

**2016 UMRAO SINGH SHER-GIL GRANT FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
STATEMENT by Florian Ebner, Chair of the Jury**

On behalf of my two fellows of the jury, Vivan Sundaram and Ravi Agarwal, let me say some words. In the last three days, we have lived an experience becoming rare: a very intense discussion and profound exchange on the proposed works among the members of a jury. I would like to thank Vivan and Ravi for that. This level of reflection of what photography is and could be today was only possible due to the variety and the vitality of the submitted works.

As all of the participating photographers know, there were the two notions of 'the staged and the constructed image' as filters and guidelines for the different concepts and projects. These ideas of the 'staged and the constructed image' (that have been in fact acknowledged strategies for another use of photography since the 1970s) give us another understanding of the medium.

But you might ask if photography has not been since its beginning a constructed image, with the very first studio portraits or Felice Beato's battlefields in the mid of the 19th century. Or take another example, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil's interior scene from 1922 showing his daughter and himself amidst different phonographs and other modern recording devices, a carefully composed and staged photograph.

These notions of the staged and constructed image should not exclude any photographic or artistic practices — on the contrary, lots of documentary approaches today are based on the idea of staging their protagonists or of constructing a more complex narrative including different kinds of testimonies. In this sense the Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Grant wants to advance another consciousness of photography, expanding the medium beyond the classical photojournalism, understanding photography not only as a mirror of visual reality, but also focussing on the reality of photography itself in a radical changing visual world.

In fact, an important number of the works submitted for the Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Grant show all these different faces of contemporary photography, from the appropriation of private photography archives till the 'bits and pieces' of the networked images from the social networks.

The third filter was the 'project quality' of the proposed works. There were works that were politically engaging but still needed to develop a formal language adequate to the issue. There were other proposals that were developed constructions but did not chart out a new trajectory for the project. So, if there is a work you like and find it missing on the following short list, it is possibly because we, as Jury, felt that it did not respond to the brief of the USG Grant/Call for Submission.

The Short List

Among the 44 admitted portfolios the jury has selected five projects for the short list. We privileged these projects where we clearly saw the potential of a future body of work that has to be produced. We would like to acknowledge the following portfolios with a honourable mention:

You Are What You Is by Kapil Das

The series of black and white portraits by the Bangalore based artist and designer, Kapil Das constitutes a subtle meditation on the face and a playful combination of different kinds of montage and collage techniques. He is superposing different views of a face, not by morphing them digitally, but by the simple means of several exposures and different lightings. His pictures mounted on cut outs of coloured patterns of paper are challenging our idea of the face as the genuine place of identity and beauty.

The African Portraits by Mahesh Shantaram

Mahesh Shantaram is a documentary photographer from Bangalore. His body of work, *The African Portraits* consists of staged portraits of African people living in the neighbourhoods of Bangalore. Mahesh's work convinced us in many ways. He photographed members of this community during the night transforming the nocturnal settings into a real stage proudly occupied by his protagonists. Despite the formal quality of his arrangements and the depth of his images, the photographer is still quite close to his protagonists and proved an honest empathy to the people.

Membrane by Sukanya Ghosh

Membrane is the title of a remarkable series of photographic light boxes, proposed by the Delhi based artist, Sukanya Gosh. The individual images are montages of different historical layers combining photographs from a found collection of and by her family. Her enigmatic and beautiful compositions inscribe themselves in the long history of photomontage since the 1920s. "The tentative translucence of images" is recalling – according to Sukanya's quote of Homi Bhabha, "the layered form of the palimpsest." Therefore the use of light boxes seems to be the adequate metaphor for this work on memory and loss.

The jury would like to make a very special mention to the following project:

People You May Know by Chandan Gomes

The story, *People You May Know*, by the young Delhi based artist, Chandan Gomes is built on the archive of conversations and visual exchanges with a stranger on the internet. In opposition to so many recent works dealing in a somehow trivial way with the digital and networked world, Gomes' approach represents a very precisely constructed novella on love and on the inextricable fusion of fact and fiction in the

times of the Internet. Quoting Chandan Gomes' paper: "Through this work, I wish to throw light on how our dependence on the Internet has reshaped our social interactions, sexual habits and our understanding of the self. In the virtual world everyone appropriates, imitates who they want to be, but hide who they really are."

Finally, the jury has decided to award the 2016 Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Grant for Photography to the project, ***When The Wind Blows by Prajakta Potnis***.

The metamorphosis of everyday domestic objects, becoming something different and transient, is an essential element throughout the installations and sculptures, drawings and paintings, photographs and videos by Prajakta Potnis. As she has displayed in different exhibitions a subtle and poetic practice reminiscent of a surrealist spirit, the submitted project by this Mumbai based artist convinced the jury: For *When The Wind Blows*, Prajakta Potnis will transform the freezer of different refrigerators (even refrigerators that have to be constructed) into a photographic studio, by staging landscapes and constructing alien places as equivalents and ciphers of our time. Or to say it in Prajakta Potnis' own words: "The frost from the freezer simulates snow clad deserted landscape or a terrain of an unknown planet. Timothy Morton's, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, initiated the site. With the melting of glaciers to the seed vault in Norway, the freezer seemed like an appropriate space to reiterate the dialogue around anthropocene through the realm of the domestic — the private. I intend to explore the possibilities of shooting within the environment of the freezer, building complex settings that translate into psychological topographies."

With this radical and at first view absurd gesture of choosing a freezer as a studio, Prajakta Potnis creates a atmospheric setting that is significant in a double sense, metaphorically for the frozen image that is photography, politically for the most challenging questions of our time.

We are looking forward to the visual universes she will create by the help of the grant.