December 9, 2015

Statement by Urs Stahel on behalf of the jury members
(Urs Stahel (Chair), Jeroo Mulla and Devika Daulet-Singh)

It is a great honour for me to announce the first winner of the UMRAO SINGH SHER-GIL GRANT FOR PHOTOGRAPHY. And I am very happy to have been invited to chair the jury for the first grant. Let me start with a few general words on photography.

We all know how new conflicts are usually announced in the newspapers. Big black headlines and underneath a photograph or two that show wild gestures, weapons and armies on both sides. But imagine a smart picture editor would have displayed instead of this direct , simple representation of the swelling conflict a photo that is cut diagonally. The two halves are pulled apart in the height and side. What is photographed might be a tree, a wall, even a piece of paper, perhaps a contract, now cut apart, means separated what was once a unity. I swear to you , it would be the more impressive, better readable illustration of this new conflict of a once united nation. And maybe it would become an art piece.

Imagine a second image: one that Umrao Singh Sher-Gil has made of his famous daughter standing in front of a mirror. She looks at the photographer and therefore also at us as spectators. But because she is leaning towards the mirror, we can see also the back of her head, the back of her hair. That means: the photograph is showing us two images in one. One from the front and one from the back, seemless glued together.

Both samples show us in different ways how photography can do far more than simply looking straight forward out in the world and push the button, as Kodak put it so successfully in the late 19th century, that the image can show different realities, the world outside, inside, mediatised, also a symbolical representation, a staging of the world, multifaced, multiple worlds or an abstraction of it, that it also shows not just the image, but also the picture materialized on paper. The paper on which the image has been printed carries a meaning, as we just imagined in the sharp cut of a paper into two halves, a meaning that can add or counteract the photographed image. Lucio Fontana, the Italian artist, exercised this perfectly with his cutted canvases in the sixties.

We've actually known this for long. The so called pictorialism in the late 19th century understood photography in a broader sense. Because these photographers wanted to be accepted as artists they copied impressionism, fauvism and symbolism. They staged photographs, choreographed scenes like Umrao Singh Sher-Gil did and printed them using very refined techniques, in bromoil, carbon, gum bichromate or they made wonderful cyanotypes.

We might not like how they copied the painting styles of those time, but we can still learn a lot from their understanding of the image as a complex object of meanings. Only in postmodern times we started to take this time period more seriously. The photographic modernism was so strict in its methodology. The view of the photographer had to be straight, the print had to be

done simply, not adding much in the dark chamber. The term 'Straight Photography' made this clear and ideologically firm for many decades.

Therefore, it is a fantastic idea for the founders of the Sher-Gil Sundaram, Arts Foundation to initaite a grant for the staged and the constructed image. Indian photography has been caught for decades in a kind of Henri-Cartier Bresson style modernism. I very much hope that this grant will have an influence on the way Indian photography will develop in the coming future.

The jury sat together for the last three days and we looked at 62 proposals and decided the following. Siya Singh with her work, The Dog Show Project is at third place. Soumya Sankar Bose is at second place for the project, Jatra, his series of staged portraits of retired theatre artists. And the first place goes to............... I am sorry I will stop here because I want you to first hear what the photographer proposed themself:

"My ongoing project, Portal constructs dated photographs held together by a fictional narrative in the form of a diary. This collection of 'fake' documents are comprised of old prints, negatives, polaroids, plates, contact sheets, magazine and newspaper cuttings, old letters, advertising leaflets – all created by me. The narration is by a fictional character, the owner of a fictional photography studio in Calcutta, as he pursues a curious case and becomes the collector of these images and documents. Through these, he attempts to trace photographic evidences of an apparently ageless character he encounters in his studio in the year 1994. This is a work that takes elements from storytelling genres like detective thriller and supernatural fiction as our (sometimes unreliable) narrator continues his search of the elusive object of his interest, a woman who does not age.

The photographs themselves range from early twentieth century and I am trying to implement exact formats, techniques and equipment available in each era to create photos from that respective point in time. Through this, I attempt to take a brief look at the history of vernacular photography in this region, information about society, popular culture, fashion and other iconography. The project in its completed form will have a considerable amount of text-based material in the form of diary pages, letters, official documents etc. I want to present the completed project in such a way as if this is some sort of a hoax and I, the author, am only presenting someone else's collection of photographic 'evidence'."

Slide show of the photographs from the project, Portal.

The project and the photographs he submitted — precisely written and photographed letters, staged early photographs, staged and re-enacted publicity photographs and so called private SX-70-Snaps – convinced the jury. We decided unanimously that this work should get the first grant of the UMRAO SINGH SHER-GIL GRANT FOR PHOTOGRAPHY.

Please give a big hand to the winner of the grant, Shan Bhattacharya from Kolkata, who flew in to be with us this evening.