

INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad ↗
Journal Home	www.chitrolekha.com ↗
Included in	ProQuest, Art Full-text (H.W. Wilson), EBSCO, Google Scholar

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 6, Number 2, 2022
Editor	Reynaldo Thompson
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.62 ↗
TOC	https://chitrolekha.com/nsv6n2 ↗

About the Article

Title	Relation to the Ground: An Analysis of Photographs by Jyoti Bhatt	
Author/s	Naini Arora	
Affiliation	Srishti-Manipal Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Bengaluru and Ph.D. candidate at IIIT-H, Hyderabad	
Funding	No funding was received. Published free of any charge.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.62.v6n208	Pages: 1-10
Full-text HTML	https://chitrolekha.com/v6n208 ↗	
Full-text PDF	https://chitrolekha.com/ns/v6n2/v6n208.pdf ↗	
Article History	First Published: December 27, 2022	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0	

Relation to the Ground: An Analysis of Photographs by Jyoti Bhatt

Naini Arora

Faculty at Srishti-Manipal Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Bengaluru and Ph.D. candidate at IIT-H, Hyderabad. Email: naini.arora@manipal.edu

Abstract:

All forms of art embody imagination, which is medium-specific. This research investigates how Photography embodies imagination, for the method in Photography differs from the other forms of art in its unique way. The processes involved in creating photographic images, whether by analogue techniques or digital, show that it is not entirely automatic. Technology automates some features but involves thought processes, and the photographer makes precise decisions. There is some 'occurring' at play. This article analyses the photographs by Jyoti Bhatt, widely recognized as a painter, printmaker, and photographer. The interaction of various two-dimensional visual media in his practice is interesting; this study illuminates what photographic principles guide his practice in photography.

Keywords: Imagination, Photography, Painting, Linear Perspective, Photographic determinant

The reality on earth appears concrete and constant, yet our experience of it is temporary and fleeting. Physical laws govern it, like, gravity, day and night movement, and seasons change. At the same time, the reality is porous as many occurring phenomena slip away without becoming visible. Some part of reality is visible to some and not to others. Our experience of reality in portions opens up possibilities to articulate it uniquely. There is a potential to re-configure and give our experience a new form in the material world. The artistic effort is to disclose some new aspect of reality. Any work of art is a kind of departure from specific modes of existence to a new body in a new material form. When looking at a chair, the entire physical chair doesn't go inside one's mind. Instead, a few characteristic points like shape, colour, and texture are perceived. Imagination is abstracting from space and time and projecting back into space and time (Flusser, 2000). Material formations embody imagination, and the form of that material discloses the artist's vision to the viewer. A person becomes a painter, a dancer, a writer, or a photographer, depending on the choice of media.

In painting, the white of the canvas is layered with the application of pigments, sometimes thick, sometimes thin, overlapping each other. At times the surface is scratched, revealing the colour below. Built-up stroke by stroke, sometimes these strokes merge with the weave of the cloth, settling in the very core of the fabric. At times, these strokes rise above the two dimensions of the canvas as if aspiring to break free and stand as sculptures. The artist embodies her being, life experiences, memories' hues, and desires on the canvas. The material transformation of humble pigments and canvas cloth into a painting happens through strokes. Before the work in the work of art, i.e., a painting, is finished, it might take moments, days, months, or years. An artist lives millions of moments experiencing stacks of events from past, present, and imagined futures. Shapes, colours, textures, and lines reveal the artist's intention. They are the triggers for the viewer to make meaning.

The method of embodying imagination in photography and its meaning-making differs from the other art forms especially painting. In photography, the canvas is already partially filled with what exists in front of the camera. The artistic act here requires immediacy to embody the photographer's observation and intention. A study of the processes involved in creating images, whether by analogue methods or digital, shows that it is not an automatic process (Benovsky, 2011). It is a happening that involves thought processes and precise decisions. There is some kind of 'occurring' at play.

