



WASWO X. WASWO was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the U.S.A. He studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, The Milwaukee Center for Photography, and Studio Marangoni, The Centre for Contemporary Photography in Florence, Italy. His books, *India Poems: The Photographs*, published by Gallerie Publishers in 2006, and *Men of Rajasthan*, published by Serindia Contemporary in 2011, have been available worldwide. The artist has lived and travelled in India for over twelve years and he has made his home in Udaipur, Rajasthan, for the past eight. There he collaborates with a variety of local artists including the photo hand-colourist Rajesh Soni. He has also produced a series of autobiographical miniature paintings in collaboration with the artist R. Vijay. Waswo is represented in India by Gallerie Espace, New Delhi and Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, and in Thailand by Serindia Gallery, Bangkok, and also by Indigo Blue Art, Singapore, and JanKossen Contemporary, Basel.

ALSO BY WASWO X. WASWO

Men of Rajasthan, Serindia Publishers, hardcover, Chicago, 2014

Men of Rajasthan, Serindia Publishers, softcover, Chicago, 2011

A Three Megapixel Journal, Lulu, paperback, 2007

European Journal, Lulu, paperback, 2007

India Poems: The Photographs, Gallerie Publishers, hardcover, Bombay, 2006

India Poems: The Photographs, Rooftop Vistas, softcover, Hyderabad, 2006

India Poems: Seventy-five Poems by the American photographer, Rooftop Vistas, softcover, Hyderabad, 2005

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Paperback edition published by Lulu.com

Cover photograph of the author: Yannick Cormier

Inside illustration: Amit Biswas

Back cover: self-portrait by the author in his Udaipur studio,

I Have Grown Long Hair, 2009

Book and cover design: Erika Linden Green

ISBN 978-1-312-00042-1

Printed by Lulu.com

FILE UNDER: ART, PHOTOGRAPHY \$16.00 US/\$17.78 CAN



WASWO X. WASWO WRITINGS | 1999 - 2014

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A Brief Personal History

MILWAUKEE, 2001

I remember taking my first photograph, a shaky snap of my mom and dad and brother. The little black box camera was just an idle fascination, but when the tilted image came back from the drugstore I had my first true inkling of the wonder of photography.

A few years later a close friend shot a picture of me backlit by the sun. A lucky trick of light produced a circular halo around my grinning, kid-toothed head. This was magic. For days I was enamored with what my friend had wrought. Photography, I realized, had the power to transform. A shy and awkward boy like myself could become an icon of saintliness.

Perhaps it was my high school and college journalism classes that drummed home the concept that photography was a morphing, duplicitous medium. Selecting a front page photograph can be fraught with moral decision and guided by concerns of politics and propaganda. A properly placed image will sway public opinion more assuredly than any number of well-worded editorials. Through journalism I learned that photography has the power to excite, bring tears, offend and outrage. One single image can illuminate or distort; bring quick understanding or mislead. A politician's portrait ennobles or humiliates. A social faux-pas snapped by a fast-fingered paparazzi has the power to change a celebrity's status overnight. Journalism taught me that photography is a two-edged sword disguised as a lance of truth.

But I was too dreamy, unfocused and romantic to ever land a job at a newspaper. I also suffered from an excess of political and moral qualms. I drifted into creative writing, churning out poems and essays and short stories. It was the early 70's, and like thousands of others in my age group I dabbled in philosophy and art, dropped out of school, explored drugs and alcohol, beat poetry and bisexuality. Eventually I found myself working at a low-paying job in the screenprinting industry. I was the product of an education in the liberal arts, and also a casualty of rebellious times.

It was around then that I became a sort of hermit. The world was spinning rapidly to new destinations, and somehow I had lost my grasp and been whirled away. I felt myself alone, an eccentric and a misanthrope. I first thought myself an artist the day I scribbled till dawn on a flimsy piece of butcher paper. Soon I was wildly and obsessively making self-absorbed drawings with colored pencils on plywood. For a number of years I did little but drink, draw, and smoke pot, imagining myself destined for some strange, glorious, outsider infamy.

It was the camera that brought me back to reality. It became a tool that reconnected me to the people and places of my existence. I enrolled in the (now defunct) Milwaukee Center for Photography, and enjoyed the tutelage of instructors such as Murray Weiss, Larry Oliverson, and Bill Lemke. The darkroom became a new, healthier, hermitage. The wonders that evolved there drew me again and again to confront the outside. I once again became engaged with the world.

With time I started to travel: Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Europe. It was through the camera that I encountered these places. There were shreds of truth to be sought, but inevitably I twisted those shreds to the demands of my fantasies. Italy and India became favorite haunts. One country seemed exquisitely civilized, the other, seductively, beautifully, primal. Both were full of wonder, chaos, and enlightenment.

At one point I felt the need to continue my education, doing Private Studies at Studio Marangoni, The Institute for Contemporary Photography in Florence. An instructor there, Romeo di Loreto, helped hone my printmaking skills to new levels of richness and subtly.

Photography continues to be my way of truth-seeking, silent poetry, and gentle obfuscation.

Yes, I still imagine a halo shining bright and angelic around my head.

Some thoughts on what I do.

