

Light in the dark



In an article on Evgen Bacvar, one of the most well-known blind photographers of the world, Benjamin Meyer poses a few questions. Why would a blind man want to wear transparent eyeglasses? Why would he wish to walk the streets of Paris dressed in the same black hat, cape and red scarf worn by Aristide Bruant as depicted by Toulouse-Lautrec? Why would he want to risk speaking on a radio programme about paintings which he has never actually seen? And why would he desire to take photographs?

Evgen Bacvar (E-oogen Ba-ooh-ah), is an art photographer and he is completely blind. Born in 1946 in a small Slovenian town near Venice, he lost both eyes before he was 12 in two consecutive accidents. Four years later, he laid his hands on a camera for the first time, to take a snapshot of the girl with whom he was in love.

He defines the cumulative reaction as the following, "the pleasure I felt then resulted from my having robbed and fixed on a film something that did not belong to me, I secretly discovered I could possess something that I could not see."

That photographs can be taken by the blind is a known phenomenon in India? Largely no. Lest Evgen's name would have featured somewhere...expressed Partho Bhowmick, the mentoring force behind the exhibition 'Beyond Sight' which was held in Mumbai recently, as he recalled his early stint of photographic enthusiasm and how he connected himself to photography of the blind worldwide.

Not many know that photographs can be taken by the blind.

Partho Bhowmick, the mentoring force behind the exhibition 'Beyond Sight' recalls his enthusiasm for photography of the blind to NILOSHREE BISWAS.

Bhowmick was transferred to Mumbai in 1999. "What was just a professional base change slowly became a part of emotional existence, Bombay started gripping me. I visited Photographic Society of India, slowly started being parts of the photography circle...till one day got a call from my regular book vendor who informed that there's this new book which I should check."

The deal never happened; instead Partho Bhowmick laid his hands on an old issue of 'Times Journal of Photography' that carried a story on Bacvar. Reflections was Partho's area of interests. But photography by the blind that's too farsighted an area...

"I had my FM2, I had even exhibited my photographs of reflection but this was phenomenal. I was intrigued, deeply interested to know more about this kind of photography."

That was the beginning of a long phase of newer understanding. Bhowmick got connected to Bacvar and a host of other blind photographers to learn about the process of photographs taken by them.

Photography by visually impaired meant learning afresh

about blindness. Bhowmick found a support from Aperture Foundation, New York, who already had supported a project called 'Shooting the Blind'. This was the turning point.

The desire to work with blindness was getting intense and Partho Bhowmick was on the lookout for prospective students. Finally, after several rounds around institutions that dealt with visually impaired, Victoria Memorial School of Blind agreed to the idea. Mahesh Umrannia became the first student. Slowly the number increased.

Thereafter with several layers of blindness in a mix group of students aged 10-50, Bhowmick concentrated in helping his students build the "mental image."

The result is a 23 photograph exhibition that travels across the country with next stop in Bangalore (Chitrakala Parishath in June) followed by Kolkata and Delhi.

Large frames mounted on the wall talk about new possibilities. Subjectively photographed, some of them delve into narratives of the imagery; honestly most of them are synesthesia that technically would mean perception of

sensory data of one-sense with another...as in hearing colours. The photographers, have tried to generate the photographs from their understanding of the warmth, colour, touch, feel of their immediate surrounding.

Bacvar's work addresses the relations between vision, blindness and invisibility, "my task is the reunion of the visible and the invisible worlds, photography allows me to pervert the established method of perception amongst those who see and those who don't. It is simple, my hands measure the distance and the rest is achieved by the desire for images that inhabits me."

In a beautifully taken photograph of the shadow of a tree, Mahesh, the photographer confesses, "I would manage to touch the lower branches of the trees and feel of the summer sun over my head and imagined the designer shadow on the footpath before clicking. Photography connects me to the visual world."

Various levels of belonging to the visual world bind the photographs be it the self-portrait of Raju Singh or the corridor of Rahul Shirsat — it is the sense of belonging that percolates.

Most of the photographs act as a deep acceptance of the tangible reality unseen to the eyes that have created them.

Thus a range and possibility of a new genre of aesthetics has been woven as one mesmerisingly looks into the photographs of the eight photographers whose eyes had been metamorphosed to viewfinders of their newly found power tool — The camera.