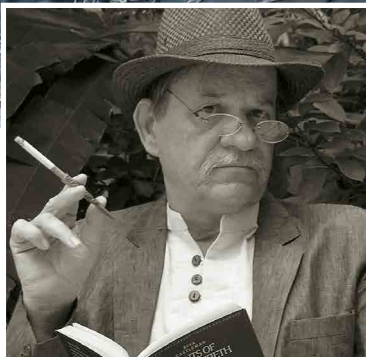


# First Among Equals

Waswo X Waswo, an American-born artist living in India, has expanded the expressive possibilities of Indian artwork.

■ BY AARON RODRIGUES



## The *outsider's* view

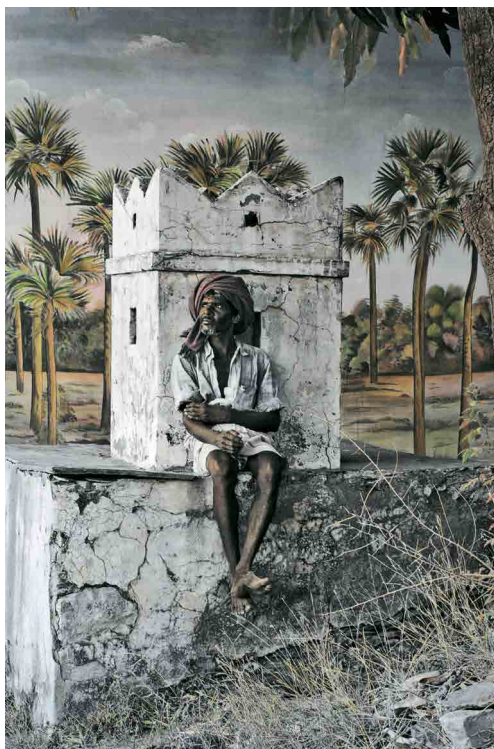


All images courtesy Waswo X. Waswo and Sakshi Gallery

Facing page: 'Evening near the Mandir', which was part of Sleeping Through the Museum; (Inset): The artist, Waswo X Waswo.

Right: 'Alone' is an archival digital black and white photograph hand painted by Rajesh Soni.

Above: One of Waswo's exhibitions.



India has thousands of artisans working at some art corner or dusty street; nearly every ancient temple in the country is meticulously sculptured, and yet, rarely do we value its immense intricate significance. But maybe sometimes it takes an outsider to appreciate India's vast cultural

landscapes. Waswo X Waswo came to India two decades ago, feeling so connected, he visited again and again, until he decided to remain here—transforming himself from the complete outsider to the absolute insider.

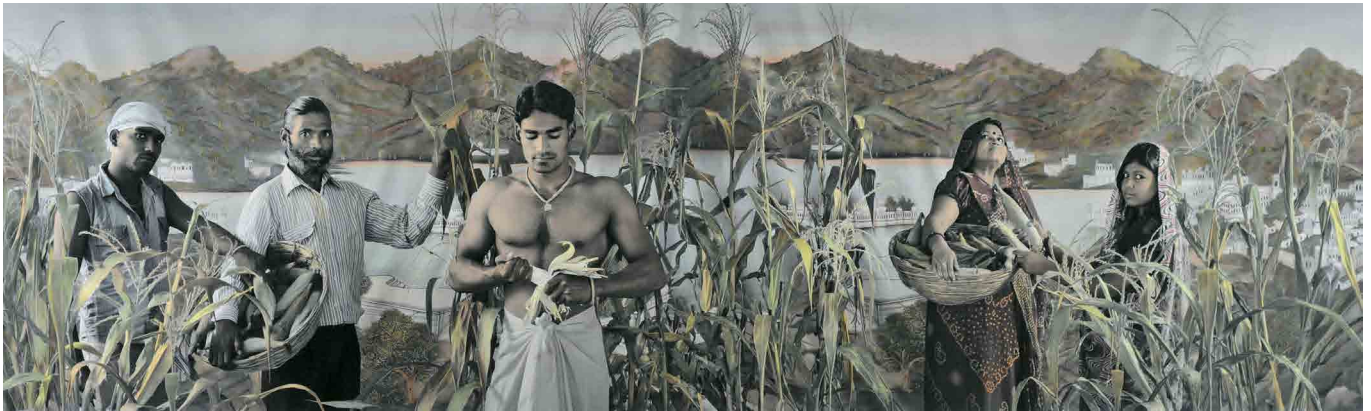
"The real adjustments that I had to make were cultural and aesthetic. I needed to shed the tourist perspective I originally had, and try to find a way to view things more as an insider than an outsider. I needed to confront my own outsider status, and respond to that," says Waswo X Waswo.