FULL ARTIST
STATEMENT FROM
AN EXHIBITION
AT THE CHARLES
ALLIS ART MUSEUM,
MILWAUKEE, 1999

The travel industry saw a tremendous explosion of growth within the later part of the 20th Century, and that growth has continued into the new millennium. Destinations that once took months to reach by steamer, train, and torturous camel safari, are now visited after only a few tedious hours in the relative comfort of a jumbo jet. Journeys and adventures that were once considered exclusively within the realm of the privileged few have become affordable to backpackers and tourists of all sorts. "Exotic" destinations are no longer reserved for the brave of heart, the strong bodied, and the well-financed. This democratization of travel is by and large a good thing. Coupled with the global reach of the Internet, travel has aided direct communication and understanding among the world's diverse populations.

But with these advances, much has also been lost.

Over the past ten years I have worked to create a body of photographs that in a small way imbues travel with the mystique of its past. I do not see these images as a factual record of my actual journeys. I do not see them as documentation of particular cultures, peoples, or places.

On one level, there is a lot of untruth in what I do. I see my photography as the conscious creation of a myth. It is the myth of beauty, romance, adventure, discovery and exoticism that once was an unquestioned mainstay in every traveler's lexicon.

I have used late 19th Century ways of seeing and early 20th Century Pictorialism as an aesthetic guide, but I have not felt constrained to blindly adhere to those styles. I tend to avoid references to the modern world, seeking to instill my imagery with quiet timelessness. This is not to say that the occasional television antenna never pokes itself into any of my pictures. It is indeed possible to find clues to the modern world in many of these photographs. But I strive for an overall feel that is removed from what is jarringly contemporary.

Thus, a landscape of a desert pool, lined with palm trees, fails to include the Toyota Landcruiser that is parked at its side. The portrait of a Moroccan man, in native dress, delivers a half-truth that does not include the businessman on his cell-phone a few steps away. The moody shot of an ancient temple keeps the sign that advertises Nike shoes just out of frame. This is myth-making as much by omission as by inclusion. Travel photographers have indulged in this kind of selective reportage since the late 19th Century. In ways, I'm just following an established tradition of Romantic lying.

I take inspiration from a range of photographers as diverse as Edward Curtis, Henry Hamilton Bennett, Eugene Atget, William Henry Jackson, August Sander, and even, oddly enough, Cindy Sherman. I produce landscapes, portraits, genre scenes, architectural studies, and self-portraits.

It is hoped that the viewer will combine these images in his or her head, and through their composite effect regain a sense of travel as mysterious adventure and spiritual journey.

PROCESS:

The prints I make are sepia toned. This process involves first making a standard silver gelatin print, then immersing it in a solution of potassium ferricyanide. This “bleach bath” causes the printed image to fade away, and eventually disappear. The print is then washed, and placed in a tray containing a solution of sodium sulfide. This causes the image to reappear in rich brown tones. Sepia toning my photographs helps remove the images from the present day, and realigns them with a mythic, invented world.

All of my prints are made on fiber-based silver gelatin papers. They are archivally fixed, toned, and washed. An embossing stamp places the initials W. X W. at the lower right hand edge of the border surrounding the image. The print is then signed in pencil on the reverse. Each print is set within an eight ply acid free matt, with the use of archival, transparent photo corners. The finished matted photographs are hinged and stored in museum quality portfolio boxes, or framed for exhibition.

Taking a Photograph

FROM THE BOOK,
INDIA POEMS:
THE PHOTOGRAPHS,
2006

I was walking, camera in hand, down the narrow road that cuts through the warehouse district in Cochin. This area is named Mattancherry, and through it floats the aromas of cinnamon and pepper and cardamom, the spices that for centuries have been hauled from plantations in the Keralan hills. These spices made Cochin (now properly known as Kochi) the gateway between India's Malabar Coast and the markets of the West.

When photographing, I tend to carry my Rolleiflex in a simple plastic or paper bag rather than in a slickly manufactured camera case. It's impossible not to be perceived as a tourist in a place like India, where skin color makes a Westerner immediately recognizable. But keeping my camera in a paper bag at least helps to avoid the more nasty stereotypes of the tourist-photographer.

I remember some years ago walking through our small Goan village of Arambol and seeing a tourist woman creeping about one of the village homes. Without warning, she thrust a huge telephoto lens through an open kitchen window. Click, click, click. I guess she was thinking of "capturing" some of the locals as candidly as possible (eating? cooking? sleeping?). The sight of this woman infringing on the privacy of others so aggressively and casually sent revulsion through my entire being. What was she do-

A Note On The Writings

Selecting writings for this book was not so much a difficult task, as it was a self-reflective one. Taken as whole, they form a sort of diary from over a decade of my life, and with that journey comes both highs and lows. From the first two essays, *A Brief Personal History* and *Some thoughts on what I do*, there is a process of change that culminates with *Anda Curry* and *Confessions of an Evil Orientalist*. Searching through my writings the truth of that evolution became most evident. I debated much about the inclusion of the unpublished poetry portfolios, as they preceded the book *India Poems* by several years, and are indisputably rough, unpolished, and much too prosaic. But they represent my self-identity at a certain time and mindset. The actual portfolios, which include chemical process photographs made by myself, reside (among other places) in the Special Collections Department of the Golda Meir Library at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The unfinished novel *Nowhere* was at one time meant to become a memoir in the form of a novel. But though I pursued this project for several months, the project and subject became too expansive to contain, and was set aside for many years until I rediscovered it and selected it for this book. Similarly, *An Abridged Art History of Blotsvia* was once destined to become a full small story-book. Perhaps someday I shall take that project to its conclusion. In the meantime it stands, as many things should, unfinished and waiting for an ending. As is written within the pages of *Nowhere*, there are no full stops.

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FONTS

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