

Collector's Special

openthemagazine.com/art-culture/collectors-special/

1 December 2023



Farmer House by Jyoti Bhatt (Photo: Jyoti Bhatt)

A FEW DAYS BEFORE ITS official opening, Saloni Doshi is giving a curated tour of *The Right to Look*. The photography exhibition that will run at Space 118 in Mumbai till December 31 is but a tiny selection from Doshi's vast art collection. Look around and you find sumptuous moments frozen in a "neat slice of time," to borrow a Susan Sontag phrase. One of the first pieces to greet you is an eye-catching print by performance artist Nikhil Chopra. It shows a man shaving off his facial hair with a razor. This photograph, we later learn, is part of the *Yog Raj Chitrakar* series, in which Chopra pays homage to his grandfather through a performative lens. "Nikhil's works are very instrumental, not just for this show but for the ecosystem of Indian performance arts, generally speaking," says Doshi, about the Goa-based artist whose work dwells on issues such as identity, autobiography, the gaze and self-portraiture. There's also Pushpamala N's radical recreation of a Jose Veloso Salgado painting of Vasco Da Gama and Vivek Vilasini's quirky

take on Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. In another room, we see Madhu Das' *Gifts of Earth* (2013) depicting a tree sprouting from human roots and Vivan Sundaram's *Growing Up* (2022) in which Sundaram, who passed away earlier this year, intervenes with Umrao Singh Sher-Gil's symbolic image featuring an angelic Amrita Sher-Gil.

A wellspring for young and emerging artists, Space 118 is a rarity in a rapidly gentrifying city like Mumbai. It is located inside a warehouse compound flanked by industrial depots awaiting their vertical fate. It is apt, then, to catch a glimpse of Akshay Mahajan's images, which embrace Maximum City's contradictions. When we meet, Doshi says that her first-ever buy was a Raghu Rai but over the years, she has also diligently amassed her fair share of Jyoti Bhatt's. No wonder, *The Right to Look* is bursting with Bhatt's photographic oeuvre. Many of the octogenarian artist's documentary images of the tribal way of life offer a window into the joys and hardships of rural India. "I feel like the relationship of a collector with an artist isn't simply about how much one buys but rather how much you fall in love with their work. When you find yourself immersed enough to realise that you just need the work in your home, that is when you begin a bond. This is what I found myself enjoying with Jyoti Bhatt," Doshi says, sitting in her book-lined office at Space 118. "I had come across his works many years ago at a museum exhibition, and I was fascinated with his genre of photography, where he would capture people in their surroundings, going about their lives."



Saloni Doshi, founder and director, Space118 (Photo: Apurva Guptay)

As we soak up Bhatt's *On the Road Alone*—a black-and-white photograph of a young child approaching a gigantic apparition—Doshi observes that this work in particular resonates the most with her. “This is a very apt metaphor for me because my journey as an art collector was a painful and lonely one. When I started buying there was nobody who understood what I was trying to do. Women are trained to invest in jewellery but here I was, picking up everything that went straight into storage, under the bed, behind the bathroom or in my siblings’ home,” she says. She explains further, “One of the reasons I truly fell in love with this work by Jyoti Bhatt is that its sole figure reached out to me. It is a solitary walk towards a destination that no one is aware of. It is a path that no one was walking on with me. It felt very much reflective of my journey where I had to make my own way, where I had to find how to create an impression and how to appreciate art better.”

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Few collectors in India know the art of art appreciation better than Doshi. “I am 43. I am not married and I don't have children. In a way, I have devoted my entire life to the pursuit of art. Without mad passion, you can't do what I have,” Doshi says. “My art collection is like my children. They are my family. I joke that if the world is coming to an end I will try and save my collection first. This is *that* important to me,” she says, with a laugh. Doshi began collecting when she was in her 20s. “Being a first-generation (and female) collector in a business family at that time meant that I had very little to refer to. It was initially a difficult and often lonesome endeavour but I always had my heart set upon understanding and exploring artistic practices that were sprouting all around me. This was the time when I began visiting art fairs and biennales, constantly engaging with artworks ranging from photography, sculpture, to even video art,” says Doshi, who worked briefly for *The Times of India* before quitting to start Space 118 in 2009 to set up residency programmes and studio facilities for artists.