The photographer has the potential to frame the fleeting moments in a photograph with imagination and a keen sense of looking. Observing and communicating this fleeting reality depends upon the artist's disposition, the affordance of time and space, and the means of making the image. The artist brings forth the frame through her knowledge and use of the camera device. The ability of the device enables the artist to reveal the world that she observes and imagines, which may not be starkly visible in the external reality. Photography is an act of rebellion in a way that challenges our reality; a photograph can transcend time, holding fleeting moments in it. Photography requires the photographer to be in the present, mindful of the occurring and happenings around her. She makes various decisions, and acute discernment is necessary to communicate her intentions effectively. Decisions are aesthetic and socially relevant due to the process of involvement in the world. Understanding physical time and space allows the artist to determine the appropriateness of the context and her craft.

Across the various technological advancements in photography, the camera has not changed from its earlier prototypes (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008). Since its early invention (camera obscura), the camera has been a tiny hole from which light passes in a straight line, resulting in an inverted image. Over time, the camera evolved to include mirrors to reverse the image, and in digital, we can even see the result of the click on a display screen in a fraction of a second. Today, there are also mirrorless cameras. Irrespective of the various contexts in which Photography performs, certain fundamentals remain the same, such as lens, aperture, and shutter speed. Across all the types, the basic principle stays the same, i.e., light enters in a straight line creating a perspectival topos. The linear optical perspective of paintings found its way into the camera, shifting from manual to mechanical, and today from mechanical, it has become electronic as in digital cameras (Burgin, 1982). By default, an image is already in perspective, with all lines converging in the centre. The camera's architecture is such that everything in its 'box' is in a central perspective. A photograph, by default, embodies this central perspective.

Features of linear optical perspective are: vanishing point, variance in size, and relation to the ground level. When employed by artists in painting, a vanishing or converging point can be outside the canvas. Whereas in a camera, it remains within, and the resultant photograph embodies it within the boundaries of its frame. Vilém Flusser critically examines the relationship between the camera and the photographer. He asserts that meaningful criticism of photography will have to understand how the photographer overcomes the inner workings of the camera and how the camera redirects the photographer to its program (Flusser, 2000). How the photographer overcomes the camera's inner workings is to ask how the photographer overcomes the perspectival topos. The medium specificity of the camera is that its enclosure is perspectival. For the photographer to create a meaningful and interesting photograph, she has to overcome the camera's constraints and the medium's limitations. All the magic happens when the photographer overcomes the perspectival topos. The viewer then enjoys this magic.

From the seemingly continuous flow of reality, the photographer recognizes what entities to bring into a connection to create a frame. A photographic frame already has perspective embodied by default. It is already partially filled with what is in front of the camera. Frame in photography reveals relations between different entities. The frame presents drama that shifts from ordinary to extraordinary, causing an experience in the viewer. By bringing entities into a meaningful relation, the frame leads to an immersive experience for the viewer.

This article shows the approach of artist Jyoti Bhatt in the interaction between two media, namely, painting and photography, particularly his documentary photography. The two-dimensional surface in the painting affords the move away from the convergence point. This research finds that Bhatt frees his photographs from the closed movement of perspective even though the photograph holds a convergence point by default. A painter builds stroke by stroke with paints over time, whereas, in photography, what is in front of the camera partially fills its canvas.

Jyoti Bhatt is an eminent artist recognized as a painter, printmaker, and photographer. In his lifetime, he has produced an eclectic body of work that explores the possibilities and particularities of each medium (Sawant, 2007). Trained in fine art at Baroda school, he studied painting and printmaking. He travelled extensively abroad and to the hinterlands of India, which brought significant depth to his approach to image-making. His engagement with artists and art practice abroad led him to experiment with various materials for his two-dimensional works. He began to use industrial materials and techniques of printing with cut-outs. From 1967 onward, multiple assignments took him to the rural parts of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Orissa for photographic documentation of arts and crafts, lifestyle, and practices of communities (Bhatt, 1994). This interaction with people's daily traditions, rich in art, is also reflected in his paintings from hereon. He actively and consciously chose to break the linear perspective in constructing his images in his paintings and printmaking works. He analysed cubism developed in Paris; he noted cubism, abstract expressionism, and pop art's similarities and differences with the various organization in the arts and crafts of rural India. He continued to play with positive and negative spaces, dense patterns and movement of shapes and forms. Karode notes,

"In his paintings, Bhatt evoked the tactile feel of rugged walls, crusty landforms, and sites ruptured by war, using an array of most ordinary materials to heighten effects of relief ." (Karode, 2007)



