

TOP MUSEUM

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TOKYO PHOTOGRAPHIC ART MUSEUM

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the 20th Anniversary of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum

Dayanita Singh, Museum Bhavan

May 20 (Sat.) to July 17 (Mon.), 2017



Museum Bhavan at the Kiran Nadar Museum
Photo by Simon White

about

Dayanita Singh is one of the most outstanding photographers active in the world today and the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum is delighted to present an exhibition of her work as part of the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of its comprehensive opening.

Beginning her career as a photographer for Western magazines, Dayanita Singh gradually came to detest producing pictures of the exotic, chaotic poverty that conformed to the foreigners' image of India. As a result, she retired from photojournalism in the latter half of the 1990s in order to devote herself to her activities as an artist.

Dayanita's photographs have been described as visual novels, blending documentary with fiction, dreams with reality, absence with presence to produce unique worlds. In recent years she has developed her portable 'Museum' concept, having produced more than ten of these 'Museums' by 2016 and combining these to create the 'Museum Bhavan' (Hindi for 'large house'). Within this poetic, beautiful world she hints at the various problems the museum system and art market hold for contemporary photography and art, as well as depicting the sexuality, prejudice, class, gender, archives, information, etc. that exist in today's society. She easily transcends the existing concept of photography and photo-books, pioneering new possibilities in the photographic medium. Her work is full of rich intimations of the future direction of photography. This exhibition will consist of two parts, an introductory section presenting her earlier works, such as: 'Myself Mona Ahmed' (1989–2000), "I Am As I Am" (1999–) and her landmark work, 'Sent a Letter' (2007), while the second part will feature her later works, including her 'Museums' project that will be shown in Japan for the first time.

We hope that you will enjoy the world of Dayanita Singh in this, her first solo exhibition to be held in a Japanese museum.



From <Museum of Chance>
2013, Archival pigment print

Dayanita Singh



Born in New Delhi in 1961, she studied at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad from 1980 to 1986. For a period of six years, starting while she was still a student, she photographed the world-famous tabla percussionist, Zakir Hussain, this forming her both graduation work and being published as her first photo-book under the title, *ZAKIR HUSSAIN* (1987). From 1987 to 1988 she studied documentary photography at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. Subsequent to this, she spent eight years photographing the prostitutes of Mumbai, child laborers, poverty and other severe social problems facing India, producing pictures of what she refers to

as 'the Western image of India', to be published in various magazines in Europe and America. The turning point in her career came with a series of work she produced featuring a eunuch, named Mona Ahmed in Old Delhi. She initially met her while working on a commission from 'The Times' of London, but continued to photograph her for the next thirteen years, eventually publishing the work under the title, 'Myself Mona Ahmed' (2001). She continued her friendship with Mona after that and was greatly influenced by her. She retired completely from photojournalism during the latter half of the 1990s, turning to the wealthy and middle classes, of which she was a member, for the subject matter of her work, presenting a series of family portraits in her first exhibition at the Scalo Gallery in Zurich in 1997 and publishing the work in a photo-book entitled *Privacy* in 2003. Since then, she has published numerous works: *Go Away Closer* (2007), *Sent a Letter* (2007), *Dream Villa* (2010), *House of Love* (2010), *File Room* (2013), *Museum of Chance* (2014), etc., in which she explores the possibilities of the photographic medium. Her 'Go Away Closer' exhibition that was held at London's Hayward Gallery in 2013, later traveled to the Museum Für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, and the Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. She has also held solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago (2014), the MAST Gallery in Bologna, Italy (2016–2017) and the Bhau Dali Lad Museum in Mumbai, India (2016–2017). In addition, she has been invited to participate in numerous international contemporary art festivals and exhibitions, including the Manifesta 7 (2008), the Venice Biennale (2011, 2013), the Sydney Biennale (2016), etc. In Japan she held a solo exhibition at the Shiseido Gallery in 2011 and also contributed a work for the 'Reading Cinema, Finding Words: Art after Marcel Broodthaers' exhibition (2013–2014) that was held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, and the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

From < Little Ladies Museum – 1961 to
Present >, 2013, Archival pigment print,
photo by Nony Singh