### BRINGING COLOUR IN SHADES

Long time ago, black and white photographs were shot and then artisans would paint over it, to give shades of colour. However, in time, colour photographs were easily accessible and slowly, but gradually, there were no requirements for artisans to draw over black and whites. Steadily, the art form just dwindled away, until nostalgia hit artists and hand-painted photographs raised their pretty head again in the art world. One of those photographers was American-born Waswo X Waswo.

Waswo is recognised for his series of hand-coloured photographs and autobiographical miniatures. His hand-coloured photographs

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Above and top: 'The Harvesters' and 'The Fishermen', which were both part of Sleeping Through the Museum.

exude a vintage feeling of a lost art desperate to be born again. He approaches the imagery with an emphasis on meaning, delicately questioning cultural and social values. His artwork, which navigates between personal revelation and mythological fantasy, comprises portraits of people that talk about a vanishing trade, a satirical look at society and the people around his neighbourhood.

Born in Milwaukee, USA, Waswo X Waswo studied at the University of Wisconsin, The Milwaukee Center for Photography, and Studio Marangoni, The Centre for Contemporary Photography in Florence, Italy. The artist has lived and travelled in India for nearly two decades and has made Udaipur, Rajasthan, his home for the past ten years.

Hearing tales from his father, who was stationed in India during the Second World War, Waswo decided to visit the country in 1993, and by 1999, he would choose India as his new home.

## CULTURE AND ARTISTIC SHOCK

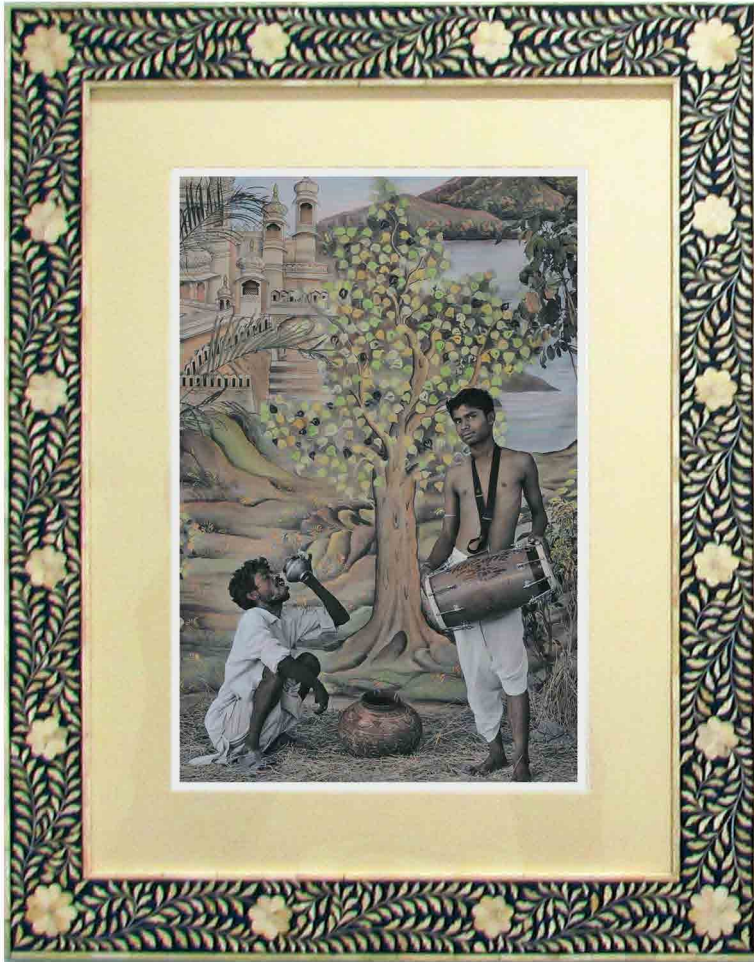
However, getting accustomed to Indian traditions would not come easy. "Initially there was a culture shock. A lot of things that I didn't

