

A CONVERSATION WITH SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

In July 2004 Gerald Peters Gallery directors Lily Downing Burke and Catherine Whitney had a conversation with Indian-born photographer Subhankar Banerjee, whom the gallery had begun representing exclusively after seeing his work on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The following is an excerpt from that conversation.

GERALD PETERS GALLERY

Do you see yourself as a documentary photographer or a fine arts photographer, and do these categorical lines cross in your work?

SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

My arctic study started with a documentary impulse. The Arctic Refuge had not been visually documented in a comprehensive manner, so I decided to study and document the cycle of seasons of this land and its inhabitants, much the same way as Henry David Thoreau studied the cycle of seasons at Walden Pond with total immersion and contemplation. At the end of my first year in the arctic I felt I had documented most of the important ecological things. In the second year my approach changed to where I was in no rush to photograph anything in particular. Instead, I immersed myself in the land and wanted to portray the soul of this place. In essence, my arctic study is both documentary, because it documents the important ecological and cultural aspects of the refuge, and at the same time it is art, because it is a meditative study of the fragility and vulnerability of a remote and harsh landscape.

GPG

What came first, your interest in photography or your interest in the environment?

SB

My grand-uncle introduced me to painting when I was thirteen years old, growing up in India, and my interest in art has stayed with me ever since. I was introduced to land conservation ideas and movements through the Sierra Club after I moved to New Mexico when I was twenty-two. While in graduate school in New Mexico I made several attempts to get back to art by enrolling in painting and photography courses, only to drop them midway due to intense pressure from graduate studies in science. I eventually chose photography as the medium to express my ideas. I suppose art came first in my life; but now, art and environment are inseparable.

GPG

When did you realize your work is of national importance?

SB

About four months into my Arctic project, in July 2001, the U.S. Congress was debating the future of the Arctic Refuge, whether to open it up for oil drilling or to preserve it as wilderness. I was

invited by the Alaska Wilderness League, a Washington, DC-based conservation organization, to contribute my photographs for this debate. I agreed. In a very critical and bitterly contested Senate debate in March 2003, my book and photographs were used by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) to show that the refuge is not "a flat white nothingness" and a "frozen wasteland of snow and ice," as drilling proponents have described it. My photographs provided a visual counterpoint to this argument. That day the refuge was saved from drilling by a narrow vote of 52-48, and my work came to the fore in this important national debate.

During the debate Senator Boxer had urged her colleagues to visit my upcoming exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. Two weeks later the Smithsonian moved the location of the exhibition from the prominent space near the grand rotunda to a much less prominent gallery downstairs. All interpretive text, which had already been approved by the Smithsonian staff and contained no oil drilling language, was entirely removed, leaving only the titles. Smithsonian attorneys sent letters to my publisher urging her to remove the Smithsonian name from my book. The exhibition did open on May 2, 2003 in the manner I describe, but the Smithsonian website listed all current exhibitions except mine. The museum entrance listed all current exhibitions except mine. The public came to know about my exhibition not from Smithsonian publicity, but by reading about the controversy in *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other magazines and newspapers. There was a Senate hearing on May 20, 2003 in which Senator Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) questioned the Smithsonian as to why these actions were taken against my exhibition. The Smithsonian defended its position by stating that this exhibition had a pro-conservation message, and it could not take sides.

After my exhibition ended at the Smithsonian in September 2003, I did not know how to continue sharing these photographs with people. So I am indebted to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, who decided to produce a new exhibition at their museum in the fall of 2003. It's now traveling across the country.

GPG

You have been described as a sort of political spokesperson for the Arctic Refuge.

SB

I do not see myself as any kind of a political spokesperson. I see myself as an artist sharing my experiences with the public about a land I have come to care about deeply. At the beginning I was not aware that the Arctic Refuge is the most debated public land in the United States. I felt that it is a remarkable land that had not been visually documented comprehensively, and I wanted to do that. However, while living in this land I fell in love with it. When I learned that it might be turned into an industrial site for oil and gas development, I decided to share my experiences with the public, to inform people about the importance of keeping this "last wilderness" just the way it is, and to celebrate it as an international treasure. Since coming back from the arctic, I've given numerous lectures across the United States. Many of my lectures have been attended by nearly a thousand people.