About the Works

〈Myself Mona Ahmed〉

1989-2000, 21 gelatin silver prints

〈The Third Sex〉 (portfolio)

1991-1993, 8 gelatin silver prints



From <Myself Mona Ahmed> 1989 – 2000,
gelatin silver print, collection of Tokyo
Photographic Art Museum

In 1989, when she was still beginning her career as a photographer, that she was commissioned by The Times of London to cover a story on the eunuchs in India and was introduced to a eunuch named Mona Ahmed. The eunuch are recognized as being a 'third gender' and despite there having been approximately one million of them at that time, they were marginalized by society. Apart from the fact that Dayanita was commissioned by a foreign newspaper, she and Mona had no other point of contact within Indian society that still remains very caste conscious. Despite living in very different worlds, over the course of this project, they often visited each other's homes, nurturing a relationship that blossomed into true friendship. Dayanita continued to photograph Mona for thirteen years without any thought of publishing the work, but then in 2001 she compiled the work to produce a book entitled *Myself Mona Ahmed*. Due a history of discrimination and a distrust of the media, which only ever treated them as curiosities, the eunuch community was wary of outsiders but they trusted Dayanita, inviting her to photograph every aspect of their lives. The finished book comprises of Dayanita's photographs combined with emails that Mona sent to Walter Keller, the co-founder of the publisher, Scalo. These were written in answer to questions by Keller and describe her life in remarkably candid manner. She talks of a childhood during which she felt uncomfortable with being a boy, describing her conflict with her father and the bullying and discrimination she met in society. After she was castrated she was rejected by her family and so, at the age of seventeen, she went to live in eunuch community, experiencing love and betrayal until she was driven out at the age of sixty and went to live in her ancestors' tomb. She speaks of her feelings towards her adopted daughter, Ayesha, the pain, she felt when Ayesha was taken from her, her loneliness, the Indian government, society, etc. Of course, Dayanita's attitude towards Mona when taking these photographs is warm, but like Mona's words, also frank. Regardless of Mona's situation, she does not try to romanticize or deceive, rather she presents an honest view of Mona Ahmed. What does it mean to be neither man nor woman but a third gender? It is an outstanding autobiography of a person trying to come to terms with her identity.

<I am as I am>

1999, 12 gelatin silver prints

The work that resulted from this transition from photojournalism had the highly suggestive title, 'I Am As I Am' (1999). It featured the girls who lived in an Ashram (temple) in Varanasi that is dedicated to Hindu studies. This temple was established by the holy woman, Anandamayi Ma, whom Dayanita's father and family worshipped, her aunt and cousins having lived in the temple at one time^{xi} and it is a place that Dayanita had been familiar with since early childhood. Varanasi is an ancient city sacred to both the Hindu and Buddhist religions, it is one of India's main sightseeing spots with over one million pilgrims and tourists visiting it annually. With the noise, the bathing in the Ganges River, the cremations of the dead and various religious rites taking place, it symbolizes the image of India and large numbers of photographs have been taken there. However, Dayanita's photographs are at odds with this image of Varanasi, and focus on the lofty image of these girls. Until they reach a certain age when they can choose their own path in life as adults, they remain segregated from the secular world, living an honorable life of poverty. This time spent living a quiet life must cause them to confront themselves and probably this is what turns the girls into adults. Floating above a terrace overlooking the Ganges, a girl gazes straight ahead, her expression still retains a childish air, but in it we can glimpse the will to live an independent existence. Dayanita's camera captures one facet of their lives, but rather than show what they are doing, her aim appears to be to photograph an existence that is permeated with a strong will. This represents a break with photojournalism and the title that is attached to these girls, 'I Am As I Am', also represents an expression of Dayanita's own determination.



