



THE TRANSIENT TABLEAU

BY SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI



ADMAN PRASHANT GODBOLE
TALKS TO US ABOUT HIS TRYST
WITH STREET PHOTOGRAPHY THAT
TRAVELS ACROSS BORDERS OF A
TRADITIONAL 'FRAME' AND COLOUR
TO GIVE US SNAPSHOTS OF LIVES
LIVED IN THE IN-BETWEENS

A joyride-horse on the beachfront stands saddled and ready. Its owner sits on the sands, resting awhile before the next customer comes along. Imagine composing this shot only to have a stray dog walk into the foreground of the frame. What would you do? Prashant Godbole took the shot. The result is an unexpected Matryoshka nesting of dog, horse and man.

Street photography is in some ways an inversion of the conventional rules of photography. There can be little or no time for planning or composing a shot. The photographer is in the midst of the action and has little control over the environment - the foreground is all around, the background is just as encompassing and there can be too many subjects that can crowd a frame. Moreover, the gear is minimal, limited to what can be carried on long walks through city streets. Perhaps it is these very challenges that draw photographers to the genre. The result, the captured image is a selective part – ironic, whimsical and sometimes downright surreal – a chosen moment of a larger transient story that is playing out beyond the stringent boundary of the frame.

Prashant Godbole has over 25 years' experience in advertising, an industry where the challenge lies in creating campaigns that go beyond the creative brief while working within the limitations of advertising budgets, media space and time. He has been at the helm of iconic campaigns such as Hamara Bajaj and Airtel's Express Yourself, and

is the Creative Head and Founder of Ideas@Work. Although his stint in photography began in a serendipitous manner, Godbole's choice of the genre of street photography is understandable, going by his penchant for creatively depicting the man on the street in his advertising campaigns.



One of Godbole's images, called Reflections, packs in numerous layers and details in a single frame. A man with a raised arm, presumably a traffic cop directs traffic with the sun shining down on him. This image is a reflection on the window of a car from within which, a man stares out, presumably at the traffic cop. Through this window, beyond the man, is the view through the other window of the car - an iron fence, with one rod bent out of shape, breaking the symmetry.

Godbole's riveting images distil the very essence of street photography, where two-dimensionality is used strategically to juxtapose subjects against reflection, shadow, opacity and transparency of other objects in the frame.



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF PRASHANT GODBOLE



EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW -

Slice-of-life is a recurring visual style in your work, be it advertising or street photography. What draws you to this genre?

‘Slice of Life’ is a phrase describing the use of mundane realism depicting everyday experiences – things that are emotional, provoking, insightful and moving – conveniently sliced and packaged in the form of books, television, theater, advertising, photography and cinema for your viewing pleasure. What draws me to this genre of photography is that you are holding up a mirror to society, capturing the life of a moment on film, making room for instinct, telling a story, half a story and making one smile. It tends to be ironic and often surprises you.

How does your background in advertising influence your photography?

Advertising is focused on appealing to the basic emotions of the consumer like affection, love, lust, joy, happiness, envy, greed, fear, sadness, pride, rage, confidence, zeal, etc. With advertising, you have only seconds within which to communicate your message. So we tend to keep images simple and to the point. Your visual should seek to be understood even by an illiterate person. Simple becomes powerful. Removing what is not the picture and what is not the message becomes art. I apply the principle of simplicity to my photography by exploring, documenting and discovering life as it unfolds in front of me.

