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ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

DAYANITA SINGH

November 30, 2018 • Dayanita Singh talks about transforming the photobook



View of "Dayanita Singh: POP-UP BOOK SHOP / MY OFFSET WORLD," 2018, Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

*The Delhi-born photographer Dayanita Singh published her first book, *Zakir Hussain*, in 1986. The eleven books that followed, including *Museum Bhavan* (2017), document and form the bedrock for Singh's observational and omnivorous photography. Interested in the photobook's relationship to other objects and infrastructures, Singh has increasingly drafted custom objects—from bespoke cabinets, cases, and desks to bookshelves and beds—to serve as mechanisms of display and logical extensions of her project. Her work is currently featured in the Fifty-Seventh Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and her solo exhibition "POP-UP BOOK SHOP / MY OFFSET WORLD," which she discusses below, continues at Callicoon Fine Arts in New York through December 18, 2018.*

THE ONLY THING I'VE STOLEN IN MY LIFE is Robert Frank's *The Lines of My Hand*, which I took when I was a student at the International Center of Photography because I thought I couldn't be an artist without having it. It's an unusual book, as many of his books are. It's a big white book with a pencil drawing of a hand on the cover. Inside are his photographs—some he's scratched on, some he's written below. His work challenged the conventions of what I thought photography was intended to be. Frank had ease, not just in the way he photographed but also in the way he made the books. I don't feel I'm making just a photobook. I'm *transforming* the photobook. I love the photobook; I just want the photobook to do more.

The Pothi Box, a work at the center of my project at Callicoon, is a series of offset-printed photographs on cards—of archival documents and materials, often wrapped or warped by string, or bundled in fabric parcels—stacked and inserted into a wooden box with a window in the front and at the back. It has thirty cards in it, so you can change those cards every day, every hour, every year, as you like. I call it an “unbound book.” And you can put it on the table, or on the wall. When you buy *The Pothi Box*, my work exists in your house; my archive is in your house, but not as a book on the bookshelf, not as a fossilized print on the wall. With *The Pothi Box*, chances are that from time to time you’ll change the image.

I sometimes call myself an “offset artist.” In this exhibition, all of my images are offset images. There are no gelatin silver prints here, and there are no digital prints. I use photographs as my raw material, and I’m concerned with finding new forms for photography and pushing the limits of how we disseminate the image in my own analog way. For ten years now, I have been thinking about this place between the art gallery and the publishing house. I love both, but I want something else along with them—this third space, which I think the book-object can occupy. So I collect photographs and spend a lot of time editing. In that editing, the form emerges, and then the dissemination process starts. I have this idea of other objects that could become part of this book-object space. Could a book generate other objects?

The glass loupes in the show are reminders of how we used to look at contact sheets. They were made in Murano, and each one is different. I love the idea of not just making the book-object but asking how it is going to be shared with you, how you will carry it away. What’s the table going to be like? I’ve included my signing table, with the paperweight/placard with the roles I perform, including director, curator, registrar—that’s a work as well.

The final product is affective because I have really good raw material. If the images were not strong in some way, I couldn’t do this. The challenge is to make a strong body of work and then turn it on its head. I don’t think there’s any big deal to taking photographs. If you’ve done it as long as I have, you begin to do it reasonably well. I go out into the world. I collect these images, over years. And then I sit with them and see what they want to be. The work suggests the form. I would say 10 percent of my work is photography—*actually* making photographs. And I think that’s important to me. Of course I love the medium, but I just think we’ve been limited by the art world in terms of what photography can be. I like the tactile. I like the fact that this object will be in your hands, and when you travel, this little thing can actually travel with you! When you go to China, this might go with you to China. I like the idea of you becoming the curator of my work.

I’m always surprised by how little furniture there is in most museums. Since museums wouldn’t allow me to carry in my own benches, I worked out a system. In *Museum of Shedding*, all the furniture fits under the bed—everything—because the curators would say: “Dayanita, we’re not going to spend money on another crate to bring all your tables and stools. *We* have tables and stools.” *Museum of Shedding* was made for myself—that’s *my* house, that’s for me to live in, that’s my bed, that’s my desk. If you visit, you sit there. Photography needs architecture. The book is one kind of architecture—but we need to think beyond that. I love the photobook, but it does end up on the bookshelf. Photos were kept in shoeboxes, where you could then flip through them. They should not be fossilized behind a pane of glass.

— As told to Grant Johnson