From <I am as I am> 1999, gelatin silver print, collection of National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

〈Sent A Letter〉

2007, 7 softcover books in handmade box, 7 teak vitrine



This consists of a beautifully made, small box, measuring 9 x 13.3 cm., that has been carefully covered in fabric and contains seven books. Six of these books bear the name of an Indian city on the spine—‘ALLAHABAD’, ‘BOMBAY’, ‘CALCUTTA’, ‘DEVIGARH,’ ‘PADMANABHAPURAM’ and ‘VARANASHI’—but the seventh is slightly different in color and bears the words, ‘NONY SINGH’, her mother’s name. If the book is opened, each page bears a single photograph, 7 x 7 cm. in size that is positioned slightly below the center of the page. Printed in rich, high-quality tones, there are no captions or explanations attached. Each of the books is in a

concertina format and once it has been opened out, it is freestanding, creating a small gallery. Originally, this work was based on the mini albums that she used to make for her friends, cutting out photographs and pasting them onto paper. She always made two copies of each; one to give to the friend and one as an archive copy to be stored in the ‘Kitchen Museum’. She started making these books in 2000 and by 2007 she had produced over thirty. One of these came to the attention of the publisher, Gerhard Steidl, who published them with virtually no change to their format. Thanks to mass production technology, several thousand copies were produced from two handmade books, but when doing this Dayanita employed a new gimmick. That was the box in which the seven books were stored. On the undyed cloth covering the box are the words, ‘Dayanita Singh’ and the publisher’s name, ‘Steidl’, and in between these, the legend, ‘SENT A LETTER’, continuing on the other faces of the box as it is rotated with: ‘to my friend’, ‘on the way he dropped it. Someone came and picked it up and’, ‘put it in his pocket’. The idea is to make it appear that even though it did not arrive at the person it was intended for, it became an irreplaceable ‘letter’ to the person who happened to receive it. Fitting comfortably onto the palms of two hands, allowing the viewer to gaze intently at each small photograph as they quietly turn the pages, the design of these books has the same feel as a privately printed collection of poems that the author would not want others to see, or a secret letter from somebody special. As the title, ‘SENT A LETTER’ suggests, the way in which this photo album has been made encourages that sort of behavior. This sort of intimacy is the result that Dayanita aimed for when taking the photographs. Landscapes, snapshots, samples, clay figures, interior decoration or the library of an old mansion, etc., the contents of each of the books are different and some of them include works from series that have been published previously, but differences in sequence and format make the works appear different. For instance, in the “ALLAHABAD” series, some of the recipients will only have to glance at the work on the first page to realize that it depicts Anand Bhavan, the home of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, the bedroom, closet, study, etc., all having a special significance in Indian history. However, for somebody like ‘me’, who possesses no such knowledge, a personal relationship is born the moment they pick up this small book, the view of the regular row of stone pillars seen from inside a mosquito net, the enormous bookshelves in perfect array, a closet filled with neatly stacked shirts with mandarin collars, all create an image of the former inhabitant. The works included in “VARANASHI” are from the ‘I Am As I Am’ series, but the small format imbues them with a more intimate, innocent nuance. The most interesting book is the one inscribed with the name, “NONY SINGH”. This contains a beautiful record of mother and daughter, it can be simultaneously regarded as a letter and a present from the mother, Nony, to her daughter, Dayanita, while the album itself is a letter and present from Dayanita to her mother Nony.

<File Museum>

2012, teak and archival pigment prints



< File Museum> 2012

By 2016 Dayanita has built more than ten ‘museums’ and together they form what she named the ‘Museum Bhavan’ (Hindi for ‘large house’). ‘File Museum’ is a portable, folding structure, handmade of teak, 227 cm. tall, that opens out to become 132 cm. wide. Inside it contains one hundred and forty-two framed works and just like looking at works in a conventional art museum, we can walk around this ‘museum’ and enjoy a maximum of up to forty works. The works are displayed in five rows vertically and with one, three or seven rows horizontally, depending on which side is being viewed; each work can be appreciated individually while those before or next to it intervene, facilitating the creation of vertical or horizontal sequences. In an ordinary museum it is common to change the works on display and in this one too, Dayanita doubles as the curator, selecting different works from the one hundred and forty-two stored inside and substituting them at random times. It possesses a collection of works, there is a curator and the exhibits are changed; in other words, it can be said to incorporate all the functions of a regular museum.

