and aesthetics. A crucial aspect of the project was the precise recreation of the deities and attention to detail. The content influences the colorful, pop-art feel of the images. Thirty-five Indian craftsmen created the props, sets, prosthetics, makeup, costumes and jewelry. Each subject was cast to portray the deity with fine accuracy. Among the depictions include *Ganesha - The Obstacle Remover*, *Kali - The Goddess of War and Renewal*, *Durga - The Invincible Goddess of Power*, *Saraswati - The Goddess of Art, Music and Knowledge*, *Hanuman - Son of Wind, Devotee of Rama, and Vishnu - Supreme God of Protection and Sustenance*. Further study of each deity enhances the experience of the project for the viewer. In contrast with oil paintings by Raja Ravi Varma (1848 - 1906) which inspired her as well, Sharma's photographs provide a modern take on religious tradition.

William R. Wilson

William R. Wilson is a Diné photographer who explores the possibilities of controlling one's image. He moved to a Navajo reservation at the age of ten and became interested in photography as a teenager. Diné means "Children of the Holy People", the preferred term by Navajo people. In addition to his profession as an artist and photographer, Wilson is also an arts educator and community organizer. His latest series, *The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange*, provides another glimpse of transcendence, going beyond by reclaiming the power of a particular moment in photographic history of Indigenous people.

American culture remains enamored, Wilson says, with the photographic exchange between Euro-American and Native Peoples of the Americas - particularly the decades from 1907 to 1930 when photographer Edward S. Curtis produced his magnum opus, *The North American Indian*. Taking back that period which left Native people frozen in time by the dominant culture, Wilson creatively uses the medium to embark upon an exploration of process and an investigation of documentary portraiture.

Going back to the darkroom, making emulsions, and exploring a beautifully alchemical photographic process, *The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange* represents the slowing down of process still relevant amid today's digital age. Inviting indigenous artists, art professionals and tribal governance to participate in the studio portrait project, each session is also a performative ritual and multi-faceted engagement. Sitters are encouraged to bring items of significance to the session and afterwards Wilson gives the subject the tintype photograph produced during the exchange. Using wet plate studio photography, Wilson links history, form, and critical dialogue, yielding an enigmatic aspect of storytelling and social practice.

Susana Raab

"I half facetiously say that if there is a soul exchange in the photographic process that soul probably resides in that object. The aluminum type plate is marked by the photons that bounced off of the subject that registered an image, changed by a chemical reaction on the surface of the plate. It's a physical marking and exchange recorded on the object. It's unique and it's cool to have. I don't want to hold that. I give it back to the subject," Wilson says. "Photography grounds our imaginations to the real in a way that paintings or drawings haven't been able to do. With photography the medium is a precise representation of what it sees. There's something magical about that moment when I bring folks into the darkroom and they get to watch the development. Witnessing the process of an image reversing from a negative to a positive when the image is resolving and comes to the fore, invokes a human response seeing your image made. It's an intimate space and part of my social practice that I appreciate and value."

By making and sharing these images, Wilson demonstrates the resurgence of important indigenous peoples here today and dramatically contributes to the collective understanding of Native American people and our own American identity. He effectively supplants Curtis's Settler gaze and his remarkable body of ethnographic material with a contemporary vision of Native North America.

Social perception and cultural identity are themes that heavily influence Susana Raab's *Chollita* series. Peruvian by birth and father, Raab left the country at the age of three following her parents' divorce. When she first returned to visit Peru over a decade ago, she was surprised when locals nicknamed her "Chollita Gringa". *Cholo* or its feminine counterpart, *Chollita*, is a loaded term used to identify the offspring of native and Black parents of Peru. The original meaning signifies a dog of disreputable origin, used during colonial times as an insult. It's a complicated word with connotations that range from disgust to affection, reflecting the complex socio-economic rules that modern day Peru continues to employ. "The word itself conveys one of the many paradoxes of Peru: to love and hate something at the same time, to be both mother country and oppressor," Raab says.

