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Raghu Rai
At Adiganga Kali Ghat, Kolkata
2002
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
A Bazar Sence Old Delhi
2006
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
Muhram in Mehrauli, Delhi
2007
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
Reflection at Lajpat Nagar Market
2005
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
THE DRAMA OF INDIA
by Donald Kuspit

Raghu Rai is a highly regarded photojournalist -- his work caught Henri Cartier Bresson's eye in 1977; Bresson brought him into the Magnum Photo Agency, the first Indian photographer so honored -- but to regard his work as no more than observant reporting is to miss their artistry and irony. The contrasts in his photographs, whether black-and-white or in color, are bold and excruciating, making us conscious of the social tensions in his scenes. They seem staged, each figure an actor in a carefully scripted drama, playing a role foreordained by tradition. The figures may be contemporary, like the setting, but seem to go about their business as though in a trance, like sleepwalkers in an ancient ritual.

Rai may have come across the street scenes he photographs by chance, but there is nothing left to chance in his photographs. Bresson found his "decisive moments" accidentally, but Rai seems to have chosen his moments deliberately. Bresson captures the passing moment -- his photographs are about the passing of time, indeed, time is implicitly their subject matter -- but Rai's photographs suggest the inevitability of it all, giving them an aura of timelessness. Rai doesn't simply fast-freeze time; it doesn't exist, which is the reason his photographs are more visionary, not to say uncanny, than Bresson's. Rai realizes the moment, Bresson merely captures it: Rai's photographs make reality tangible, Bresson's only give us passing appearances.

For Bresson making a photograph involves making an immediate decision, as though to match the immediate moment. The apparent spontaneity with which some subject matter suddenly appears -- unexpectedly comes into his field of vision -- is what makes it memorable for Bresson. (But then why do some moments catch one's eye more than others, why do some things seem more spontaneously given and memorable -- more intrinsically meaningful and valuable -- than others? Bresson has no explanation of why he privileges some moments and some subject matter over the others -- why some seem to stand out and all the others seem irrelevant and go unnoticed.) In sharp

Raghu Rai
Directing Traffic in Central Avenue, Kolkata
1990
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Raghu Rai
Kumbh Mela, Allahabad
1996
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
Tourist Leaving Pushkar Fair, Rajasthan
1992
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

Raghu Rai
Fighter Plane in City Traffic, Bangalore
"Raghu Rai: Invocation to India"
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

contrast, Rai's photographs unpack what might be called the "symbolic aura" surrounding some subject matter. Lacking a symbolic aura the subject matter has no intrinsic meaning: it is not "momentous," but exists merely for a moment, as it does in Bresson's photographs. Bresson gives us empty appearances, Rai conveys the resonant, mysterious fullness of reality. Rai's photographs offer us insight into the collective unconscious of India, while Bresson's photographs suggest that everyday consciousness has its exciting moments, making it seem more insightful than it is.

One of the two standing figures in *Muharram in Mehrauli, Delhi* (2007) wears a white shirt, the other a black shirt. They are more or less in the middle of the picture, standing at the edge of the circle of people that surrounds them, but apart from them and within the circle. Some wear black shirts, some white shirts. There are a few gray shirts, but the sense of dramatic contrast remains. Black and white are at odds, suggesting the oddity of the scene. All the figures are male -- men and boys -- implying that women are second class citizens in India. And yet above and behind the bearded figure in the white shirt is a sign advertising Kalinga; women and sex must be somewhere, invisible but on every male's unconscious mind, making their presence felt if only as an abstract signifier. Several figures are stretched out on the ground in the center of the circle. They seem like corpses, but they're in a trance state, their eyes closed. They've been hypnotized by the foreground figure. He stands apart, separate from both the wide-eyed crowd and the fallen figures. It must be Muharram: he walks towards us, as though to enter our space, as the body of the figure stretched out below him does. Shadows mark the ground, made by cables or ropes, and figures with staffs: they're all in our space so we don't see them. But we know they are there, and so are we, watching the religious street theater with our wide-eyed camera.

