



PHOTO: SUMON YUSUF

When I heard that there was an exhibition on the Bede community at Shilpakola, and that a foreigner had taken the photographs, my curiosity was piqued—I was interested, but also worried. So many foreigners have come and “discovered” the tragedies and poverty of people in the region. Whether they are terrifying images of refugees on the run, grotesque images of injured women and children, or still images of working-class people in motion on the streets, I find it important to discuss what the photographer wants to show and often fails to see in the process. Here were photos of a marginalised people; could we make sense of the community through a foreigner's gaze? So, I decided to see what was at work.

At Shilpakola, I found a larger orchestration at work. This was a project titled “Desterrados” (Nomads of Bangladesh), with a common theme addressing the “landless population of Bangladesh.” The exhibition is an extension of the original publication, sponsored by the Inditex Chair of Spanish Language and Culture at the University of Dhaka, designed as a cultural dialogue between two photographers from the two countries—Sumon Yusuf and Salvador Arellano.

The exhibition, curated by Tanzim Wahab, was built along an elliptical pathway, so that you might start from the name at the centre and circle back to it. The two works branched out from the centre of the gallery and met somewhere at the back, and the only way to know if you were walking from one to the other work was by the colour of the photographs. Yusuf's work, “Nómadas” (Nomads), is, in a monochrome of black on white, about people, settlements and lives in the distance, over large stretches

LANDLESSNESS IN “DESTERRADOS” THROUGH THE OUTSIDER'S GAZE?

of vacant land. Arellano's, on the other hand, is louder, with colours and faces, and portrays a more focused look into the Bede community.

On each side of the centre wall was a copy of the original publication of the works—a book wrapped in yellow, parted in two because of the two separate works it holds, with respective titles on either of its covers.

“The book was published in Spain this August to be distributed and shared as a product of the cultural exchange in Europe, and is not intended for sale, nor available in Bangladesh. The exhibition in Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy came to be as an afterthought, and that's why

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the title is primarily in Spanish and the book is bilingual (English and Spanish),” says Yusuf.

The works are currently being exhibited at The Edge Gallery till November 18.

Sumon Yusuf's “Nómadas”

Yusuf's work carries over from his earlier work on river erosion, as he shifts his focus here on the people displaced because of erosion and “other causes” to touch upon the theme of “landless people”. His concept note, written by Faiham Ebna Sharif, draws on the

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EXHIBITION



PHOTO: SALVADOR ARELLANOSA

EXHIBITION

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existence of these people to present a “paradoxical illusion for ‘global’, ‘urban’, ‘enlightened’, ‘settled’ citizens and questions their relationship with nature.” Yusuf, who works as a photojournalist for *Prothom Alo*, spent his weekends travelling along highways and following routes taken by various groups of displaced and landless people to find new settlements and inhabitation. In only four months, his journeys took him to temporary settlements in Jamalpur, Tangail, Faridpur, Manikganj and more. Along these routes, he found vast stretches of unoccupied land that look barren and desolate to the foreign eye, with settlements scattered on them.



PHOTO: SUMON YUSUF

And appropriately so, his photographs come through as little bits of observations made in his journeys, of people he cannot truly identify or understand. His work photographs people into the distance, often faceless and elusive, in a sincere effort to establish how distant and irreconcilable his own body and position is from theirs. He makes no effort whatsoever to establish in his work “who” these people are, “where” they have come from, “why” they are here. Instead, he attempts to catch fleeting moments of activity and rest, among people whose relation to land is greatly affected by a sense of illegitimacy imposed on them by modern day ideas of land ownership. Large portions of his photographs occupy space to portray what looks like “nothingness”, to try and understand how landless bodies build their own temporary spaces in vast stretches of land unoccupied by modern civilisation.

In one photograph, I see a parked boat. In another, I see an abandoned bus. An old leafless tree standing upright in yet another. Yusuf tells me that these images are kept here to capture a sense of abandonment, a meditation on everything modern civilisation leaves behind and refuses to make room for, like a lot of these landless people.

