

# EXPLORING GENERATIONS

**Annu Palakunnathu Matthew shares her passion  
for memory, culture and identity through photography**

BY DEEPALI DEWAN



*Photograph by E.S. Curtis*

NOBLE SAVAGE



*Photograph by A.P. Matthew*

SAVAGE NOBLE



## HOW DO I SEE IT?

Opens **May 2**  
Meet the Curator:  
3–4 p.m. on the  
1st and 15th of  
each month  
May to October

Photo: Indian from India, Savage, Portfolio I, 2001

**P**hotography is the filter through which we see ourselves and the world around us. It is the water to our fishbowl, so utterly pervasive and natural that we no longer notice it. In my work as a ROM curator and as an art historian, I have worked on the origins of photography and its more recent history. I am interested in understanding how the photograph has shaped contemporary ways of viewing and being in the world.

Some years back, in the beginning stages of writing a book on the history of photography in India, I started feeling grumpy about the challenges of writing about certain genres of photographic imagery. One of them was family photography. Arguably the most numerous, ubiquitous, familiar, and personal of any genre of photography—it is also the least studied and the most absent from photo histories.

One of the main reasons I found it difficult to write about this genre was the lack of family photo archives in mainstream institutions. The ones that do exist, however important, tend to be of “orphaned” photographs, images that have become disconnected from their family histories.

Thus I decided to embark on a deeper investigation of family photography for myself. On the one hand, I’ve embarked on a journey to create an archive of family photographs at the ROM that are still connected to their family histories. This is now The Family Camera Project (see page 30).

On the other hand, I looked around at the work being done by artists who use family photographs as source material in their creative work. I’ve followed Annu Palakunnathu Matthew’s work for a long time and have been drawn to how intriguing, different, and smart it is. Annu is also the most reflective and articulate artist I know, where the cerebral matches equally with the affective and intuitive.

Annu’s work has always felt different to me from that of other artists who use family photos in their work, likely because of Annu’s collaborative method. She gets to know the families depicted in the images, interviews them about their stories, and works with the generations of family members to produce the resulting image.

In this way, the work is as much in the process as well as the result. Her work expands the notion of the family photograph as a nexus of interactions, only one result of which is the final image.

While not all of Annu’s work incorporates family photography, much of it does so in a direct or indirect way. It links with her larger body of work by using a familiar visual form—in this case the family photograph—that has become part of a collective consciousness. It is a familiarity, she says, that draws people into the work and then asks them to question their assumptions about themselves and the world around them. Each image is important not only for what it shows, but also for what is not shown—what is hidden, and what has been lost.

For Annu, the family photograph is an object filled with emotional and psychological energy. Her work reveals the expressive potential of family photographs and builds on the powerful grip they have on our imagination, memory, and sense of self. Indeed, she uses family photos as a way to explore the larger dynamics of national identity, collective memory, and social transformation.

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Photo: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. *To Majority Minority*, Ysabel (detail), 2014, digital animation. Courtesy the artist and sepiaEYE.



Photo: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. *Re-Generation*, India, Annu (details) 2011-2015, digital animation. Courtesy the artist and sepiaEYE.

## DEEPALI DEWAN INTERVIEWS ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW

**DD:** Much of your work uses family photographs as source material for your creative work. What draws you to family photos? When did you first start to use them? How has your use of family photos changed over time?

**APM:** A number of my projects start with images from popular media to engage the viewer with something that initially appears to be familiar. For example, in *An Indian from India* and *Bollywood Satirized*. More recently I have been using family photographs. Again, because of their universality across cultures, they help to initially engage my viewers. Then the work takes that further to ask the viewer to question their assumptions. I am drawn to the family photograph for what they initially represent and for what they often also hide.

I first started using family photographs in a personal project that I created during a residency at the Anderson Ranch in Colorado. The project was to mark my father’s 25<sup>th</sup> death anniversary. I created fabricated memories by combining snap-



shots from my childhood with recently made images from England with my Holga camera. I actually had forgotten about my first use of family photographs until this show. I started with using my own family photographs to explore my own story and now collaborate with other families to tell their stories.

**DD:** How do you meet the families you work with and what is that process like?

**APM:** I find families through word of mouth, recommendations from others, Facebook postings, and by contacting local photographers. In Vietnam, a student of my husband’s put me in touch with a producer of the TV show *Vietnamese Idol*. She had 10 families ready by the time I arrived. In another city, I contacted a local photographer. He put me in touch with a family who then introduced me to more.

I usually communicate with the families by phone or email. I arrive at their doorstep, usually with my husband, David, who assists me, and my huge bag of lighting gear. Having David there is a huge boon as it allows me to interact and connect with the families as I go through their albums while he sets up the lights. As he is also a photographer, we speak the same “language.” He also gets on very well with kids, which is always charming. As I go through the family albums, memories pour out amidst the family members I am meeting. I love hearing their stories and understanding the family better. While we talk, I decide on an image and then scan it. The final animation and the re-enacted images that I make with



*Memories of India, Nested Baskets, 1996.*

Photo: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Memories of India, Nested Baskets, 1996*, gelatin silver print. Courtesy the artist and sepiatEYE.