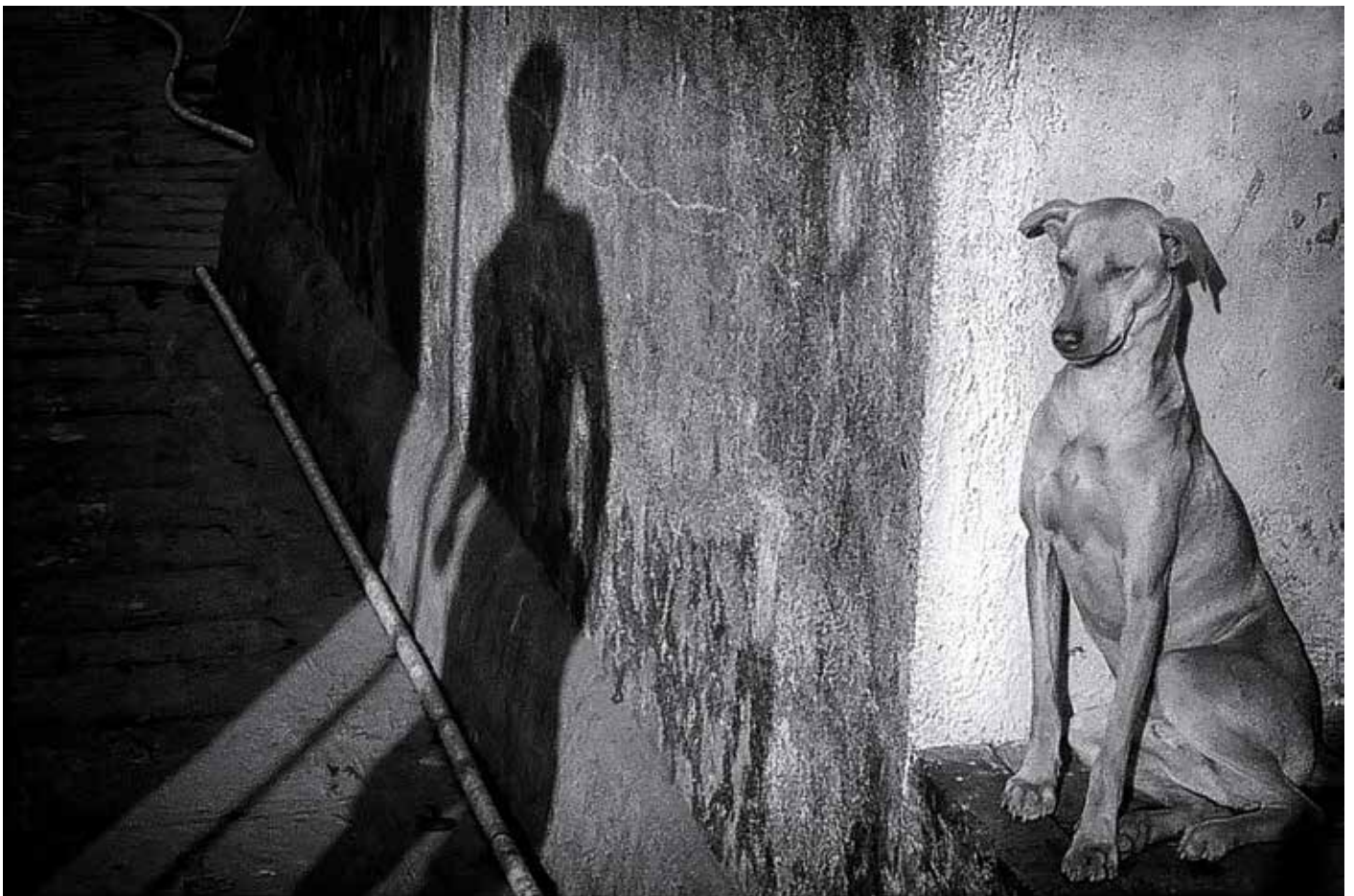
How did your stint with street photography begin?

I was fortunate enough to work on advertising campaigns with masters like Ajit Patel, Ashok Salian, Farokh Chothia, Shantanu Sheorey, Raghu Rai, Swapan Parekh and Prabuddha Dasgupta. There is a huge influence of these photographers on me.

But my stint with street photography as such actually began with the 'Express Yourself' campaign for Airtel. We wanted Swapan Parekh to shoot it. But he wasn't free, so I stepped up and picked up the camera. And I've been in love with it, ever since.

Why Black & White as a medium rather than colour? Is it because street photography exists in the 'in-betweens', where colour becomes immaterial?

I agree it exists in the 'in-betweens'. A photograph's impact on a viewer can be aided or hindered by the choice of using black and white or colour. Colour allows you to highlight certain elements in an image, it grabs your attention and it has a richer dynamic range. But humans see the world in colour, so a rendition of the world in monochrome makes us pause and look closely. Removing colour from the image allows us to see the subject and its context more directly and lets us connect with the photographer's intent more easily. That's why black and white images appear to be more timeless, simpler and more dramatic than colour images. It's an easy choice, really.



How different is street photography between India and elsewhere in terms of the complexity of the place and the juxtapositions and contrasts it offers?

While the settings and environment change, your approach would remain the same. This helps bring out the diversity in the people; the traditions and culture speak volumes for themselves. And India is simply bursting with diversity – a street photographer in India is really spoilt for choice when it comes to subjects.

While capturing the moment, you have only a split second for composition, lighting – basically the aesthetics of the frame. How much of that, do you think, is chance – being in the right moment at the right time? Or is it as Henri Cartier-Bresson once said: ‘Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera.’ (Though, he also did say, ‘Of course, it’s all luck’)

The perfect shot is more than just chance. Your ‘*riyaz*’ or practice of photography (composition, light direction, shutter speed, aperture, ISO, White balance, focus, etc.) has to be so perfect that the camera must become an extension of your body. As a great photographer once told me, and rightly so, luck is where opportunity meets ability.

How much difference does the location make? Are there favourite haunts that you return to, that you have always found to be great for the kind of shots you love to capture?

In advertising we say that if you have a good location, a good model and a great crew, then 90% of your job is done. On the street, you don’t get to choose any of these. What you are looking for, is a stolen moment that you are proud of. Having said that, I have shot more pictures on the seafront where I often go for walks.





How do you stay emotionally detached from the many stories unfolding around you? Is it important at all for street photographs to interact with their subjects before or after a shot?

This question is more appropriate for a photojournalist. Suppose you have witnessed an accident. The person is bleeding. Do you take his photograph or help him? I would drop my camera and help the person. It's just who I am.

But if you're doing a project, or a series of images, you must interact with your subject. As far as street photography goes, I don't interact – I just steal a moment from their life and run.

How much of your own personality do you invest in a photograph?

One hundred per cent. I am constantly discovering why I picked up my camera to take a certain image. My pictures derive from my evolving point of view of the world.

Is there any semblance of preparedness that one can bring to street photography?

On the street, you are never disappointed. So much is always happening on the street. But sometimes, the world surprises you. You have to be prepared mentally. I have learnt from my photojournalist friends that every time you go out with a camera, you must come back with at least one good workable image. When you put that kind of pressure on yourself, you ensure things don't fall beyond one's control.