

Museum of memories

German photographer Anja Bohnhof plays with the immense possibilities of memory for her project in Kochi

Somewhere in the secrets of our childhood are places where we hid from the world to be ourselves. For artist Upendranath T.R., it was the pond where he swam often, which today is a metal factory; for Deputy Mayor of Kochi, Bhadra, it was a staircase in the house of her grandfather poet G. Sankara Kurup, and for theatre artiste Ramesh Varma, it was the overgrown backyard of his home where he smoked his first cigarette and talked politics.

Years away from their childhood, German contemporary artist Anja Bohnhof asks these and other personalities from Kochi to revisit their private hideouts for her photography series – ‘Territories of the Self’.

“These portraits of public figures reveal them in a place where they were once free of rules and expectations. Given their positions of importance now, it is the contrast that these photographs look at,” says Anja, who is working on the project as part of her three weeks with Kochi Biennale Foundations’ Pepper House Residency for artists, supported by the Goethe Institut.

“The more public our lives are, the more we move in worlds that are strange to us, the less space we have for inner retreat caught up as we are in the demands of daily life,” reads her concept note to the



TRACING HISTORY German photographer Anja Bohnhof usually works with analogue large format photographs PHOTO:THULASI KAKKAT

series. Her pictures reveal people freed of the paraphernalia of popularity, profoundly themselves for a stolen moment.

Anja has always been interested in the underbelly of things. What lies beneath what we already know? The question prompted her recent book project – ‘Blore—Unlock the City’ – wherein she photographed places and people that artists and intellectuals of Bangalore held dear. “I expected people to take me to personal spaces, as would have probably happened if I did this project in Europe, instead, many led me to public

places such as Cubbon Park or Lal Bagh. The public identification of these places was a form of self-representation for the artists,” says Anja.

Conceptual art

Conceptual art has informed all of Anja’s work. As a young student of photography, she says she once scoffed at conceptual art herself, but as she grew to understand its vast possibilities, she began to explore it herself. “I was probably a bit arrogant at first,” she says, “But then I realised that it offers you so many different ways to look

at even a small topic.” The evidence for this is visible in Anja’s ‘Bahak-Burden of Things’ series. Tomes have been written about Kolkata’s “bahaks” or “carriers”— human load-bearers of rickshaws and assorted cargo. Yet, in Anja’s series, one looks at them afresh, shot up-front against the dusty white backdrop of her bare-bones, roadside studio.

Before Anja’s work in India, she spent 10 years capturing remnants of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) as it stood after the Berlin Wall fell. Anja lived in western Germany but studied in its

eastern half where she awoke to a portion of her history that was hitherto unknown to her. “After the Berlin Wall fell, the former GDR grew increasingly westernised, and objects from the GDR are now stored in museums,” she says.

For one of her eight projects there, ‘GDR -Museum Views’, she used museum artefacts to recreate rooms as they would have looked pre-1989. Her series ‘Strangeland’ looks at the present day lands of “erased villages”, which were at the GDR border and destroyed to boost border security. Nothing remains usually, except for an electric pole or detached staircases.

Raising questions

“Photography is the perfect medium for playing with memory,” says Anja. “It enables one to ask questions; not to tell people how things are or are not, but rather to raise questions which they are then free to answer.”

Anja’s most iconic work, ‘Traces of Absence’, asks “What’s left when nothing’s left?” It looks at places associated with people such as Albert Einstein and Martin Luther King, photographed devoid of furniture or private belongings. With all of this removed, what “suggests that the owner might still be at home; what does it say of posterity and presence”?

Anja adds that the medium she chooses to work with enhances the concepts it elaborates. She works usually in analogue large format for it requires deep concentration. She cannot review her work immediately as she could in digital format. On her chosen field for 20 years—photography—Anja says, “It’ll take me my whole life and more to understand everything about photography.”

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