

## The Lost Pundit

### The work of Jyoti Bhatt, photographer and printmaker

On the outskirts of Ahmedabad, the Gujarati city encircled by the chimneys and the pollution of textile mills, there lives an artist who, besides teaching at the university, also collects antiques. Together with his brother he dismembers them in order to refashion the parts to make an object for use by the rich. Thus a dressing table may be made up of bits of an old chest, a cupboard and some printing blocks. The value of this dresser would probably be a hundred times that of the original material. This is how history is shredded only to accumulate as debris in palatial mansions.

Jyoti Bhatt is a printmaker and photographer from the nearby garden city of Baroda where he teaches together with his wife who spins delicate pottery. Unlike his Ahmedabadian contemporary, he is concerned with documenting the rapidly disappearing folk arts of Gujarat where traditional wall decoration for example, is being replaced with cinema and advertising posters. Such work is naturally fraught with lack of finance and materials, yet Jyoti devotes as many of his resources as he can for he feels that after the next 10 to 15 years, little will be left of the 3000 year old traditions.

Running parallel to this archival work, is the production of photographic prints as works of art. His favourite device is the diptych where two prints are positioned in operation, at a concurrence or at a tangent to each other in order to create a contemplative space. It is work that deliberately transcends the subject “*suggesting meanings other than the liberal ones, often ambiguous and inexplicable*”. *Blacklight* perhaps typifies his approach. It is a photograph of part of a wall where the kerosene lamp unintentionally participates in a series of events (including the keys) on the wall. Were we to view it within the context of the whole wall, this tableaux may not seem significant; yet Jyoti’s manipulation suggests an aesthetic disorder, a random series of events that are inexplicably connected.

His concern for the folk arts is readily discernible in his graphic prints for which he is better known, being one of the pioneers in the 60s of this particular art form after his return from a year’s study in New York. Besides incorporating figures of birds and animals, decorative floral and other motifs derived from folk art, his prints also organize the space and the elements within according to schemas derived from the past. *Fly*, for example, uses the methodology of *Nari-Kunjara*. Figures in the early prints are usually flat and filled with symbols, reminding one of the tattoos of South India. Writing, in the form of obtuse statements, is integrated within these motifs so that it, too, becomes part of the embellishment.

A growing disenchantment with the art market has partly led him to give up graphic printmaking. *The Lost Pundit*, his most famous print, perhaps best illustrates his dilemma of doing things “without knowing exactly what I am trying to achieve and why”. Inscribed on the owl that is an ideological vane, are symbols of various religious and ideologies. An arrow in the lower half of the picture points in one direction, the vane in another. And the Pundit, with the beginnings of a cynical (or is it playful) smile seems to ask, where is the way out from this morass....