She found kindred spirits in her mentors, Kavita Singh, Rajiv Savara and Lekha Poddar who encouraged her to look at art in different ways, and helped her finetune her collection. She explains, “Kavita taught me the art of looking at everything, with her spotless eye for details. Rajiv taught me how to do in-depth research on the artists I was buying and understand their journey better and with Lekha, I learnt so much about the language of contemporary art and world politics and how it affects this form of art. I have seen so many shows with her in different parts of the world and imbibed her understanding of international art and its relevance in terms of the Indian context.”

She hopes that *The Right to Look*, which has been curated by her friend and fellow collector Amit Kumar Jain and which borrows its conceptual premise from the visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, will similarly help others see photography in a different light. An avid photographer herself, Doshi admits that photography has always been her first love. “My

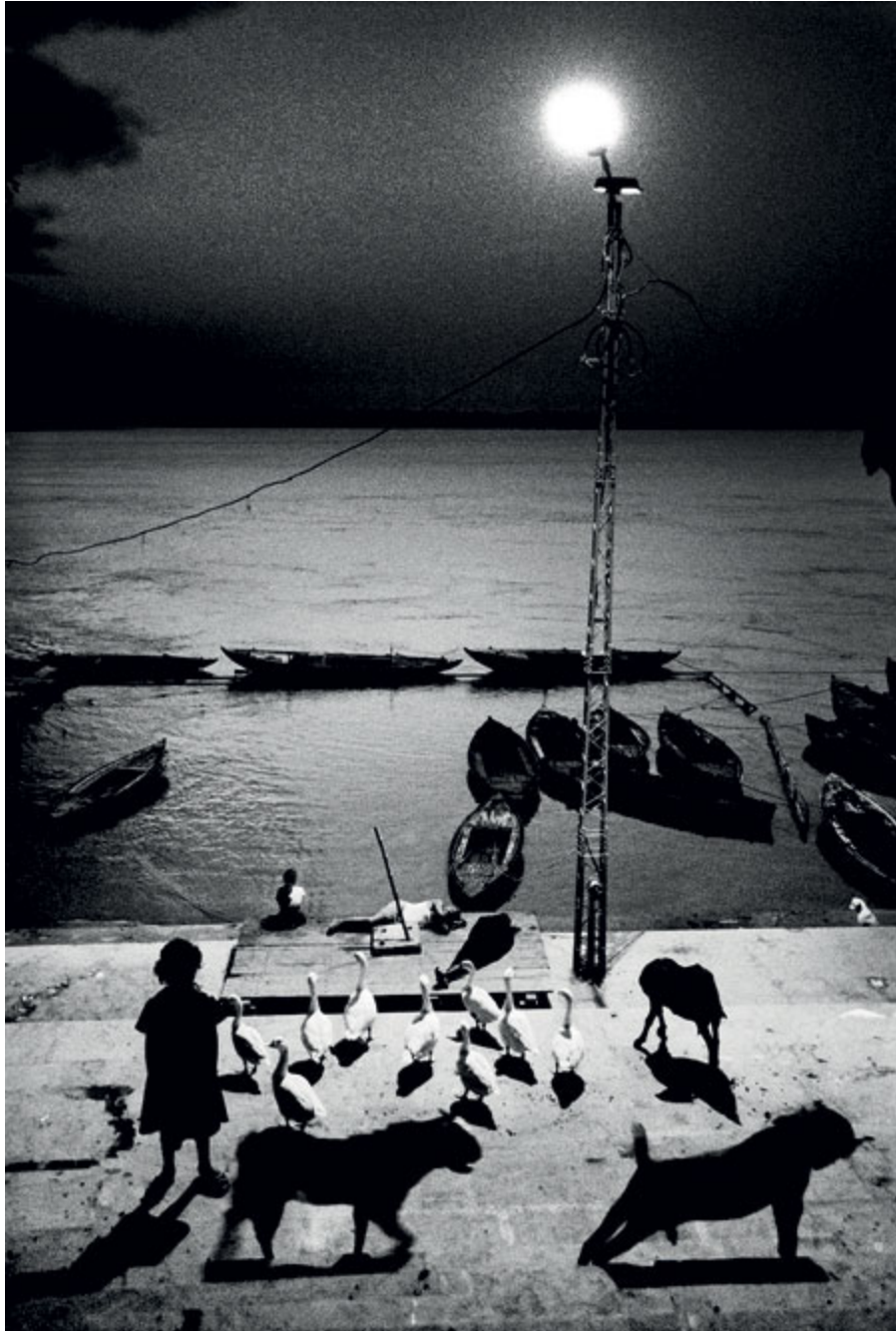
formal association with studying, under Jeroo Mulla at Sophia College, and seeing films by Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa and Mani Kaul allowed me to better understand the formal composition of an image and understand what the lens captured.” When she started her own journey as a collector some of the first things she bought were photographs. “There has always been an aesthetic, historical, formal and personal connection that I have felt towards photography. In fact, I am not even talking as a collector here. I am someone who is enthusiastic about understanding artists, their practices, their studio spaces, what they thought about, and how they responded to the world around them.” For her, a photograph succinctly captures “a snapshot of a photographer’s lived experience,” which has always thrilled her.