I liked the challenge of using a simple tool and my knowledge of the technical aspects of photography to create beautiful images.



**Above:** *Memories of India, Billowing Fabric, 1998.*

**Below:** *Memories of India, Woman at River, 2002.*

Photos: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Memories of India, Billowing Fabric, 1998*, gelatin silver print. Courtesy the artist and sepiatEYE. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Memories of India, Woman at River, 2002*, gelatin silver print. Courtesy the artist and sepiatEYE.



the family are based on that one image, so finding the right one is important.

I then take family photographs for the family. Beforehand, I send instructions on what to consider wearing (no text on T-shirts, please wear complementary colours etc.) The photos for my project get converted into black and white, so the colours don't matter, but it makes a huge difference for the family photos. These photographs include other members and friends of the family and not just the three generations of women. Taking the initial photos gets everyone to relax and they get used to the lights we have set up and the camera. We then rearrange the lights to match the original photograph, which the final animation will be mimicking and I get the three generations to collaborate and reenact them. Usually the daughter and granddaughter help guide the different participants and correct their hair, dress, angle, etc. Again, I like that interaction and collaboration. There is also an obvious interest in how the family will be represented.

I then interview the grandmother and/or daughter to hear their family's story specifically connected to the concept I am working on (Partition, immigration.) It sometimes gets pretty emotional. A number of these women have become my Facebook friends and I update them about my shows via email.

**DD:** Your work seems to be as much about different techniques of photography as it is about the themes covered. Can you speak about the different photograph processes in your work and how you choose which ones to work with? How do the particular photographic format and technique contribute to the meaning of a piece for you?

**APM:** My projects always start with an idea. Figuring out how to communicate that idea comes through experimentation, feedback—and crossing my fingers. With my past experience with computers, I don't have a fear of technology and I love discovering how the extended digital toolbox can help me.

The idea for the final presentation (lenticular prints) in *The Virtual Immigrant*, happened when I looked at the photos that I had started to take. The participants always seemed to stand in the same pose, which lent itself to the overlapping/back and forth experience of viewing that a lenticular print gives and it was a perfect metaphor for the virtual immigrants experience. This was before I was even thinking about video.

In the work *Memories of India* I used the Holga, a plastic \$20 toy camera, which is known for having only a few exposure settings. I didn't want to get bogged down with the technical aspects of photography. I liked the challenge of using a simple tool and my knowledge of the technical aspects of photography to create beautiful images.

**DD:** So much of your work seems to stem from your own life story. Why?

**APM:** This is because I feel more comfortable speaking about issues that I am concerned with through the lens of something that I have experienced. Frankly, it is the ideas that stick with me and interest me the most.

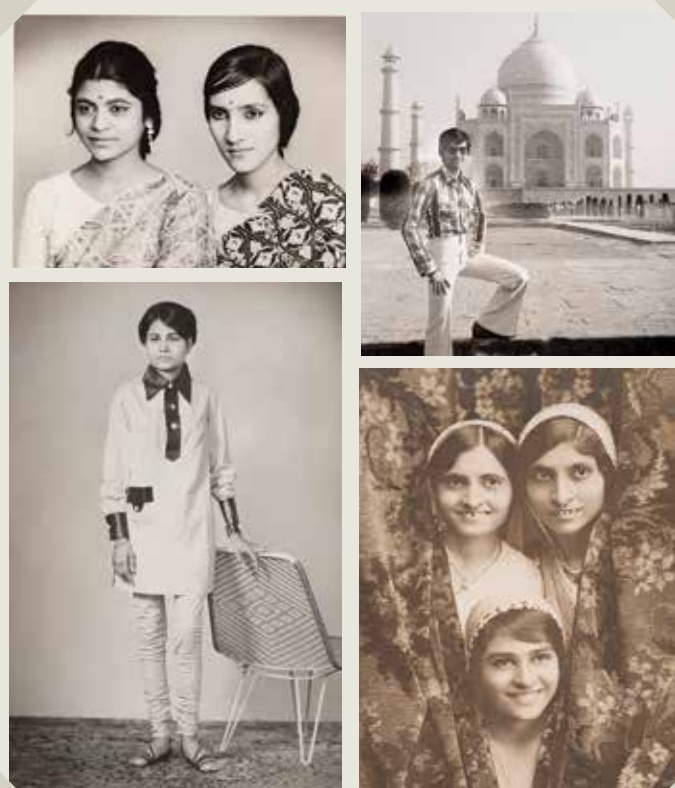
## THE FAMILY CAMERA

What is a family photograph? To some, it is a precious frozen moment. To researchers, it is a document or evidence of history. To others, it is a medium where we can express ourselves.

When a person makes the conscious decision to look through a lens and capture the scene before them, that photograph has a personal meaning. The decision to capture that particular moment is influenced by the relationships between a person's being, history, and current environment. How that image is interpreted and perceived by others, whether by family members or strangers, is then affected by their individual perceptions.