accept in the beginning, I learnt to accept. I started understanding the reasons culturally," Waswo says. Today, Waswo has a shrine for Buddha and Ganesha at his home and back in the City of Lakes, he is called *Chacha*.

Influenced by his huge collection of Indian vintage art, Waswo X Waswo decided to sepia tone his photographs chemically. However, he would soon realise that it wouldn't be so easy—getting the right acid papers, finding the correct films (which would later be obsolete) and cooking up the right chemicals to reproduce the photographs was far from simple.

"From the early days I had some problems finding materials. But the real physical problems for me started when I set up a chemical darkroom in Udaipur. I found it impossible to find the chemicals I was accustomed to using, and the chemicals I did find had no proper mixing instructions. I also battled heat and dust and impurities in the water," he says.

Thus, he decided to go digital. But even here he would find problems. "At the time I had the very first Epson 2400 printer in Rajasthan, and finding inks and archival papers for it



Above: A piece titled 'The Dholak Boy'.

was pretty impossible. Much of the time I had to order from outside the country, and then I would get hit with high import duties. Now a photographer can find excellent archival supplies in both New Delhi and Mumbai at reasonable costs," he says.

## SEEKING PARTNERS IN CRIME

Waswo works with a lot of young Indian artists and is not afraid to give them their due, a rarity in the art scene. "Waswo has been very supportive. In fact, he always gives us credit for our work, unlike other artists," says Rajesh Soni, an Udaipur-based artist. For Soni, hand-painting photographs are family heritage. His grandfather, Prabhu Lal Soni, was the court photographer to the Maharana Bhopal Singh of Mewar and a hand-colourist who painted the black and white photographs. In fact, it was Soni, who, suggested that Waswo should try painting over the photos, even volunteering to do it.

For every single artwork created, there lays a partnership of at least four people—the model, the person who paints the backdrop (which he oversees), the colourist and Waswo himself, as photographer. The process works this way—Waswo clicks the photographs at his studio, on the outskirts of Udaipur, where his models, mostly locals, pose in front of the beautiful backdrop. He uses natural light and the images come out in colours. Before going to print, these photographs are converted to black and white. These prints are later sent to Rajesh Soni, his collaborator, who then brushes them with colour.

"Waswo asked me to respond to his photographs in my own way. The only limits he set were limits of size, and the number of editions for the lithographs. Other than that I had free range," says Subrat Behara, a young artist from Orissa, who worked closely with Waswo for his latest showing—"Sleeping through the Museum".

In the past, for his works titled "Confessions of an Evil Orientalist" (2011) and "A Studio in Rajasthan" (2008), Waswo collaborated with Soni and Rakesh Vijay, a miniature artist. Waswo is also trying to expand the expressive scope of Indian miniature paintings. This time around, for "Sleeping through the Museum", aside from Soni and Behara, he has collaborated with potter Shyam Lal Khumar for terracotta figures.

In his latest solo, Waswo orchestrates a series of lithographs by Behara, to respond in his own surrealistic style. The exhibition questions the notions of what constitutes museum-worthiness and how institutions often miss the subtleties of culture in the rush to gather documentation. Thus, Waswo ends up critiquing his work. "Hopefully, the exhibition will ask more questions than offer answers," he says.

The artist feels that awareness about India's art is growing in the country and abroad, but it is still being undervalued. Commenting on the changes he has to face in India, he said, "It is not only that I have changed, but even India has changed. India is not the same India it was 15 years ago. There have been changes from both sides," he says. 