But his work follows the lives of people from different backgrounds and realities: some displaced by natural events/catastrophes, some who've moved as migrant labourers, others from nomadic communities. Some of the people in his work have been forcibly displaced by development and/or climate catastrophes and have been left to fend for themselves because the state

does not address the inability of these landless communities to make permanent settlements. His work clumps all of these landless people under the title “Nomads”, but to label those who have been rendered landless by forced displacement as “nomadic” (a word that commonly identifies people/communities whose work and ways of life traditionally centre around deliberate movement) is a gross misrepresentation. The title of the work almost lets you imagine that they have a choice to “settle down”, and that may prevent you from addressing the problems of landlessness and land ownership in this country while you consume images of a “wandering people”.

only three weeks on sites to shoot. And in this short time, he took on the massive task of creating a story about the Bede.

Much is said, or rather not said, about the Bede. Popular ideas identify them as a nomadic people moving along rivers and associate them with snake charming and magic. But Arellano writes in the book that he found very little academic documentation on the Bede in his research.

“Most of the information I found on the internet about them was quite repetitive. As I discovered later, some was and (sic) even false. I realised that the Bede community was much more than quaint shows with snakes and monkeys, something I was not interested in. I realised that they were still an unsolved equation. That feeling motivated me,” he tells me.



PHOTO: SUMON YUSUF



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PHOTO: SALVADOR ARELLANOSA

Salvador Arellano's “Pez de Sombra”

Arellano is a Spanish photographer who has worked on several projects, ranging from personal biographical stories to documentary photography. He tells me that his personal projects usually stretch out over long durations, but he was commissioned “Pez de Sombra” to be put it together within a few months after

This motivation creates photographs that make straightforward observations about how the Bedes exist and their various states of being. I see them at work, on boats and river banks, fishing, handling nets, repairing boats. I see them at rest, laying on parked boats and tarpaulin tents. I see Arellano trying to create a picture of their beliefs, customs and ritualistic traditions, through images of snakes and fish on jewellery and

possessions. He portrays them as a community, with an image of the children sitting together to study, or images of several boats and tents stationed together in rows and clusters. Most strikingly, I see them as conscious models of close portraits, ready to be photographed by a foreigner for the world to see.

He writes in his accompanying texts of the poverty and marginalisation of the Bede, and that he has attempted to “shed some light, in a subjective and partial way, over a handful of scenes and stories...”

What results, therefore, is a foreigner's documentary of a people the world knows very little about, as he has seen them over just a few weeks and spoken to via an interpreter. He has called this work “Pez de Sombra” (whose literal

translation is “shadow fish”) as a nod to a line of classic Spanish poetry borrowed from a book dedicated to “gypsies” (“Romance Gitano” by Federico Garcia Lorca), and with that he has romanticised the lives of a people he knows so little about, in a coloniser's language. His gaze and the liberty he takes to get so close and personal with the Bede makes me uncomfortable.

He says, “My photography does not articulate or engage in any sort of imperial gaze or colonial discourse. It talks about universal values.” And yet, he talks about the Bede's poverty and marginalisation, which adds political commentary on the community's existence, in ways that are not universal but rather unique to their history in a part of the world that he is not from. As hard as he has worked to draw a noble image of the Bede, I remain dissatisfied at how superficial this work remains because of his inability to recognise how he affects an object while photographing them, as the subject behind the camera.

In conclusion, Yusuf's work stands out for being respectful to the people it photographs, but Arellano's falls short in just that. The book itself, named in Spanish, published in Spain and commissioned by an initiative whose “mission is to promote the presence of Spanish language and culture in Bangladesh”, disregards Spain's own colonial legacy in the name of cultural diplomacy. The book only exists as a documentation of the marginalisation of a people it remains inaccessible to while exploiting their existence for dialogue that is dominated by the foreigner's language.

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