So far, Doshi’s private collection, encompassing not just photographs but also paintings and sculptures—ranging from the works of MF Husain and Zarina Hashmi to Subodh Gupta and Thukral & Tagra—has been a source of awe for close friends and family. Now, it’s time for the public to partake in a slice of the artistic luxuries that money can afford. The idea for displaying some parts of her collection for everyone to see (“it’s not really a common practice,” she remarks) came to her last year during a conversation with curator Amit Kumar Jain.

However, one of the major reasons behind hosting *The Right to Look*, Doshi acknowledges with a chuckle, is that she herself hasn’t seen a significant portion of her acquisitions in years. Most collectors are compulsive shoppers. Doshi jokes that once when she curated a show of Raghu Rai’s photographs she found herself “buying more than curating”! To buy aggressively only to realise later that space to display is a constraint is a common collector’s dilemma. So, the works are in constant rotation mode. Or, as is most often the case, they sit in storage facilities and wait for a callback. As Doshi puts it, “Apart from all other social, historical, aesthetic and personal reasons for setting up the show, one important consideration was to take stock of the condition of my collection.”

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To her utter dismay, Doshi discovered that more than 22 photographs were in urgent need of restoration. Some of these works are nearly two decades old and given the fluctuations in temperature, humidity, environment, and rains leading to water seepage, there’s always a high risk of damage. “A few works had to be reframed because of broken glass, fungus or water seepage. Hence, I wanted to open everything up, clean things and give the artwork its proper care and due that it should constantly receive,” says Doshi, adding that during the Covid-19 pandemic she finally had a chance to revisit her collection and document it. “Only last year did I actually build my art storage as works were spilling out from all over the place. You know you are a collector—a term I found hard to accept until recent times—when you have to set up an art storage for your collection,” she adds.



Life is Elsewhere by Sohrab Hura (Images courtesy: Space 118 and Saloni Doshi)

As the founder and director of Space 118, Doshi promises that she will continue to actively engage in online programmes to nurture younger artists, shed light on their studio practices, provide opportunities for giving grants and conduct fundraiser shows to help her community. But in the meanwhile, she's eager to do more shows like *The Right to Look*, which delve deeper into her own personal collection. "I have enough artworks in my collection to keep me busy for the next five years," she says with a laugh. She adds, "To put up a show like this is not to indulge in any reciprocal transaction over what I have been given. On the

contrary, I want to find myself part of the same processes that I was exposed to and present an opportunity where I can better elaborate and further the cause and love for art, and establish connections and relations between artists and collectors—everyone.”

(*The Right to Look* is on view at Space 118, Mumbai, till December 31 (by appointment only)

About The Author



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