

FOR COLLECTORS OF FINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Black & White

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Compassionate Lens

Vilem Kriz:
Poet in Exile

Mitch Dobrowner:
Eye of the Storm



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Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: An Indian from India

George Slade

What is the definition of nostalgia? And how does it apply to photography, which is retrospective by its very nature? If Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's imagery looks backward in time, it is less romantic recollection of the past than a kind of bracing, corrective look at personal experiences and cultural behavior. Her work opens up the historical record, reframes what people see, and presents new conclusions about the evidence she has transcribed into her images.

Besides what we see, non-visual elements and intellectual constructs are called into play; Matthew creates many opportunities for introspection and discovery. Although they have great and satisfying formal appeal, one should spend an extra minute or two looking at her images, because they are sub-



Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

versive, and often change in unexpected ways. Two recent series, *The Virtual Immigrant* and *Re-Generation*, actually do change as you look at them; they are presented in lenticular prints and on iPads respectively, and feature one type of portrait lap-dissolving or fading out and into another. Your own position, whether physically, socio-culturally, or both, is a common factor when viewing Matthew's photographs.

Hers is an ethnocentric stance, though her background gives special spin to that position. Born in England in 1964, she moved with her family to India at age ten. Matthew has been living in the United States since 1992. She is very much a child of English-speaking realms (and still has a distinctive English accent), though her outward appearance and her primary fascinations derive from the Indian subcontinent, that nation that is evolving into the world's most populous country (predicted to outpace China soon).

In the United States, she has to explain that she is "an Indian from India" to distinguish herself from American Indians. She has even, at times, referred to herself as an Indian American—and it is this socio-cultural inversion, both semantic and psychological, that lies at the heart of her series, *An Indian from India*.

Drawing inspiration, motivation and subject matter from the photographic archives of late



CHIEF RED SHIRT
No. 19.

Photographer Unknown

FEATHER INDIAN



CHIEF SHIRT
No. 93.

Photograph by White & Matthew

DOT INDIAN

Feather Indian / Dot Indian, 2001-2007



Photograph by E.S. Curtis

WOMAN'S PRIMITIVE DRESS



Photograph by A.P. Matthew

INDIAN WOMAN'S PRIMITIVE DRESS

Woman's Primitive Dress / Indian Woman's Primitive Dress, 2001-2007

Point of View
An
A

"My work builds on the presumed veracity of photographs to spur a critical reflection on the power of photography and its effect on the perception of memory..."

19th and early 20th century photographers like Edward S. Curtis, who sought to catalogue and symbolically define the "primitive," supposedly disappearing Indians of North America, Matthew restages portraits of native American "types" with herself, the modern immigrant with her mixed ethnic markers, replacing the individuals so assuredly set down as representative examples of what our Canadian neighbors astutely and respectfully refer to as "first Peoples."

American society still defers, all too often, to stereotypes; we do not like to dwell on deeper meanings or consider the implications of giving short shrift to the complexities of cultural background. So the images Curtis recorded, which, as we know, involved staging and costuming to heighten the typological aspect of his study, have imprinted themselves as icons of Native American identity, regardless of their actual truths.

Matthew has encountered comparable confusion about her identity; to Americans, she presents as non-American, and our relatively limited ethnic imaginations want to put her somewhere, as something. She tells us

she is Indian. Like Columbus (whose westward journey sought passage to India, so when he made landfall he assumed the people he found waiting were Indians), we blithely assume, despite many signs to the contrary, that Matthew has self-identified as one of America's Indians. Labels satisfy us, truths notwithstanding.

Matthew makes sly use of this tendency toward didactic cultural myopia: Curtis' "Noble Savage" becomes, through Matthew's substitution of herself for the unnamed icon, "Savage Noble," adorned with a shawl that may have no more relevance to her everyday life than the ermine-tailed headdress worn in Curtis' photograph. In the most succinct example of the inversion, "American Indian" transposes itself to become "Indian American." One of the most subversive elements of Matthew's work, in this series and others, is how easily this turn is accomplished.

Throughout *An Indian from India*, two portraits, separated in time by nearly a century, appear side-by-side, allowing ample opportunity to compare and contrast. Pay close attention to details—there are numerous levels on



Photograph by C.M. Bell

QUANAH PARKER, WASHINGTON D.C., 1880s



Photograph by A.E. Matthew

ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, PROVIDENCE R.I., 2000s

Quanah Parker, Washington, D.C. / Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Providence R.I., 2001-2007



NOBLE SAVAGE

Photograph by E.S. Curtis



SAVAGE NOBLE

Photograph by A.P. Matthew

Noble Savage / Savage Noble, 2001-2007



QUANAH PARKER, WASHINGTON D.C., 1880s

Photograph by C. M. Bell



ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, PROVIDENCE R.I., 2000s

Photograph by A.P. Matthew

Quanah Parker, Washington, D.C. / Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Providence R.I., 2001-2007



Photograph by F.A. Knehart

AMERICAN INDIAN WITH WAR PAINT



Photograph by A.P. Matthew

INDIAN WITH WAR PAINT

American Indian with War Paint / Indian with War Paint, 2001-2007

Matthew recreates in these images the sensory impressions of India she first experienced as a child.

which these works function. Look at the full-length portraits staged by a beach and in a house, intended to show costume dress to its total extent; Matthew seamlessly inserts her newly clothed self into the image illusion. Matthew is a careful and accomplished craftsperson; she makes excellent use of the original settings, and her self-insertions are both effective and emotionally evocative.