GPG

How do you respond to those who see your work as propaganda for the environmental community?

SB

Dorothea Lange once told an interviewer, "Everything is propaganda for what you believe in, isn't it?...The harder and more deeply you believe in anything, the more, in a sense, you're a propagandist." One could interpret the photographs of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, and Eliot Porter as propaganda because these photographs influenced public policy. My photographs have also influenced contemporary politics, and I suppose history will judge whether my work stands the test of time.

GPG

Did you ever lose faith in your mission?

SB

My first year in the arctic was difficult. I had to learn to live in an environment where wind chill frequently drops to minus one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and blizzards blow at up to sixty miles per hour. But I eventually learned how to live and work in this Arctic icebox. By the second year, I was more in tune with the land, observing, meditating, contemplating, and enjoying the simple and subtle beauty of this pristine habitat.

I spent fourteen months in the field over a period of two years, mostly camping on the land with my guide and friend Robert Thompson, whom I trusted with my life, and at other times with native Inupiat or Gwich'in families in their homes. There were times I was sure I would freeze to death until another cup of hot coffee revived me, times when there was no money and only the richness of fellowship could buy us sufficient hope for another day's work. At those times I took inspiration from nature herself, from my native Alaskan friends, and from my abiding sense that the Arctic Refuge had become one of my homes.

My arctic study started as a self-financed project. Then after a few months of work, and after I had exhausted all my savings, I received sponsorship from Blue Earth Alliance, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting photography projects that educate the public about endangered landscapes, threatened cultures, and contemporary social issues. Friends, patrons, and foundations provided generous support that kept the project alive. I was elated when Helen Cherullo, publisher of The Mountaineers Books, decided to publish my book *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land*. Even with all the generosity, the cost was daunting. I incurred over \$100,000 debt to complete the project. Right when I thought my career as an artist and conservationist had ended, because I had no idea how to pay back the debt, I received the prestigious Cultural Freedom Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation with very generous financial support to keep the project alive. The fellowship enabled us to create additional exhibits that are being hosted in museums, it provided support for lectures in twenty-five cities, and it allowed us to donate ten thousand copies of the book to libraries and indigenous communities around the world. This fellowship will also enable me to start my next photographic study, which will focus on contemporary social and environmental issues in other parts of the world.

So my journey in the Arctic was extremely challenging, both in dealing with harsh weather as well as financially, but I never did lose faith.

GPG

Your work has been compared to twentieth-century photographers Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter. Where do you see your work in relation to the history of landscape art?

SB

Hudson River School painter Asher B. Durand once said, "Wilderness, untamed nature everywhere, asserts her claim upon us and the recognition of this claim constitutes an essential part of our art." I suppose all landscape artists working in any medium draw their inspiration from nature herself. However, each artist responds to this inspiration in his or her own unique way. Ansel Adams' studies, with few exceptions, focus on the grandeur of nature. He used bold forms, dramatic light, and high contrast to portray the sculptural qualities of grand western landscapes that black & white was best suited to portray. Eliot Porter, on the other hand, rejected grand landscapes and worked almost exclusively with intimate landscapes. He used soft light on cloudy days to portray subtleties of nature and he worked almost exclusively in color, with the exception of his earliest studies.

Neither of these approaches, taken on its own, was useful in representing the arctic landscape. I saw the land as grand yet simple, a place where the existence of life, including wild flora and fauna and native cultures, is modest and fragile. Employing simple compositions, mostly the subdued light of cloudy days, and a meditative process of observation, I wanted to portray the duality of grandness and simplicity. My study is a representation of fragility and vulnerability of grand landscapes. I worked with expansive views like Adams and used subdued lighting and an aesthetic sensibility like Porter's. It is the simplicity that I was irresistibly drawn to. Many who visit this arctic land do not find it to be beautiful in a classical sense. I hope my work will instill a new sense of nature's beauty in the public consciousness.

