

# Tunnel vision

Dayanita Singh's new photographs bring her one step closer to home, says **Vivek Menezes**.

Sunset's slanted rays cast a terracotta glow on the battered walls of Dayanita Singh's spare home at the end of a lane in the Goan village of Saligao. In the evenings, the pooling of the darkness and the lengthening of the shadows make entering the front room seem "like walking into Dayanita's photographs", declared a recent house guest, the London-based musician Talvin Singh. It's almost like a gallery, with old family photographs and antelope-horn trophies acknowledging previous inhabitants, as well as prominent displays from Singh's last book, *Privacy*.

Like her other recent elegant black-and-white photographs, which *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter described in 2005 as "reliquary still-lives of a specific historic past", the images from *Privacy* are haunted by what remains unseen. The book kicks aside the market-driven blinkers that constrain Indian photography to tedious iterations of Raghu Rai's canon. All through its pages, Singh exhibits powerful restraint. The images linger in memory precisely because of what has been left outside the frame. *Beds and Chairs*, which will be at Gallery Chemould from February 8-28, will provide a useful retrospective glimpse at this earlier work, even as Singh's enigmatic new work, *Go Away Closer*, comes to Galerie Mirchandani +Steinruecke on the same dates.

Singh says that time spent in Goa has had a profound impact on her work. It has become a fundamental influence that ranks alongside her earliest exposure to photography via her mother's persistent shutterbugging, and six



## Dayanita Singh

winters in the early 1980s of photographing tabla player Zakir Hussain while imbibing the cadences and pauses of classical music. Since she first started walking the village bylanes of Goa in 1999, her work has steadily grown more distinctive. It has moved into unfamiliar terrain for Indian photography – there are no more captured moments. *Go Away Closer* is far beyond mere snippets: it travels deep into long tunnels of spent seasons and stacked-up centuries.

The pioneering photographer, Dorothea Lange, described the camera as “an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera”. Singh’s new work takes it a couple of steps further. It consists of photographs and relationships between photographs that demand to be dealt with in the same framework as literature.

Singh’s close friend, the writer Amitav Ghosh, calls the new work an “astounding achievement”. “I think it charts a new direction in photography,” he told *Time Out* via email. “What struck me most powerfully is that the pictures are depictions of interior states; they express an inwardness of emotion that is rare not just in photography but in any of the visual arts. What Dayanita is doing here is much closer to what a novelist does than what photographers traditionally do.”

*Go Away Closer*’s notebook-sized companion volume (published by Steidl) is itself a compelling little exhibition spread out on non-numbered, uncaptioned pages. It unfolds like a book of secrets, each photo engaged in dialogue with the image opposite. The best pairings come across like an entire novel in just two photographs. There’s an odd parallel to Goan painter Francis Newton Souza’s similarly original notebook-like *Words and Lines* (Villiers, 1958), the core of which also grew out of a long period spent mostly alone in an old house in Saligao.

It has been an unconventional, occasionally bumpy ride for Singh. Born in 1961, educated at Sanawar, and the National Institute of Design, in Ahmedabad, Singh did a stint at the International Center of Photography in New York in 1987-’88 and interned with the legendary photographer Mary Ellen Mark. Her photojournalism has been published in all the premier showcases in the world – *The Independent*, *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Fortune*. But in



Dayanita Singh in her backyard in Goa

the mid-’90s, she turned away from the stereotypical demands of photo editors and into uncharted territory of a different, national landscape where ideas of “Western” and “Indian” flow into each other and cannot be forcibly cleaved to opposite poles.

It is this work that gave Singh entry into spaces that remained largely untouched by Indian art. Since 2000, she’s had exhibitions at Berlin’s modern art museum, the Hamburger Bahnhof, at Boston’s storied Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and at leading galleries in Europe and the USA. Another landmark achievement came a few months ago in Manhattan, where billboard-sized images from Singh, Chuck Close and Mitch Epstein were positioned outdoors in Madison Square Park for a show entitled “Cities in Transition”.

*Go Away Closer* is another step yet. These are assured images that brim with extraordinary eloquence. Some – including a favourite

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of Ghosh – are not included in the Steidl volume. As he describes it, “A few lights are strung across a dark surface, under a cloudy sky. At first the picture is puzzling in its emptiness, but as you look, the print reveals, at its very centre, a slow, almost invisible heaving; you see then that it is a picture of the sea, gathering strength beneath a line of fishing boats. What appeared to be a horizontal surface now becomes a cross-section, in which the power of the sea and the fragility of human life is rendered in an image of haunting, menacing beauty.”

See *Gallery Chemould and Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Art for event details*.