Fig. 1. Jyoti Bhatt, Still life with parrots, 1955, Oil on Board. Courtesy of the artist and website Artsy.com

In the painting titled 'Still life with parrots,' the shapes combine fluidly (fig. 1). They overlap, merging the distinction between front and back. All objects have different viewpoints. The parts of a single entity also are made from different angles. Drawing of the bottle mouth, the bottleneck, and the body of the same bottle are from different angles. The bottle mouth is from the top view, and the bottleneck and bottle body are from the front. Different viewpoints combine, and this treatment is across the objects in the painting. The tonal variations and use of colour are the choices of the artist. In this painting, the colour and tonal variation are not dependent on the angle of the light, like chiaroscuro or the optics with light and shade. Though the drawing shows each object from a different point of view, the viewpoints are also different within each object. Yet, the painting maintains coherence and integrity in the overall spatial plane. He constructs his images from various perspectives that point to a certain truth about the objects. The fact of the bottle is that it has an open mouth to something inside, whereas the body is round in which things go and settle. Drawn in this manner reveals the various aspects of the bottle, pointing to the truth of the bottle.

As explained above, Bhatt creates compositions with multiple viewpoints in the image's construction. His interaction with the arts and crafts influence his paintings significantly. The construction of images here homogenizes the space and heightens the flatness rather than creating an illusion of depth.

Bhatt is instrumental in bringing photographic practice into the folds of fine art. Sawant points to the powerful imagery in his documentary work that needs serious attention (Sawant, 2007). This body of work from 1965 to 95 finds mention in articles, books, and curated exhibitions as documentary works (Nair, 2019). In the writings on this body of work, the written words describe the subject matter of the documentation; the question is how it documents in the form of photographs. The photographs find appreciation for their artistic value; their prints are in exhibitions and collections worldwide. They are primarily black and white photographs developed from the film roll. The question arises of how the photographs are document. Besides the materiality and subject matter, what does the formal structure of the photograph reveal? How can it be established that these works document the living traditions of the community, their relationship with their space, environment, and approach to life? Sawant asserts that though there have been numerous shifts, stylistically and formally, in various media, viewed as a whole, the oeuvre of Jyoti Bhatt appears to cohere together (Sawant, 2007). What connects his paintings and photographs? Is it possible to locate parameters that help break away or heighten the perspective embedded by default in Photography as a form of art? For our analysis, we take the body of work from 1965 to 1995 as Bhatt considers these photographs documentary and also as these works were exhibited and published widely (Bhatt, 2013). To illustrate and bring forth the article's intention, we analyse a few photographs.