How do family photographs shape our memories? What can they tell us about history? Do our family photos have meaning for anyone else? In order to explore these questions and others, the ROM has launched *The Family Camera Project*. This community archive project will collect and preserve family photographs and their stories in the ROM's collection. Future generations, teachers, historians, and scholars will have access to these stories, which will enable people to write new histories of Canada.

The first phase of this project will take place from May to October 2015, and focus on families and descendants who have some link to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. It will also focus on family photographs from the Canadian African and Caribbean communities. Families can participate in this archival effort by contacting ROM Curator Deepali Dewan at [deepalid@rom.on.ca](mailto:deepalid@rom.on.ca) or 416.586.5698. For more information visit [rom.on.ca/ROMfamcam](http://rom.on.ca/ROMfamcam).



**DD:** Autobiographical references were more direct in your earlier work, but your recent work seems to be more of an abstract reference to your own life experiences, such as living between multiple cultures. Would you agree? If yes, how do you understand this evolution in your work?

**APM:** I do agree but unfortunately I don't understand the evolution! When I look at my work it seems like a logical progression, but as an artist the progression doesn't feel logical at all!

When I started photography, I wanted to be a photojournalist. But I soon realized that I am too much of an introvert and shy. Over the years, I have become more comfortable interacting with people (though I am still an introvert) and I wonder if this now allows me to also include the stories of others.

**DD:** What kind of resistance or challenges have you encountered in your personal journey to become a photographer and how do you think this has shaped your art?

**APM:** I grew up in India in the 1980s and 90s and there was pressure to have an arranged marriage. Frankly, I had assumed, like most of my classmates, that I would get married soon after college. Luckily I didn't succumb to that narrative (I have no idea why. Maybe because I had relationships that I knew would not last a lifetime.) Luckily for me, that pressure did not come from my mother, despite the pressure she had from the community around her, doubly so as a widow.

I had taken one optional photo class in college in India. In my memory, there were 15 of us, one camera and two rolls of film for the semester. The magic of the darkroom turned me on to photography. When I started photography, I had no idea how I was going to make a living. One idea was to be a photographer on the beaches of Goa, selling Polaroid photos to tourists of themselves on the beach. Once I came to the United States I feared I wouldn't be able to afford anything more than a home in a trailer park. I guess these thoughts drove me, but I am not sure they shaped all my work. The work that my experiences in India did shape is *Bollywood Satirized* and *Fabrications of the Truth*.

**DD:** What kind of photography are you drawn to? Who are your favourite photographers?

**APM:** Though my work has become more and more photo-based, I still love and respond to black-and-white photography. I love Duane Michals, Ray Metzker, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Tony Ray-Jones to name a few.

I had seen an image of the 30<sup>th</sup> street train station in Philadelphia in *Camera and Darkroom* magazine and loved it, as it was an image that I wish I had "seen." I wanted to meet the photographer. It so happened that an assisting job came up and I met him, and he is now my husband, David Wells.

The other work I appreciate is by other artists who have also lived between cultures. The photography of Shireen Neshat, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Abelardo Morell come to mind.

Fabricated Memories (details), 1997-2000.



When I started photography, I wanted to be a photojournalist. But I soon realized that I am too much of an introvert and shy.

Photo: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Fabricated Memories (details), 1997-2000, polaroid transfer artist book. Courtesy the artist and septaEYE.

**DD:** What inspired you to start turning still images into animations?

**APM:** It seems a natural progression from the diptychs of *An Indian from India* to the lenticular prints with the *Virtual Immigrant* to the photo animations of *Re-Generations*...but it wasn't. The number of digital tools was exploding and I became interested in stop animation. That converged with my interest in family photographs and led to *Re-Generation*, which is a series of photo animations.

**DD:** Some of your work seems to have what one could call a feminist dimension, such as *Re-Generation*, which focuses on three generations of women. Is this fair to say? If so, what draws you to this perspective?

**APM:** I started *Re-Generation* in India. There were two reasons why I focused on women. One is that they more overtly show the change in

dress between the generations compared to men. Second, I did like walking into these homes and giving the women all the attention and involvement. So yes, it does have a feminist dimension, but also a visual one.

**DD:** *Open Wound* references the traumatic events of 1947 when India's independence from British colonial rule was marked by much violence that accompanied the creation of India and Pakistan as separate countries. How did this work come about? Has the work ever been exhibited in South Asia?

**APM:** When I was doing *Re-Generation*, I photographed a family in Israel where the grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. It made me realize the importance of including her history and that every family has a history.

Also going to the Holocaust museum in Israel got me thinking about how, during the Partition over a million died and nearly 15 million were displaced in three months. Yet, we have nothing to commemorate it. The children of the Partition are getting older and though there have been academic oral histories done, I wanted to create work that would make the survivors voice more accessible to a larger audience. When I was in school in India, we never studied the Partition. Through my project I learned that three of my classmates' families had been displaced by Partition.

I did the *Open Wound* work on a Fulbright fellowship to India and finished it just last year. It had not been seen by a large South Asian audience, until the recent San Jose Museum exhibition. It has not yet been exhibited in South Asia. o

**ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW** is a contemporary artist. Her exhibition *Re-Generations* runs until October 18 at the ROM. It is curated by ROM Senior Curator **DEEPAI DEWAN**.