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Mumbai: Prarthna Singh and Snigdha Poonam 2024: Notes from a Generation

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Prarthna Singh and Snigdha Poonam

2024: Notes from a Generation

TARQ

Mumbai

With the 18th Lok Sabha elections, 2024 has been a significant year for India. Nearly two-fifths of the country's 1.4 billion citizens are under the age of 25—a significant fraction of the voting pool. Photographer Prarthna Singh and writer Snigdha Poonam, two artists concerned with precarious political trends in India, spent five years traversing towns and cities they have lived in, in order to interview young people between the last elections and the most recent ones. The question they asked was: how do young people—those with the potential to play a crucial role in the future of the country—think and feel?

The exhibition, curated by Pune-based editor and writer Skye Arundhati Thomas, consisted of 26 portraits. The subjects in the photos were from various religious, class, and regional backgrounds, some dressed casually, others photographed in their work attire. The uniformity of the portraits (neutral backdrop, steady gaze of the subjects into the camera lens) made the portraits reminiscent of government documentation; these could easily have been pictures used for voting forms or identity card applications.

In the first, and biggest, room, portraits covered all four walls, creating the impression of being watched from all sides. To walk around the gallery was to do so under these young people's unwavering gazes. As one did, recordings of the interviews played softly over a hidden speaker. It was difficult to make out what was being said, but that seemed inconsequential since each portrait was a world of its own, highly distinct, and with an entire story confined to the limits of their frames. *2024 (06)* (2022), for example, is a portrait of a young woman in what is presumably her work blazer. She wears two badges, one that reads "I am vaccinated" over the Toyota logo, the other has her name and title, as well as a reference for her place of work: "Heritage Toyota." She looks calmly into the lens, shoulders relaxed, yet there is an immense vulnerability in her expression. All of these details—from her minimal makeup to her small nose ring—fill the portrait with meaning, with a certain narrative. No information was provided under the portraits or in the audio recordings to help connect voices to faces. And perhaps that was the point, that these incredibly subjective, personal anecdotes and perspectives could belong to anybody. The images came together to form a bigger picture of India, one that was complicated and intricate.

2024 (19) (2023) is a portrait of a young man with narrow shoulders and long hair. He's dressed casually in a black tank top, with a chain around his neck, sporting a butterfly pendant resting between his prominent collarbones. He, too, looks into the camera with a neutral expression, his eyelids heavy over incredibly dark eyes. With this portrait, Singh has beautifully captured the cusp of manhood in the balance of the subject's body language and physique.

In another room, divided by thin curtains, audio recordings of the artists' interviews played on headphones, the clips stitched together with ambient traffic noise separating the stories. They varied in subject matter—from queer love to discovering an affinity for rap music to running away from home. Their voices were sincere and passionate, but in very few instances did any of them talk explicitly about politics.

The very fact that the artists refrained from making their political opinions or positions known; that the recordings consist only of anecdotes; and that the portraits contain distinctive details (nose ring, butterfly pendant) made what could have been an ideological project far more intimate, in essence arguing that indeed the personal really is political. The direction of the curation and the storytelling added a certain poeticism to this collective portrait of India at a crossroads.

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ISSUE

JUN 28, 2024

139 Main News: Celebrated Filmmaker Flees Iran After Conviction