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## 'For me, photography is a kind of beautiful language'

By PREETI SINGH || 17 December, 2016



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Nathalie Herschdorfer. (Below) An image from *Coming into Fashion: A Century of Photography* at Condé Nast, curated by Herschdorfer in 2012.

*Swiss art curator Nathalie Herschdorfer, who was recently in Delhi for a workshop on photography, speaks to Preeti Singh about how images can reflect the prejudices of an age.*

**N**athalie Herschdorfer is a curator and art historian specialising in the history of photography. She is currently the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Le Locle, Switzerland. She was recently in India for her workshop which was part of the Habitat Photosphere 2016 – a photo festival put together by the India Habitat Centre. Her workshop was focused on different ways of exhibiting photographic works.

In conversation with *Guardian 20*, the curator speaks about photography and its different sub-genres.

**Q.** Please tell us about your workshop, “Curating and Thinking about Photography in Exhibitions and Books: Exploring Different Ways of Image Showing and Curation”, which was recently held in Delhi.

**A.** I run a museum in Switzerland so I organise exhibitions. I am practicing as a curator for the last 15 years. So, during this time I was involved in many art exhibitions, photography exhibitions — either working on it directly or with an artist on an exhibition. And because of my practice, I visited many exhibitions and I was seeing that in recent years, a lot of different ways have opened up to exhibit photographic works. When I started years ago, it was mostly choosing the size of frames and putting that on the wall and not really thinking about it. But today's photographers can use wallpapers, choose to frame or not frame photographs, and so on. I really like contemporary photography. It can be a very surreal and different kind of exhibition. In that case, it can be very interesting to talk and discuss about different ways of thinking about a space because as a photographer, when you think about your work in a space or in a book, it's a completely different way of thinking, because a visitor of the space or a reader of the book has completely different experience. Everybody today has screens. Today, everybody has a smart phone, computers — we see a lot of images on screens. But what is interesting is that young photographers want to have a book printed on paper, like something physical, and in Europe or in the US, we are trying to push photo books that could be self-published. It is a book as an art form. The question is, why do we need to have books on paper. I don't believe in digital books for that matter. Many young photographers believe that an artwork could be in the form of a book. We need to discuss more about this tradition of photography.

**Q.** What is contemporary photography for you? What changes have you seen in photography since the time you started curating exhibitions?

**A.** I am into photography exhibitions. I have been involved with different kinds of photography and I work a lot with emerging artists and contemporary artists. But I also need exhibitions about the history of photography. For me, what is interesting is, I would like to call these photographers as image-makers. The fact is, we all are photographers. We all are on Instagram, Facebook, and we take so many pictures but it doesn't mean that professionals are useless. And I really think there is room for professionals, but they have to think differently. In contemporary photography, it is not necessary to carry a camera; you can use accessible images or used images. I'll give you an example: I recently had a show in my museum by British artist Mishka Henner. He used Google Earth images for the exhibition— an idea which is very accessible on the Internet. He made a very interesting work which speaks about landscapes. It's about landscape photography and speaks about all of Earth, be it ecology, economy, industrial facets. I like such open-minded work, where artists have many ways to tell different things. Contemporary photography is very important and we are more literate about photography than we were 50 years ago. Photography is a kind of beautiful language.



Clifford Coffin, American Vogue, June 1949 © 1949 Condé Nast

**Q. You are currently the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Le Locle, Switzerland. How important has the legacy of Swiss artworks been to the world in general?**

A. Well, it has really influenced my work. How I see art today is very much influenced by it. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if I think in historical terms, there were very important artists who were educated at the Bauhaus in Germany – in the 1920s. All that came to Switzerland and somehow there is a tradition here with the art schools which comes from the Bauhaus tradition. Bauhaus is a German art school that existed since the 1920s or 1930s. It was a school which had architecture, photography, designers and many other artworks. It was like a common ground. This shows how artists can create an impact in society. This had a deep influence in Switzerland. Artists always have something to say about our society. They see things before we see them, and in that sense, they have a very important role to play in society.