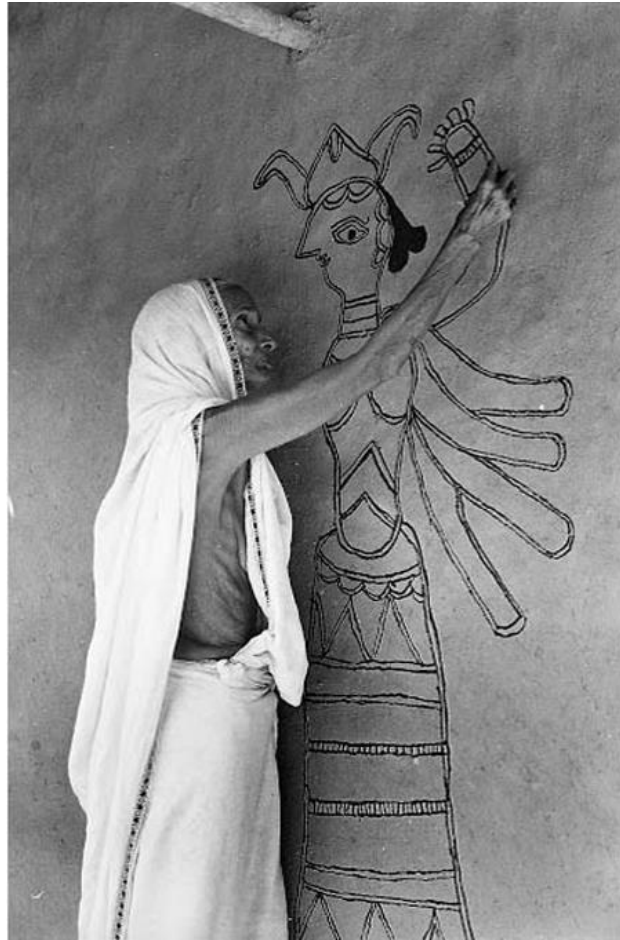


Fig. 2. Jyoti Bhatt, *Durga*, Mithila, 1977, Silver gelatin photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Reproduced from catalogue Jyoti Bhatt, *Photographs from Rural India*: Jyoti Bhatt, Tasveer Arts Pvt. Ltd., Bangalore, 2013.

The older woman's gesture resonates with the motion of the drawing on the wall (fig.2). It appears to reflect the idea of two women; one immortalized in a drawing, an aggregation of all the women, and the other an older woman who has lived and experienced a long life. The drawing reflects the older woman as much as the older woman reflects the drawn image. They are, as if, in the position to dance, the still picture becomes alive, making us reconsider who is drawing whom. This frame removes the distinction between the wall with the drawing (background) and the older woman (foreground). Both are fused to make this photograph. We switch between the two, the background and the foreground, to look at and decipher meanings. It comes from a human, an older woman, making an image of a goddess. The goddess is *Durga*, symbolic of the shakti inside that reflects itself outside as a drawing. *Durga* is not seen as a god but as representing all females. A female draws the emancipated form of *Durga*.

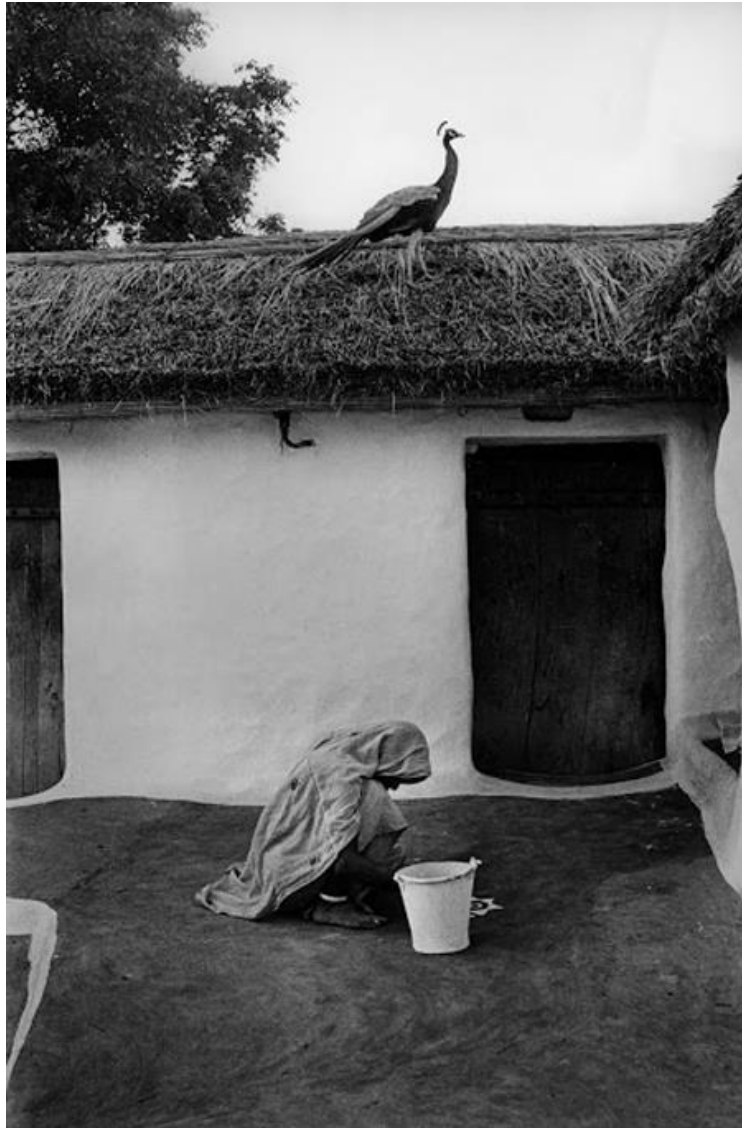


Fig. 3. Jyoti Bhatt, Rural courtyard, Banasthali, Rajasthan, 1972, Silver gelatin photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Reproduced from catalogue Jyoti Bhatt, Photographs from Rural India: Jyoti Bhatt, Tasveer Arts Pvt. Ltd., Bangalore, 2013.

