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Last Modified: Sat, Dec 17 2016. 02:50 AM IST

Image-makers versus photographers

What makes an image a work of art in the age of selfies?



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Nathalie Herschdorfer at the India Habitat Centre. Photo: Ramesh Pathania/Mint

I am not a photographer myself and so I don't know (much) about the techniques. But there's a sense...an eye that you develop with this distance from the medium. It is interesting...even necessary for what I do," says photo historian and director of Switzerland's Museum of Fine Arts, Nathalie Herschdorfer. The curator was at the India Habitat Centre for *Photosphere*, a month-long, first-of-its-kind photo festival themed on sustainability.

Herschdorfer's career spans the Y2K Internet crossroads, the launch of the first iPhone in 2007 and the phenomenal evolution of camera phones and digital photography. Her first stint as a curator for 12 years at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne exposed her to photographers old and new, but her most special memory is of working with the American photographer Ray K. Metzker for his 2008 retrospective. "His work is like treasure for me—black and white, street photography from the US of the 1950s and 1960s. When I spent time with him in his studio, he was well into his late 70s. He was very relaxed; he didn't have to prove himself, because he knew he had 50 years of work behind him.

"Sometimes, in the process, he would also discover some photos he'd taken in his youth but forgot about. And he'd suddenly get very interested in what he shot and how he did it," she says, adding that "he also made my eye, in a way".

But today, she observes a growing difference between photographers and "image-makers". With the popularity of camera phones and the Internet, even mere selfie-takers can technically be called photographers. "But I like to say

image-makers because they are interesting in the sense that they really start off with a blank canvas and think about what image to make—whether or not you use a camera—not just what image to take,” she says.

In October, Herschdorfer displayed a 13m-long print of UK-based photo-artist Mishka Henner’s work in her museum. Under spotlights in an otherwise pitch dark room, it initially looks like a very symmetric, abstract painting. In reality, though, it is an aerial shot of 935 production wells and 440 injection wells at an oil extraction site in Texas. Henner put it together by assembling hundreds of high-definition satellite images he’d obtained from browsing Google Earth. In a *New York Times* interview in August 2015, he said this project started when a friend of his was documenting the lives of Manchester’s prostitutes. When looking up the area on the Internet, he noticed that he could zoom in to observe scenes of women soliciting—“things he would never encounter with a camera on the ground”.

Herschdorfer says the frightening, yet striking symmetry of endless pipes and dug-out wells makes you think of the impact the energy needs of human beings have on the landscape. “(Henner) doesn’t use a camera at all, but I think he’s part of (a) new generation of artists who are redefining the role of photography of the Internet era,” she says.

As she scrolls down the thousands of images on her phone, she comes to an image by another British photographer, Dan Holdsworth. “Oh, we have him on display at my museum right now,” she says, showing crystal-clear, almost water-like images of cascading lines. Unlike Henner, who uses no instruments to actively capture images, Holdsworth works with geologists and what Herschdorfer calls “high-precision instruments”. He “records” the landscapes in Iceland or the Alps, and has more recently ventured into the post-glacial rock formations in the Jura Mountains along the France–Switzerland border.

With geo-cartographic and photogrammetric instruments, he meticulously fuses the hundred of photographs he takes from helicopters and those taken via drones into accurate GPS coordinates. The result is an abstract figure, like a wave of clear water in a toppling glass tumbler. “It is actually a 3D imagery of a mountain with an astonishing level of detail,” says Herschdorfer, pinching her phone screen to zoom into the picture. The exhibit is, with a rather dystopian undercurrent, titled *A Future Archeology*.

“For me this is the new sort of landscape photography,” says Herschdorfer.

Photosphere *will be on till 31 December at the India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road. For details, visit Indiahabitat.org*

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