The ‘File Museum’ that she first showed at London’s Frith Street Gallery in 2012 marked the beginning of the ‘museum’ series that she continues to work on to this day. ‘File Museum’ is a series of photographs showing endless piles of files. Sometimes these are fussily tied with string and laid on shelves in an orderly fashion, other times they are roughly tied together and piled up from floor to ceiling, leaving no room to walk. From small rooms that appear to be private offices or backstreet workshops, to vast national archives or courtroom vaults, there are invoices, contracts, official documents, court records, etc., the photographs presenting an astonishing accumulation of documents. Occasionally, they also include the faces of the archives’ owners or porters, photographed working closely with documents. Perhaps they are archivists.

The documents range from those that look new to those that possess the unique library smell, where a touch will send up clouds of dust and cause them to fall apart, but no matter how chaotically they may be piled, they possess a kind of order and we can tell just by looking that they are still current. In a conversation with a Swiss curator named Hans Ulrich Obrist, Dayanita revealed that this series was discovered by the historian, Sunil Khilnani. She said that when she met Khilnani she 'wanted to show him a work that nobody else had ever seen,' and selected two hundred works on the subject of 'paper' from among those she had produced over a period of more than ten years. Khilnani selected twenty-four of these and named the series 'File Room'. Prior to this, wherever Dayanita worked, she could never resist photographing the study in a house or the document vault in a building. Khilnani made this unconscious obsession with archives visible, giving birth to a new development. Her mother, Nony Singh, pointed out in essay to be included in the book of the 'File Room' series that this tendency of Dayanita's may be a result of having been brought up in an environment where she surrounded with documents and books, watching as her mother had struggled with a huge quantity of documents concerning land inheritance. 'File Museum' represents the history, memories and records each file connotes.



From <File Museum> 2012

〈Museum of Chance〉

2013, Teak and inkjet prints



left
from <Museum of Chance>
2013

below
from <Museum of Chance> 2013



The 'Museum of Chance' (cat. no. xx) that was 'established' at the same time is a larger museum than the 'File Museum'; consisting of two structures, each 252.5 cm. by 86.5 cm., it contains one hundred and four square works, 46 cm. by 46 cm., and fifty-nine rectangular works, 31 cm. by 46 cm., a total of one hundred and sixty-three works. This museum also contains four-legged table and a chair and is capable of displaying eighty-four works.

Among the works in the 'Museum of Chance' is one that shows an enlargement of Dayanita's representative work of the young girl jumping in the air next to the River Ganges, hanging on the wall behind

Mona Ahmed who is lying on a sofa. There are also various familiar subjects from Dayanita's work, such as Zakir Hussain, old machines, museum exhibits, night views, indoor scenery, etc. In addition, unusually for her, she has inserted close-ups of actresses and actors that have been photographed from movies using a 35 mm camera and although at first glance it appears to be a miscellaneous collection, by fine-tuning it according to her 'tone', it creates a marvelously consistent collection of work. The surprising thing is that although we recognize the works and are familiar with them, the fact is that not a single one has previously been published. This offers a clue as to why she enjoys working on this museum. In the introduction to the book, *Museum of Chance* (2014) she writes, 'What happened in this. While I was in London, I dreamt I was in a boat on the Thames that took me to Anandamayee Ma's ashram in Varanashi. I climbed the stairs and found that I had entered the hotel in Devigarh. At a certain time, I tried to leave the fort but could not find a door. Finally, I climbed out through a window and I was in the moss garden in Kyoto.' This is the basic philosophy of the 'Museum of Chance'. It is not only a single track experience in which one work leads to the next, but also sometimes unexpected timing or a conversation with somebody will lead to the creation of works from a different direction. Grasping opportunities, betting on possibilities and even risking dangers to conjure up chance as it were inevitable; it represents the path that Dayanita has followed as an artist, and results in a miraculous collection.