In this photograph (fig. 3), the peacock's shape on the hut's roof resembles the contours of the woman's body on the floor, with its head bent and immersed in making *rangoli*. The frame of this photograph brings into a relationship the shapes of the two entities mimicking each other. The top of the frame and the bottom of the frame are connected and fused by shapes. The spatial division (concerning the ground level), the stillness, and the continuity of the shapes in this photograph give it an appeal of a miniature painting. Each object is delineated clearly and has its own space in the composition. The meanings and metaphors can be many as per the poetic depth of the viewer.

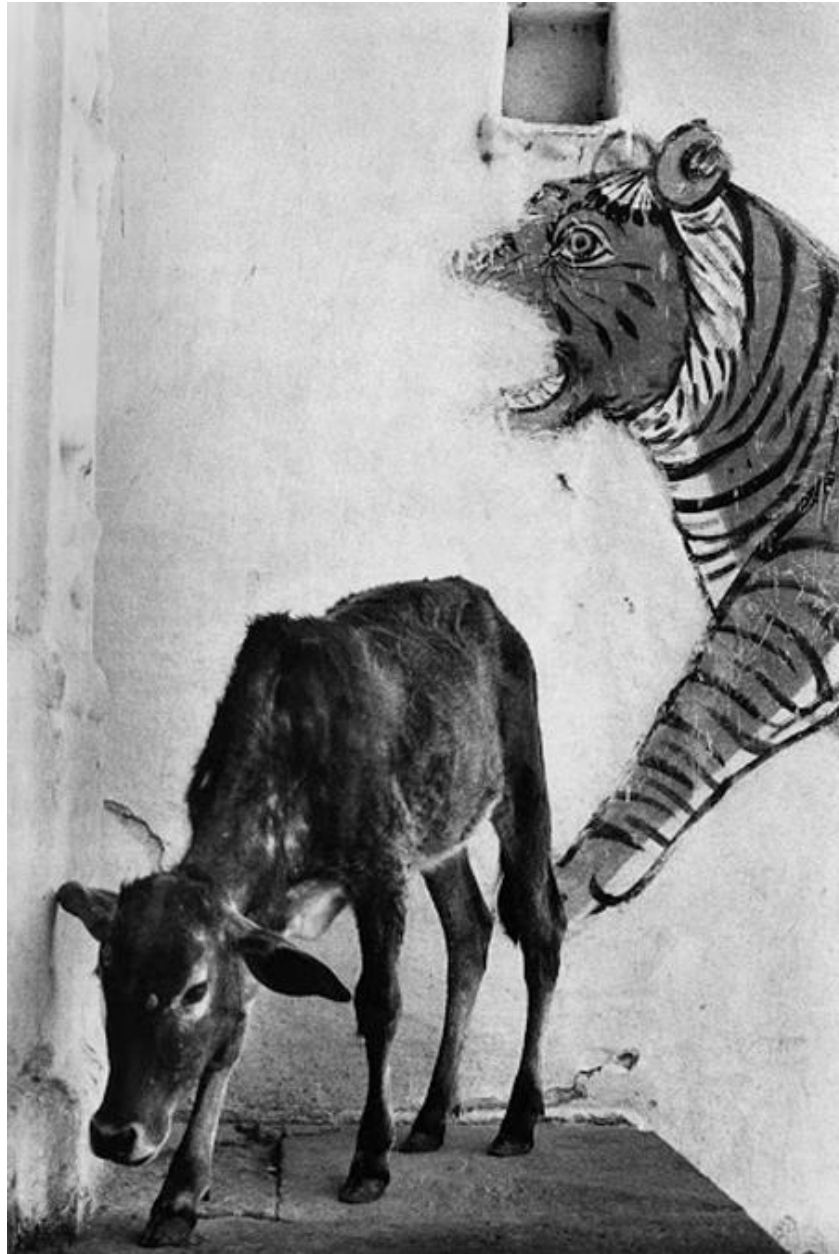


Fig. 4. Jyoti Bhatt, *A tiger and calf*, Rajasthan, Photograph, 1973, 30x19.8 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Art and Photography, Bangalore.