Raab began traveling to Peru more frequently to explore her own fractured cultural identity and understand her place in a lost homeland. Documenting landscapes envisioned by Raab as dreamscapes were a way of showing Peru as more than what others imagined. Combining portraiture, landscapes and street photography, Raab's series transcends common stereotypes about Peru. As she began inquiring about the origin of the word *Cholo*, she realized that by photographing the underclass, she was representing herself as well, since she was viewed within her own family as a half-breed.

Raab's images place the underclass in a democratic context using the beach as an ambiguous background for their lives so class could not be referenced. Additionally, the beach is a place where people are at leisure eliciting a different kind of feeling. In contrast, images of domestic employees, maids and servants convey a sense of isolation, sadness and alienation consistent with their treatment in society. Issues of colorism* are dominant in Peru. A large part of the population lies on coastal Peru and bears no resemblance to the touristic depictions of them. Raab focuses her lens on the beauty of the darker-skinned underclass, portraying the subjects with dignity, pride, and connection, going beyond yet again.

Shining a light on these connections, Raab turns stereotypes of poncho-clad natives, llamas and rural mountain paths on their head providing a more modern interpretation of Peru. In capturing these moments, Raab gained a journey of personal reconciliation.

On the beach an older woman Raab wants to photograph attempts to clean up her son-in-law's taxi cab. "Don't worry about it, I want this scene just as it is," Raab tells her. "Look proud."

"I AM proud," the woman says.

* Discrimination based on skin color, or colorism, is a form of prejudice or discrimination in which human beings are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to skin color. Hunter, Margaret. "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality" (2007)



Manjari Sharma, *Lord Hanuman*, *Darshan* series, 2011.
Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"

Artist Statement

Darshan consists of nine photographically recreated, classical images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses that are pivotal to mythological stories in Hinduism. Most commonly used in the context of Hindu worship, *Darshan* is a Sanskrit word that means "apparition" or a "glimpse". Lead by the experiential nature of a *Darshan*, this series explores the delicate relationship between photography and representation.

Having left a ritual-driven community in India, my move to the U.S. precipitated an enormous cultural shift. It was this cultural paralysis that motivated me to use my one medium of worship—the camera—to study, construct and deconstruct the mythologies of my land.

The goal was to turn multidimensional memories of sculptures and ornamental paintings of Hindu Gods, into two-dimensional photographs. For centuries, the way that we have experienced *darshans* (metaphysical connection established upon sight) is via laying gaze upon a molded figure, a carved statue or an illustration that represents a likeness to avatars described in Hindu scripture. This series of images invites the viewer to consider a photograph as means of spiritual engagement.

To make the imagery for the series, exhaustive research on each character led to the assemblage of a diorama, by a team of approximately thirty-five Indian craftsmen who created props, sets, prosthetics, make-up, costumes, and jewelry to exacting specifications. Printed on a massive scale, these photographs are presented in an elaborate installation that resembles the experience of a Hindu temple... complete with incense, lamps, and invocation.

By bridging the gap between the significant ceremonies of my parents lives and my own mythology, this series has become my reason to immerse, question and push the boundaries of my faith, not only beyond my imagination, but beyond the very frame that surrounds the photograph.

Manjari Sharma

Manjari Sharma



Lord Shiva, *Darshan* series, 2011. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"



Manjari Sharma

Top: Lord Brahma, Darshan series, 2013. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"
Right: Maa Saraswati, Darshan series, 2013. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"





Manjari Sharma

Top: *Maa Lakshmi, Darshan series*, 2011. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"

Left: *Lord Vishnu, Darshan series*, 2013. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"



Manjari Sharma

Top: *Maa Durga, Darshan series*, 2011. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"

Right: *Maa Kali, Darshan series*, 2013. Digital chromogenic print, 60 x 48"