GPG

Why did you shoot in color, rather than black and white?

SB

I see the world in color, and that is why I chose to photograph in color. In the introduction for his retrospective exhibition catalogue at the Art Institute of Chicago, Raghubir Singh wrote, "[Color] is the fountain not of new styles and ideas, but of the continuum of life itself." Almost all contemporary photographic artists working in color. Also, I felt that many people think of the Arctic as a colorless place of snow and ice, but I was amazed to discover the richness of color and life in that land, even when it was completely snow covered. Color was the only medium through which I wanted to express my feelings about this fragile yet rich northern landscape.

GPG

Tell us about your choice of format and size.

SB

I used medium format cameras, except when I needed longer lenses for wildlife work. Then I used 35mm cameras. Medium format seemed ideal for ease of travel and flexibility, and moderate film size was appropriate for making prints that can show detail. Weather conditions in the arctic are very harsh during winter months, with temperatures dropping to minus forty degrees Fahrenheit, blizzards gusting at sixty miles per hour, bringing the wind chill down to minus one hundred degrees Fahrenheit or colder. I had to use older mechanical camera bodies with few or no electronic parts. I used Mamiya 645, Nikon FM2, and Nikon F4 cameras. I photographed from land as well as from the air.

GPG

What is your photographic printing process?

SB

I chose a digital printing process, since it provides the highest quality and maximum archivability of all currently available color printing processes. The film originals are scanned at high resolution and computer work is done to adjust contrast, highlights, and shadows in the same spirit as the traditional wet darkroom burning and dodging process.

GPG

Prior to becoming a full-time photographer, you had a lucrative professional career as a scientist. What possessed you to essentially mortgage your life and head into the unknown territories of the Arctic Refuge?

SB

The best answer I can give is that, in my life, there are no straight lines. The route by which I arrived in Alaska was as spontaneous as my wanderings across the Arctic tundra. You might be wondering how a denizen of Kolkata, India ended up taking photographs in Arctic blizzards. I guess opposites attract. Having come from a tropical land, the arctic always intrigued me.

GPG

Did your scientific background have any influence on your photography?

SB

I am sure my lifelong training in science was very helpful in learning the technical aspects of photography with relative ease, in dealing with technical challenges in one of the harshest climates on the planet, and in doing background research on ecology and native cultures. Beyond that, science primarily creates a rational mind. As an artist, I decided to reject rational thoughts and

instead trusted my instincts, feelings, and passion to guide my aesthetic sensibility. Eliot Porter taught at the Harvard Medical School before taking up photography as a way of life. Looking at Porter's work, we see clear evidence of his scientific background. He captured these exquisite photographs of birds in flight, when no one knew how to capture such high-speed motion as a perfectly still photograph. It was quite a technical achievement, and I suppose this is where his scientific background helped to figure out the setup, proper flash, et cetera. But as we look further into his studies it is clear that his aesthetic sensibility did not come from science. Instead it came from a much deeper place, his soul.

GPG

You never had a photograph published prior to your Arctic journey. Now you've acquired great prominence with your book, exhibitions, and lectures. What will you do next?

SB

My book has been very well received by the conservation community, the museum exhibitions have already been seen by millions of people, and the lectures are very well attended. I feel extremely grateful and humbled by the acceptance from the public as well as from critics, since this is, after all, my first photographic study. I understand socially motivated art is often criticized, but that's where I draw my inspiration. I hope to continue to work on projects that inform the public about the health and well being of our planet and our place in it. Edward Steichen once said, "The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself." This is a tall order, but I think we also need to explain and establish man's relationship to his environment and all other species we share this planet with.

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How do you sum up your relationship with the Arctic Refuge?

SB

For me, the Arctic Refuge is the place where I learned how to "see."