In this photograph (fig. 4), a switch occurs between looking at the calf and the painted tiger on the wall. This frame brings the two into a relationship where the painted tiger seems to attack the calf mimicking a real-life situation. With even a slight shift in the angle, the distance between the painted image on the wall and the object would change, rendering the photograph less effective. This frame fuses the background and the foreground.

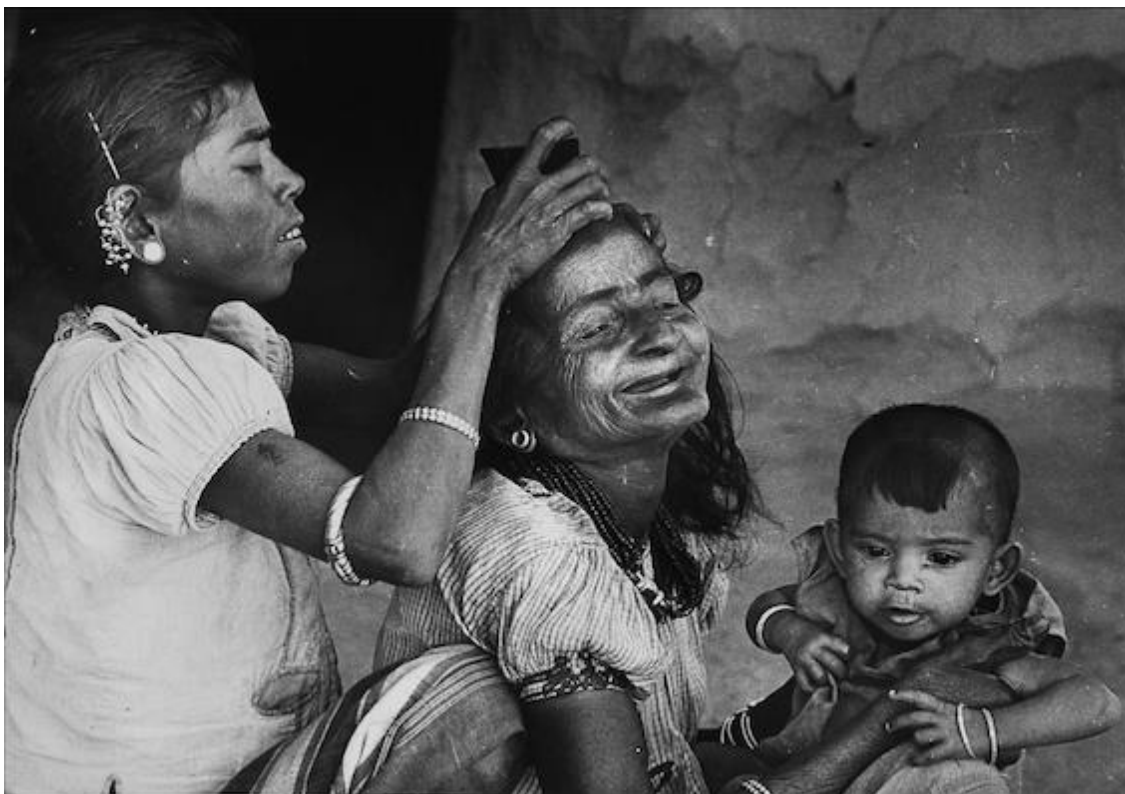


Fig. 5. Jyoti Bhatt, Gujarat, Silver gelatin print, 1968/69, 18.1x25.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Art and Photography, Bangalore.

(Fig. 5)The photograph above discloses itself by creating motion within its interiors. The changing position of the head and gestures of the body carefully lead our eye movement, creating a visual rhythm, metaphorically suggesting the movement of the generations. All are brought together within a single frame.



