

Manjari Sharma

Shower Series

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Imagine the scene. You invite a friend of a friend, an acquaintance, a complete stranger, to come and take a shower in your bathroom.

This is the foundation upon which Manjari Sharma creates her Shower Series. From this small amount of detail I conjure up images of Sophie Calle's work with strangers, where she invited them to share her bed which had been placed up in the Eiffel Tower.

Within both Sharma's and Calle's work the stranger often shared intimate details of their life, and it is because of this that I am reminded of a chapter from E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*. In Forster's book several of the main characters meet by coincidence. They discuss literature and art and the pursuit of culture by the book's poorer family, the Bastis. Leonard Bast finds the meeting invigorating, and they all feel that the social boundaries imposed upon them by wealth and society have been, for this small amount of time, left behind. They are at liberty to talk about their personal affairs, their aspirations and artistic desires; I have come to term this as "the romance of strangers."

This 'romance' is very much a key element with Sharma's work, I feel, and partly why I find her series so fascinating.

I think it is important to look at the setting Sharma has used to photograph her subjects, and how this relates to our interpretation. The shower itself, with its cascading falls of water, lend the images an almost biblical tone – elements of baptism, cleansing, birth, and satisfied thirst. And is this not after all what Sharma's work gives her participants, a way in which to cleanse their souls, to reveal all without the boundaries of modern-day society crushing them down? The small box-shaped shower has become transformed into a confessional, with Sharma assuming the role of priest, purging her subjects of their sins.

The subjects' emotions are essential to the work, and give the work its power. Whilst some photographs were taken as Sharma and the subject were talking, others are reconstructions of a natural pose that Sharma had seen them display. Because of this, the subjects' faces have an exceptional clarity, almost grace – as if they have experienced the world and made peace with their mistakes.

A natural pose holds such poignancy, for example in the previous image, the fixed eyes of the woman staring not only past the photographer but also past us as the viewer. In that single crystallized moment the delicateness of human existence bleeds into the frame.

There are certain images that have particular resonance with me. For example the first image, where those broad shoulders slope slightly down; I begin to feel as though the water is washing the world off his back. Sharma has captured strength, yet such fragility all at once.

With their naked skin exposed, each portrait demonstrates the fragility of our existence, our selves exposed to the water, cleansed by one of the most primal of elements

The light that illuminates the subjects falls in through the bathroom window, touching their faces and pulling them out of the darkness of the green marble walls. Rich colours and stylized lighting is typically found in commercial portraits, yet not so often in fine art photography. Sharma has implemented this style of finishing for her images, which does them great justice.

As I have done with so many other pieces of artwork, whilst viewing Sharma's series I begin to ask myself why people would be interested in participating in such a project. From a photographer's perspective I can understand completely: we are observers, we comment and bring things into question. Yet as a subject, I wonder what their motivation is.

With the removal of dominant religious structures for a more secular belief system, the structure that was once in place to give people guidance, to allow them to repent for the mistakes they have made in their life has been replaced. Instead, people confide in each other; there is a greater sense of self-direction; of a need to control one's own future, and live by rules established by one's self.

Whilst we have empowered individualism we have in the process dissolved our community bonds. Such feelings are intensified in bustling city areas such as Brooklyn.

I wonder if, in some way, people are participating more and more in projects such as Sharma's is a response to this. A sort of pushing out; of trying to establish connections with new segments of society.

Regardless of who leads whom, it is a brave step for the photographer to take, a sincere form of trust in the kindness of strangers.