



In conversation with Yannick Cormier

Description

Yannick Cormier is one of the nine photographers for Pondy Photo 2014. Not only is his work on display, but he is also the curator of the event, thus helping PondyART and Kasha Vande organize this grand exhibition. On the evening of 20 March, the Inquirer team got an exclusive interview with him where he spoke about his work, his experiences in India, on Kashmir and on the Narikuravas. An excerpt from the interview...

You have worked as an assistant in the Fashion photography industry. What made you change from fashion photography to documentary photography?

Actually I never wanted to work in the fashion industry as such. I only worked in the fashion industry to get to know the techniques of photography, to have a strong technique base for myself. And I think advertising and fashion photography are the most technical fronts of photography. So I went into fashion to learn that technique and later use it in my own expression. I am not a technical person, but I wanted to know. And when I got it I wanted to use it, just for the expression of photography. I don't use techniques that much, I am not a technician, but I know the techniques of photography, it is at the back of my head.

From 2003 to 2005 you had worked with Wostokpress who then sent you to India. Tell us a little bit about your journey to this country.

After quitting the studio, I walked around with my portfolio. I worked with Wostokpress for a few years. I did various types of photos for them, portraits and all for magazines. In the beginning they wanted to send me to Brazil as a correspondent. But that time my wife got a scholarship here in Chennai. Then I got sick, I had some physical trouble. I was in the hospital for 3 months, I couldn't move. Then I saw a film called 'Ghosts of India' by Louis Malle and before this movie I hardly knew anything about India. And when I saw this film it changed my whole way of looking at India. After that I told my wife and I told my director that I wanted to work in India, because there is so much happening here. And finally when I arrived in India I fell in love with it. After working here as a correspondent for a year I wanted to stay on. So I told my director that I want to do my own thing in India. And she completely understood.

What was so special about 'Ghosts of India' that it brought you all the way here?

I have been crazy about cinema ever since I was a child. And I am also very fond of life on the streets and all art related to it. So this film showed a bit about that, about people from Calcutta, some of the youth of Chennai, and I really saw how the streets of India are in this film, and finally when I reached to India, I could feel all the street life here, the people, the animals. And I liked that very much.

You have taken photographs on Kashmir, and on the Nari Kuravas. Tell us a bit about those bodies of work.

Whenever I had heard about Kashmir, before actually going there, I had found the tone of the news always very propaganda style rather than real. So I decided to go there myself to see with my own eyes what is going on there. And when I arrived there I found the meaning of propaganda to be very different from where I come from. I saw how the truth is very different from what I reported. Officially twenty years ago there was a militant war in Kashmir. And it was a very powerful war. And the times then was tough. And I agree with that. But according to the propaganda that we hear the situation is still the same, but it is not the same anymore. There are 6 lakhs of paramilitary soldiers, there is CRPF, border police, and they are in the civilian area. And they have supreme power there. If they kill someone or rape someone, nothing happens to them. They have too much power over the people and I wanted to show that.

As for the Nari Kuravas, I was documenting the life of the community when I found out that there was an act, by the British, called the Tribal Criminal Act. By this act, everyone born into this community, because he is from this community, is designated as a criminal. You are a criminal because you are born a Nari Kurava. That means if anything happens, murder for example, they will just go to the Kurava clan and catch anyone and call him the murderer without any investigation. This law was abolished in 1953, I think, but in the mind of the people, subconsciously, they are still criminals. I found them to be good people, strong people, they are good in music. It is in their blood. Actually they came from Rajasthan over a thousand years ago I think. And they were Kshatriyas, warriors. Only when they came down to Tamil Nadu and to Kerala, they become untouchables, Dalits. One day I was coming from a festival and we saw a young boy with a gun come out from the bushes. We asked him if we could get his photographs. I liked it. That is when I decided to document their community. To me, they are beautiful. And I wanted to show that.

Not only are your photographs are on display, but you are also the curator of Pondy Photo 2014. Tell us about your experience as a curator so far.

As Pablo (Bartholomew) has already said [yesterday](#), and I agree with him, the topic of the tribes is very close to my heart. They are the first strain of civilization. And our civilization draws from their civilization. I wanted to speak about that. There is a big political issue around them. In India, open economy was declared in 1992. And since then, these people have been pushed back into the land of the mountains. I think you have to find a way in which you can develop your own country and at the same time respect the future that these people will have. Because that speaks badly of the country. You want development but at the same time you want to seize the land from these people. That is discrimination. I think it is important to show the beauty of these people. That is why I took up the job of a curator of this event. I contacted a lot of people. I wanted to show the work of Sunil Janah but I got no response and there were others who didn't respond. But there were people like Pablo (Bartholomew) who did. So that's how we came about creating this whole event, creating visual corridors for people to travel in.



Yannick Cormier,
Curator of Pondy

Photo 2014

About the Photographer:

Yannick Cormier resides in Chennai and is a frequent visitor to Pondicherry. He is a documentary photographer born in Paris and has been working as a photographer for the last 16 years. He is based in Chennai for the last 11 years. In the beginning of his career he used to work for the fashion industries. He has contributed to magazines like Vogue, Flair, Elle and Vanity Fair. He then started working with the agency Wostokpress. During 2003 he came to India and since then he has found it difficult to leave this country. In 2007 he founded the agency Trikaya photos. Scroll down for a selection of his photos from his exhibition for Pondy Photo 2014 at the Old Distillery.

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Date Created

March 22, 2014

Author

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