Fig. 6: Jyoti Bhatt, A girl from a farming community standing near the wall of her house, Rajasthan, Photograph, 1989. Courtesy of the artist. Reproduced from catalogue Jyoti Bhatt 1959 – 1994 curated by Rakesh Saini Kolkata, in association with Sujin galleries, Singapore.

(Fig. 6) The photograph above shows the background fusing with the foreground, bringing the girl and the painted bird into a relationship. It may mean the painted bird is an extension of the little girl that has taken flight from her shoulders, or the bird becomes the girl's wings to fly away, giving up the feel of flight in this still image. Though the photograph is in colour, it does not determine the frame or its meanings. The colour here is like an ornament that enhances the beauty of the composition.

Jyoti Bhatt's body of work in painting and photography demonstrates a formal approach to visual image-making where he attempts to challenge the medium's limits. A common thread runs through his practice of media, painting, and Photography via breaking a single viewpoint both formally and philosophically. A sense of appropriateness is embodied in his awareness of the subject matter, location, and his process of making photographs. The photographs reveal his intent to document the fast-disappearing practices of indigenous communities, the relationship of people to their environment, and their daily routines. Analysis shows that this intent is not just in the subject matter of the photographs but also in the form of the image construction.

The background is in solid relation to the foreground; the people's surroundings form the community's identity. This fusion between the background and foreground is not a choice between this or that. It is true to the artist's location, subject matter, and intent; it is a befitting choice. This amalgamation is how the artist sensed the community, movements, and rhythm of the people, their lifestyle, and their approach to existence. The linear optical perspective is challenged in his photographs by erasing the distinction between the background and foreground in the photographic image; here, both become important in the photographic frame. The relationship between the entities distracts from the vanishing point and avoids creating a hierarchy in size variances. This documentation via Photography becomes diverse as the various objects and events are brought together in a frame and organized extraordinarily.

Notes

1. Flusser, Vilém. (2000). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books. 8
2. Benovsky, Jiri. (2011). Three kinds of realism about photographs. In *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 25:4.
3. Rubinstein, Daniel and Sluis, Katrina (2008). Life More Photographic; Mapping the Networked Image. In *Photographies 1:1*, 9-28
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540760701785842>.
4. Burgin, Victor. (1982) Looking at Photographs. In Victor Burgin (Ed.), *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 146
5. Flusser, Vilém. (2000). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books. 47
6. Sawant, Shukla. (2007). Parallels that Meet: Paintings, prints, and photographs. In Roobina Karode (Ed.) *Jyoti Bhatt: Parallels that Meet*. Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery Pvt Ltd. ISBN 978-81-904957-0-7, 50, 52, 61.
7. Bhatt, Jyoti. (1994). Walls and Floor: The living traditions of Village India. In *Jyoti Bhatt Archives*. Asia Art Archive, accessed 27 January 2022.
<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/jyoti-bhatt-archive>.
8. Karode, Roobina. (2007). Editor's note. In Roobina Karode (Ed.) *Jyoti Bhatt: Parallels that Meet*. Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery Pvt Ltd. ISBN 978-81-904957-0-7, 15.
9. Sawant, Shukla. (2007). Parallels that Meet: Paintings, prints, and photographs. In Roobina Karode (Ed.) *Jyoti Bhatt: Parallels that Meet*. Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery Pvt Ltd. 63

10. Nair, Uma. (2019). Jyoti Bhat, Living Traditions: 1967-1995. In *Kolkata International Photography festival, special issue*. Kolkata: India Photo Arts.
11. Sawant, Shukla. (2007). Parallels that Meet: Paintings, prints, and photographs. In Roobina Karode (Ed.) *Jyoti Bhatt: Parallels that Meet*. Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery Pvt Ltd. 50
12. Bhatt, Jyoti. (2013). *Photographs from Rural India: Jyoti Bhatt*. Bangalore: Tasveer Arts Pvt. Ltd. ISBN 978-1-62890-107-8.

Naini Arora is a faculty member at Srishti Manipal Institute of Art Design and Technology, Bengaluru. She is a visual artist and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at International Institute of Information Technology, Hyderabad. Her research and practice focus on the non-perspectival depiction of spaces in painting and photography.

Email: naini.arora@manipal.edu. ORCID Id: 0000-0003-2580-9255