It's a theater of the absurd -- at least to Western eyes -- in which we are participants, whether we want to be or not. Muharram is approaching us: will we also come under his spell, fall to the ground in testimony to his spiritual -- certainly magical -- power? Or will our camera protect us from him, serve as a barrier of detachment? What will happen next? It is the sense of anticipation, uncertainty, expectation that gives Rai's photographs their edginess, charges them with suspense and anxiety. A "decision" has yet to be made, whereas in Bresson's photographs the decision has been made: the photograph is finished, the photographer's moment of mastery of his subject matter -- his illusion of being in control of it, as though it was a puppet dangling from his glance -- has passed, whereas Rai's photographs are "unfinished" masterpieces. All the more so because however

Raghu Rai
Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York

seemingly in control something may or may not happen next -- happen to the photographer, who is implicated in the scene in an urgent, intimate way that Bresson rarely if ever is, however implicitly present he is. Rai's camera is engaged not simply contemplative, not capturing the right moment but aware that that there is no right moment, aware that the world has slowed to a standstill and may never move again -- except at the moment when the camera shows that it is part of the action. For Bresson, the "decisive moment" is a moment of separation from the subject matter, for Rai it is the moment when the photographer shows that he is under its spell -- when his camera no longer seems able to defend against it, but conveys his deep attachment to it, implies that he has no choice but to photograph it for it is an inescapable part of himself.

Again and again Rai shows us scenes of contradiction, suggesting his own contradictory attitude to India. The strong shadows in the lower space of *Directing Traffic in Central Avenue, Kolkata* (1990) contrasts with the luminous (if grayish) buildings in the upper space. The difference is heightened by the contrast between the isolated policeman -- wearing a black shirt and white pants, thus epitomizing the visual tension of the scene -- and the traffic. Adding to the sense of contradiction, not to say absurdity, of India, is the contrast between the hand-drawn wagons in the center of the traffic and the trucks that bracket them on both sides. Traditional India, dependent on human labor, and modern India, dependent on technology, exist side by side -- incommensurate yet moving together in the traffic. India is divided against itself; class conflict is implicit, and, if we take the Delhi and Kolkata pictures together, conflict between religious introspective and secular commercial India, the sacred and profane. Raj seems to respect both, however indecisive he is about which he prefers.

In *Kumbh Mela, Allaharad* (1996), a holy man confronts us directly, his eyes challenging the camera's eye. It is dual to the death between the sacred and profane. Will we come under his spell, or will we remain under the spell of the camera's eye? He is almost on top of us; the invisible lower part of his body is in our space, as though replacing -- certainly displacing -- our body. The boy, girl, and moustached man in *Tourist Leaving Pushkar Fair, Rajasthan* (1992) also stare at us, but with curiosity rather than spiritual intensity and intention. The car and bus pictured are small and beaten-up -- certainly not the latest, fastest models -- suggesting the backwardness of secular India. The contradictions of India are ironically conveyed in *Fighter Plane in City Traffic, Bangalore* (2003). A solitary fighter plane stands guard beside a busy

highway on which a crowded bus moves, flanked by solitary figures on motorbikes, which seem to be escorting it, as though to some important event, or as though the people on the bus were important dignitaries. The fighter plane points upwards, as though zooming into space, symbolizing India's fighting spirit and technological progress, while the bus is old, battered, and likely to breakdown, perhaps from overload -- India is overloaded with people -- suggesting that India still has a long way to go to be truly modern and up-to-date.

Even when the scene is not crowded with people and vehicles, as in *On A Highway, Punjab* (2000), the solitary, shiny truck, on a highway that seems to go nowhere, looks distant and small compared to the sleeping, turbaned figure. He's large and in the foreground, the truck looks small and is in the background. His Coca-Cola outpost -- is that a Coca-Cola delivery truck driving towards it? -- is on a rural road which intersects, at a right angle, with the highway. But the major contradiction is between the foreground knitting device, evoking Gandhi, and the sleeping owner of the Coca-Cola stand. He, Gandhi, and the primitive machine are passé in the new India symbolized by the truck. But then, to emphasize, it is a distant prospect: the old India confronts us at every turn in Rai's ingenious photographs.

"Raghu Rai - A Retrospective," Feb. 18-Mar. 20, 2011, at Aicon Gallery, 35 Great Jones Street, New York, N.Y. 10012.

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