〈Little Ladies Museum – 1961 to Present〉

2013, Teak and inkjet prints

The 'Little Ladies Museum — 1961 to Present' displays a towering image of women. If we trace the works that are included in this we see that in addition to pictures of Dayanita herself or Mona, several other women serve as subjects, appearing repeatedly at different periods in time, providing a tasteful glimpse of the history or changing emotions of a particular woman over the passage of years.。



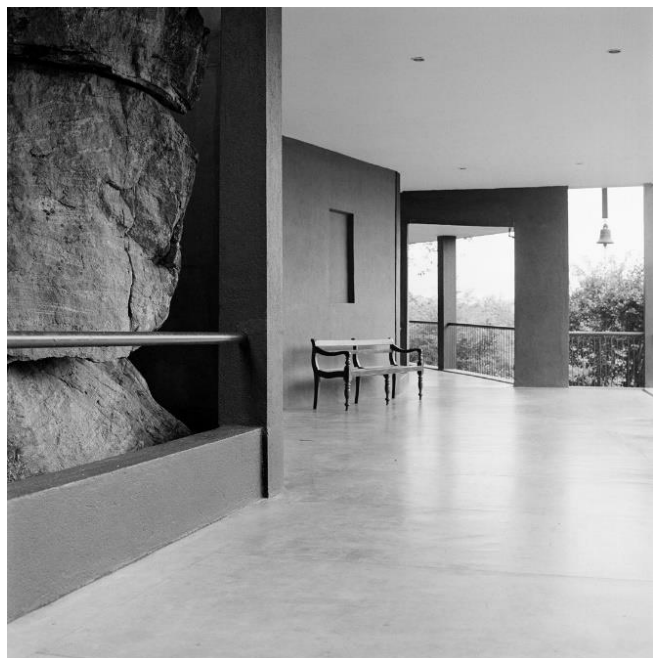
Left: <Little Ladies Museum – 1961 to Present> 2013

Right: from <Little Ladies Museum – 1961 to Present> 2013

〈Museum of Shedding〉

2016, Teak and inkjets prints

Her latest work, 'Museum of Shedding' (2016) can be described as representing the architecture. Consisting of an space and structure, this museum contains a bed, a desk, a chair, a stool and storage, it literally has everything required of a museum and of course, its collection comprises of works that feature tranquil space and inner areas.



From <Museum of Shedding> 2016

〈Time Measures〉 2016

35 Inkjet prints

Her latest work, 'Time Measures' (2016) is a beautiful series derived from 'File Room' that consists of thirty-five works. It displays full-size close-ups, shot from above, of bundles wrapped in faded red cloth. Although all the photographs resemble each other, if they are studied closely, it can be seen that the way in which each bundle has been tied and the color has faded is different. Regarding the contents of these bundles, the viewer who is familiar with Dayanita's work will recognize them by their shape as having appeared in the 'File Room' series, and realize that they contain documents. With the change from black-and-white to color and a different method of photographing them, they create a completely different impression. What these photographs represent is the passage of time and something that although



meaningless to others had been very important to its owner, if they were to be investigated there is no telling what secrets or contexts they may contain. In addition, both 'File Room' and 'Time Measures' illustrate the powerful Indian tendency that exists towards documentalism, and can be said to symbolize the love of discussion and negotiation that is India itself. It represents the respect and awe of humanity's intellectual activities that have been built up gradually over a vast length of time. As Dayanita writes, 'after digitalizing all

the documents it will not be possible to express the same thing by photographing remaining mountains of files.'

< Time Measures > 2016

〈Mona and Myself〉 2013

Digital projection of still images



When Dayanita was selected to participate in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale with Ai Weiwei, Romuald Karmaker and Santu Mofkeng in 2013, she displayed this 'Book-Object from the File Museum' on the wall, together with slides showing 'File Room' and 'Go Away Closer' on a screen. In addition she presented Mona's photographs, entitled 'Mona and Myself' (2013), as a slide show, creating a space in the corner of the German pavilion where it seemed a looking-wistful Mona was living.

〈Suitcase Museum〉 2015

2 leather suitcases, 44 framed *Museum of Chance* books

As the title suggests, 'Suitcase Museum' (2015) consists of two leather suitcases containing forty-four framed copies of the book *Museum of Chance*. It is a humorous work, demonstrating not only Dayanita's stance as an artist but also providing an interesting comment on her life as she transports her works from city to city.



This exhibition is

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Museum Hours : 10:00–18:00 (10:00 – 20:00 on Thursday and Friday)

※Last entry 30 minutes before closing

Closed : Monday (except July 16)

Admission : Adult: ¥800 (¥640)／ Students: ¥700 (¥560)／

Junior & senior high school students, people aged 65 or over: ¥600 (¥480)

※ () for group over 20 people

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