Emotions play a role in the other series reproduced here. Titled *Memories of India*, the work, which Matthew started in the mid-1980s, has an even greater initial nostalgic tug than do the photographs in *An Indian from India*. But there is some subtle manipulation happening in this work. As the photographer wrote on her website in conjunction with another portfolio:

"When flipping through a family album, we become more cognizant of the histories and memories of our own and other families. My work builds on the presumed veracity of photographs to spur a critical reflection on the power of photography and its effect on the perception of memory, family and the warping of cultures over time."

Made by another photographer, or taken out of context, the work in *Memories of India* could easily be misread as a kind of 21st century faux naïf travelogue, carried out while drifting through a dreamlike landscape on a grand tour of the "exotic Far East."

In fact, the work is partially the view of an outsider; as noted above, Matthew was born in the United Kingdom, though her family is strongly rooted in India and she refers to it as her "cultural homeland." The work in this series represents memories, more than facts; Matthew recreates in these images the sensory impressions of India she first experienced as a child.

There is a synesthetic quality, then, that associates each visual record in the *Memories of India* portfolio with an impression derived from another sense—the sound, for instance, of water splashing on an elephant's trunk, or its wet surround of one's dabbled toes. The smell of burning brush, or incense, or soap lingering in fresh laundry, or spice suffusing a meal; the feeling of a breeze or of blinding sunlight flooding across a plaza, the dirt underfoot in a park—these are all critical components of the works in this series, and



Woman in smoke, 2004-2006



Man stirring, 2004-2006

"The images are a time warp, taking me back so the memories can be experienced over and over again."

once again, they demand some attention; viewers will benefit by projecting themselves into the space, to imagine what they might experience therein. These are memories constructed to enable both personal recovery of times lost and vicarious experience of spaces never entered.

Matthew is very open and intentional about this work, for which she used a plastic-lensed toy camera to emphasize the abstraction she hoped to convey, or at least the distraction she wanted to create, to draw viewers away from the specific physical facts of the moment and push them toward something extra-sensory, or four-dimensional.

"The images are a time warp," Matthew writes, "taking me back so the memories can be experienced over and over again." Virtual reality in a single frame, on looping playback.

Some of Matthew's other works include movie posters made to emulate Bollywood styles while featuring imagined films that address various social issues in Indian society having to do with male/female relationships (the series titled *Bollywood Satirized*). *Spatial Memories*, another color series, records the

destruction of neighborhoods as urban environments in India undergo dramatic change.

Throughout her various bodies of work Matthew animates the still image with both real and implied dimensions of sensory information. In another series, *Open Wound*, Matthew again creates video images that almost imperceptibly warp and transform into new scenes. Her statement about this work applies broadly to her work addressing the potency of historical photographs.

"Old images," she writes, "reignite memories and...take us back to a different time." For Matthew, it is crucial to remember, burning is no idle metaphor.

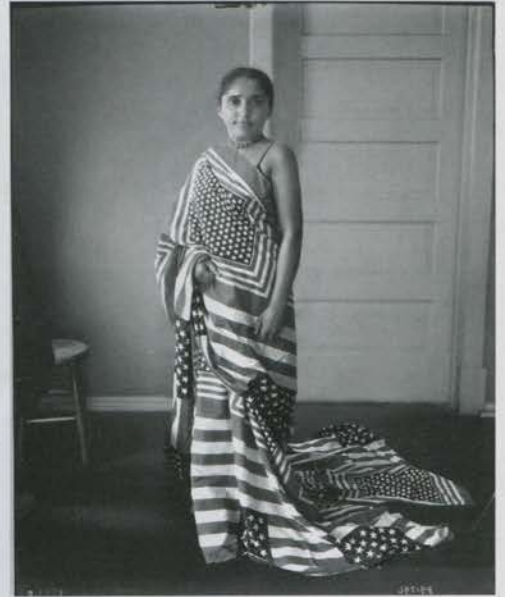
Fact File

To learn more about Matthew's work, visit www.annumatthew.com. She is Professor of Art (Photography) and Director of the Center for the Humanities at the University of Rhode Island and is represented by SepiaEYE, New York City and Tasveer Gallery, India.



Photograph from the Wanamaker Expedition, 1913.

AMERICAN INDIAN WEARING FLAG



Photograph from the Wells Expedition, 2003.

INDIAN AMERICAN WEARING FLAG AS A SARI

American Indian Wearing Flag / Indian American Wearing Flag as a Sari, 2001-2007



Baby sleeping, 2004-2006



Ladder, 2004-2006



Filthy feet, 2004-2006



Mother's feet, 2004-2006



Priest, 2004-2006



Elephant wash, 2004-2006