**Q. What are the things or qualities you look for before curating an art show?**

A. I am researching on different subjects in photography. I visit a lot of exhibitions and look for images on Internet. Before thinking about a specific thing, I keep my eyes open as to what an artist has to say about it. Recently, I discovered young female photographers who have worked on female bodies. And for a long time there was a tradition in photography that male photographers would photograph female bodies. There is a tradition of nude fashion photography and you should also notice that there is always a male vision about women. And I think we need more female artists. There have been female artists in the past but very few. The ratio is very skewed, and today we have to make an effort to bring more female artist's exhibitions as there are subjects where female artists have different visions; and when female artists photograph a female body, it's a very different way of thinking. I see a lot of female artists emerging now in the world.

**Q. Sale of photography books is quite limited, especially in the Indian market. There are only a handful of photographers who are able to sell their books. Could you elaborate on this vis-à-vis the international scene? And what can be done to increase the book sales?**

A. Even in Europe, the number of copies and books sold can be very low. Many of these are self-published and have 50 copies out; others are brought out by small publishers, with some 500 copies, are reach a very limited audience. Some publishers today would produce 2,000 copies or may be 5,000 copies of such books. Even 5,000 copies is too small a number. The big companies or publishers at least want 20,000 copies to make it financially work. And I am thinking here about Europe as a market. I don't think you make a book to make money and if you think as a photographer you will be able to make money, it's just wrong. The fact is that when you make an exhibition, you can sell prints. That's true but then, an exhibition can be over after few weeks or say two months. But books will stay there. It's a fantastic way of sharing your work with people who couldn't come to your exhibitions. But if you want to make money, I don't think it works. And even in Europe, publishers ask photographers to invest money in the project. This is very tricky. Many publishers today do not want to take the risk so they ask for 20,000 Euros from photographers to make their book. They have to look for crowd-funding. And many projects are today are carried out due to crowd-funding.

“*It's very difficult to make your living as a photographer. And many photographers have to take to teaching and commercial work to make ends meet. And nobody wants to pay or invest in photojournalists, as you know. Everyone has access to Getty Images now.*”

**Q. But do you think because of these hurdles, and in order to make a living, many professionals are quitting photography?**

A. Definitely. It's very difficult to make a living as a photographer. And many photographers have to take to teaching and commercial work to make ends meet. And nobody wants to pay or invest in photojournalists, as you know. Everyone has access to Getty Images now. So it's very tricky, and that is why many photographers go to galleries for opportunities, thinking if they can sell prints that could help.

**Q. You curated *Coming into Fashion: A Century of Photography at Condé Nast* in 2012. What according to you is fashion photography?**

A. Well, this show I curated is also a book, which is a real success. It was done in 2012 and four years later it's still travelling. Now, it will be in Beijing in January. It travelled to Japan, the United States, Mexico and

different cities in Europe. So, it was really a successful project. And the reason it is so successful is because it has glamour, beauty – because it is about fashion. Fashion photography was always considered for magazines and not to be framed in houses. It was not considered as an art form for long. Most fashion photographers were never shown at exhibitions but in the last 15 years, things have changed. A lot of young collectors are collecting these fashion images but for me, it's fine as long as they are educated in photography and do that and then do something else. But it's true that fashion is a very important subject in society. It doesn't depict the reality of society but its traits. My book is about 100 years of fashion photography, a practice that started in the 1920s. The images that were made in 1920s about fashion and female bodies are very different from the images made in 1950s, 1980s or today. It says a lot about these eras. You should know that fashion photography is always fake, because the attires worn by most models are not theirs. And in this sense, fashion photography is interesting because it is less real and more representational: it is about how photographers want to represent women in society.

*For a photo feature on images curated by Herschdorfer.*

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